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Final Pages, Final Paragraphs: Crafting the Right Ending for Fiction

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SHIFTS

Often, a successful ending is a shift or pivot from the beginning of the story. This can be an abrupt shift (as in an epilogue) or unfold from your plot, or both.

- Time
- Place
- Perspective (think of a satellite image vs. a close up)
- Point of View (shift to a minor character)
- Level of Knowledge (some questions are answered but bigger questions are presented)
- Emotional State of Characters after Initial Euphoria (ending of *The Graduate*)

For each of these, where does your story begin? Where could it shift to by the end?

Questionnaire

1. What is your story/book about? (Write about this in any way you want)
2. Whose journey are we following?
3. What is the main conflict/problem that your character is facing?
4. What is the timeline of the story?
5. What is the plot of your story? What happens?
6. What is still unresolved about your story? This might not be a plot point. It might be something unresolved in one of the relationships, or a bigger thematic question that can't be answered? In most cases, these should be resolved by the end of your story.
7. Is there an image from the beginning that can be mirrored in the end? Is there a prologue that needs an epilogue?
8. What is the biggest risk you can take at the end of your story? In your wildest fantasies, how would you like to end it?
9. Does that ending feel true to your story? If not, what can you change so that the ending feels appropriate?

Types of Endings (from One Story Endings Class)

This is the extreme nutshell version of 7 types of story endings presented by Patrick Ryan in his class on endings at One Story (usually 5 sessions and pretty affordable – worth checking out.)

- Bookend – circles back to something or echoes something from the beginning
- Shocker – a surprising conclusion that is still believable as something that would emerge from the world of the story
- Quiet Moment – slowing things down into a single moment, image, creating intimacy between reader and story
- Stepping Back – zoom out and show the bigger picture around the story
- The Question – leaves the character at a crossroads
- The Answer – something is revealed that puts everything into place
- Projection Forward – leap in time to the future that illustrates the resolution of the central conflict
- Nostalgic Note – a (perhaps) surprisingly positive memory or view of the past

The Perfect Ending Writing Exercise (from Writers Digest)

Maybe you knew the ending of your story before you even wrote your rough draft, or maybe you now find yourself unsure of your original choice for the ending. Here are a couple of exercises that will help you find the best, and perhaps unexpected, ending to your story:

1. Put the story aside and make a list of all the possible things that could happen in the ending (even if they violate your original vision of the story). Come at it from every possible angle—the expected and the unexpected, the “soft” and the “hard,” the happy and the sad and whatever lies in between. You should have a list of at least five or six possible endings. Now, consider how each option shades the meaning of the story. This is a time when you must “listen” to your story and see which way it wants to go. Chances are, the key to your ending lies in the beginning and the middle of the story. You may discover that the story you’ve written is quite different from the one you set out to write. That’s fine—happens all the time. The important thing is not to ruin your story by forcing a wrong ending simply because it adheres to your preconceived notion of what “should” happen.
2. Once you’ve discovered what should happen in your ending, there is still the question of technique. Again, try several different variations, making the final sentence:
 1. A line of description
 2. A line of dialogue
 3. A character’s action
 4. Internal monologue—a character’s thought or feeling.

WRITING EXERCISES

1. Imagine an idea for a story. Write only the beginning and the ending. Try to have your ending be circular.
2. What image does your story begin with? What is a corresponding image your story can end with?

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3. Free association – Try to answer the question “What is going on in this story?” using just single words.
4. What represents the end of the action in your story? What represents the end of the internal conflict in your story?
5. Who does your story begin with? Who will it end with?