Teaching Notes – Effective Endings / Conclusions

Introduction

The closing paragraph is the writer's final opportunity to demonstrate skills in constructing an effective creative text. A consciously crafted piece should be drawn to a thoughtful end in a way that 'completes' the text for the reader.

Although the creative response is written for assessment in an examination, writing for the 'reader', rather than the examiner, should be the focus of students.

Why focus on crafting closing paragraphs?

The reader (i.e. the examiner in the case of an external assessment) has been led through the text and engaged with the author's voice to the point of the conclusion. The final paragraph is the opportunity for the writer to deliver an ending that is plausibly coherent based on the development of the text.

What constitutes a 'plausible' ending can be viewed in different ways. What is clear is the potential for students to write very poorly thought-through endings, often with no logical link. Students need to be able to consciously craft a suitable ending and should keep this in mind from the planning stage.

Practising the construction of closing paragraphs and discussing how to alter and adapt draft ideas will not only help to develop the students' skills in text construction and its overall coherence - but also to focus on its overall effect on a reader.

Practice - Key Outcomes

Teachers should help students to understand that a well-constructed ending is just as important as a powerful beginning to their creative text. The ideas and resources below should help teachers ensure that the following **key outcomes** (dependent on the nature of the creative piece) are evident in all or most students' closing paragraphs by the time of the final assessments:

- a coherent narrative conclusion which can be plausibly linked to the rest of the text (though the link may not always be immediately evident)
- some form of resolution of ideas, conflict or character development which has some links to the opening paragraph, e.g. a 'twist in the tale' as a final piece of the jigsaw
- leaving the reader with a final image which may (or may not) be expected
- ensuring that the final line – if students choose the given final line option – makes complete sense and is not just suddenly remembered and therefore implausibly linked
- ensuring that the reader is <u>not</u> left exasperated by a clichéd and all-too predictable ending (!), e.g. 'It was all a dream!' etc.
- leaving the reader with a memorable finale!

All the practice in crafting closing paragraphs that meet appropriate outcomes should lead to students being able to draw on previous practice to develop spontaneous texts under the pressure of the final assessment.

Resources – potential activities

Learning Focus 1 – Circular Endings

Learning Outcomes

- understanding that a conclusion often includes a resolution directly linked to the beginning
- being able make plausible links in the final paragraph so that references are coherent.

Resource 1 – Back to the 'Beginning'

This resource helps students to explore one of the most common ways to end a narrative – a resolution which explicitly references the beginning. Students are asked to match the most appropriate endings with beginnings.

Teaching suggestions

- Students should understand that most narratives end with a resolution that can be linked directly to the beginning of a narrative. A clear analogy is the structure that would be followed in an argument essay. Here, students explore the initial question or dilemma, argue for or against the chosen issue and conclude with a personal opinion based on the evidence gathered (essentially an 'answer' to the original 'question').
- Teachers may find it useful to ask students to consider how popular narratives are resolved through a circular narrative, e.g. the feuding families introduced in the first scene of 'Romeo and Juliet' are resolved in the final scene after the deaths of the two young lovers. Ask students to think of other examples in small groups – feedback to the rest of the group.
- Remind students that although most cyclical narratives follow a chronological order, it is not always necessary, e.g. a place or character description – changed due to an event or time.
- Use **Resource 1** with students. They can work alone or in pairs to match the narrative endings to the beginnings.

Learning Focus 2 – A Twist in the Tale

Learning Outcomes

- understanding that an element of surprise can make the narrative memorable
- understanding that the narrative content has to be carefully constructed so that the 'surprise' is more effective
- being able to reveal the twist in a way that is not clichéd (i.e. expected)

Resource 2 – Catching the Reader Unawares

This resource guides the students through some brief principles and an unfinished narrative. They are asked to construct their one final paragraph based on the evidence.

Teaching suggestions

- Students could be asked about stories they remember where the resolution/ending genuinely caught them by surprise. This should be widened to the surprise endings of films. Discuss also the idea that certain narratives are just too predictable and could almost be described as following a formula.
- Emphasise the point that writing a surprise ending is not necessarily an attempt to reveal something dramatic in terms of what is described. The drama of the revelation is the fact that it can be plausible – but not realised because the reader was misled by certain details or words.
- Discuss the difference between a 'twist' and a cliffhanger, where the latter is usually designed to hook the reader to read on to further sections of a longer text (see the unit dealing with cliffhanger endings later in this document).
- Use **Resource 2** and ask the students to read the narrative.
- When the group have written their own versions and discussed the narrative possibilities, look at the original.
- Discuss how the 'surprise' works. Some students may feel that it was obvious to them. They are usually students who have read more widely and are aware of a range of genres and narrative structures.
- Some students may wish to attempt something with a surprise ending in the final assessment. Discuss different possible narrative structures and surprise endings with the group and set some practice pieces for home-study and assessment.

Learning Focus 3 – Using a Given Closing Sentence

Learning Outcomes

- understanding that the given closing sentence has to be carefully linked and prepared for through the rest of the narrative
- understanding that the given ending has to be in mind throughout planning and writing
- being able to make the sentence feel that it is a seamless end to the narrative

Resource 3 – The Final Sentence Option – make it work!

This resource asks students to decide whether or not they feel that a given closing sentence has been effectively deployed. They are then given some guidance.

Teaching suggestions

- Ask the students to consider how much planning should go into the use of given final sentence. Some will feel that it is probably appropriate - as long as it makes grammatical sense! Press the case that it is important that the final line must not feel as if it has been suddenly recalled and 'bolted on' to the narrative (regardless of its effect).
- Use **Resource 3** with students to focus on the way that a given closing sentence can be used well and inappropriately.
- Before the 'answers' to the 4 examples are clicked and revealed, it may be useful to discuss the reasons students are making their choices.
- Read the feedback and discuss whether any principles of using a given final sentence can be decided.

- Attempt some final paragraphs with given final sentences. It may be also interesting to see if students can create the most inappropriate example. In doing this successfully, they will demonstrate that they understand how to use it properly!

Learning Focus 4 – Ending with Something 'Learned'

Learning Outcomes

- understanding that the narrator can engage the reader through focusing on what has been learned
- being able to use the second-person (you) accurately in order to address the reader
- ensuring that the reader can empathise with the narrator or subject by sharing their reflective thinking

Resource 4 – And the Moral of the Story Is ……. ?

This resource explores the different ways in which a writer can leave the reader with a lesson learned from the narrative. They are asked to select the most appropriate moral endings from a list in order to match them to some short final sections.

Teaching suggestions

- Discuss narratives with moral imperatives such as 'Aesop's Fables'. These short narratives are often linked to teaching modes of behaviour to others that are deemed moral and 'good'. Students will have a wealth of ideas gleaned from films.
- Sometimes an ending is not linked to morality at all in that negative behaviour is 'rewarded' or celebrated. However, these endings may still be structured in a similar way, i.e. an 'anti-moral' message.
- Use **Resource 4** to help students to understand how a moral can be tagged on to the end of narratives in a variety of different ways.
- Students can be asked to write a complete narrative using the same sense of a moral message chosen from the task.
- Another task could be to restructure the given moral imperatives so that a similar lesson is learned but written in a different way – perhaps reversing what is already there, e.g. making a 'do' into a 'don't'.

Learning Focus 5 – Cliffhanger Endings

Learning Outcomes

- understanding that cliffhangers are designed to hook a reader and more appropriate for a narrative that suggests further instalments
- understanding that a cliffhanger is not a resolution and so needs to be used skilfully to be effective
- being able to recognise when a cliffhanger ending is not necessary and a 'twist' or moral may be more appropriate

Resource 5 – What Happens Next?

This resource helps students to understand that using cliffhanger endings has to be appropriate and effective in a narrative. They are given examples of suggested cliffhangers and asked to consider their effectiveness.

Teaching suggestions

- Discuss with students the idea that the cliffhanger ending is designed to leave the reader anticipating the next instalment.
- Cliffhanger endings work particularly well in longer novels where the reader is drawn through the fictional world by a series of 'hooks', e.g. Charles Dickens used cliffhangers throughout 'Great Expectations' usually through the unexpected reappearance of characters. This will be familiar for any student who watches soap operas or continuous dramas on television.
- Students will be very familiar with films that end in cliffhangers. Discuss why this is so when the film feels complete. Draw out the conclusion that cliffhangers allow for the possibility of a sequel.
- Ask students whether they consider a cliffhanger ending suitable for a relatively short assessment. If so, why? The examples in Resource 5 will give them opportunities to consider whether or not a cliffhanger is the best choice for an ending.
- Use **Resource 5**. Draw out the conclusion that for a cliffhanger ending to be used, it has to be one where the reader is satisfied with the lack of a definite conclusion.