

Bruce Ballenger Ph.D.

Professor Emeritus of English, Boise State University

2024

On Endings

Those of us interested in the craft of writing have no trouble talking about what the beginnings of essays should do. For example, it's commonplace that in nonfiction narrative openings should "hook" the readers, engaging them in the story. But effective beginnings do so much more than that. They make promises about where the work is headed. Through voice and tone, they hint at the writer's emotional relationship to the material. They also might be in conversation with the title of the work in ways that hint at meaning. We have many terms to describe beginnings (or "ledes," to borrow the journalist's term): anecdotal, scene, turning point, announcement, profile, and so on. There are whole books on famous beginnings in literature.

But what do we say about effective endings in essays? Almost nothing, which is odd since they're so important. Knowing this, writers often toil over the last paragraphs of a work. We talk vaguely about an ending that is "satisfying" and one that is not. But what makes a "good" essay ending?

Assumptions About What Endings Should Do

Since readers and viewers always pay attention to endings, whether in stories, films, poems, and other genres, we often hold unstated assumptions about what makes a good one. One way I teased out these assumptions in my writing classes was sharing with students a very short sketch that appeared in *The New Yorker* many years ago. In three paragraphs, the fictional piece describes a couple at a restaurant celebrating the husband's birthday. I gave students the first two paragraphs of the piece and asked them to write a believable ending. I collected six of these and mixed them with the authentic ending. We then all read the endings and voted on which one we were certain was an imposter, and which one we believed was the real ending.

Here are the first two paragraphs of "Birthday Party" by Katharine Brush.

They were a couple in their late thirties, and they looked unmistakably married. They sat on the banquette opposite us in a little narrow restaurant, having dinner. The man had a round, self-satisfied face, with glasses on it; the woman was fadingly pretty, in a big hat. There was nothing conspicuous about them, nothing particularly noticeable, until the end of their meal, when it suddenly became apparent that this was an Occasion--in fact, the husband's birthday, and the wife had planned a little surprise for him.

It arrived, in the form of a small but glossy birthday cake, with one ink candle burning in the center. The headwaiter brought it in and placed it before the husband, and meanwhile the violin and piano orchestra played "Happy Birthday to You" and the wife beamed with shy pride over her little surprise, and such few people as there were in the restaurant tried to help out with a pattering of applause. It became clear at once that help was needed, because the husband was not pleased. Instead, he was hotly embarrassed, and indignant at his wife for embarrassing him.

I did this exercise for years, and the authentic ending of the sketch *never* got the most votes. As you might guess, a popular ending was one in which the husband or the wife retaliates for the embarrassment. Knives are drawn, and cakes are thrown into faces. These endings satisfied our sense of justice and reflect our compassion for the sad and meek woman. Another popular version described the "indignant" husband storming out of the restaurant, leaving the wife behind to suffer lonely embarrassment. Sometimes she blew out the candle on the cake, and sometimes it burned on, a sad sentinel to a broken marriage. This was popular because it exploits a key detail in the story that seemed to symbolize the wife's desperate hope, and it signals our compassion for the lonely woman and projects our sadness about her situation. This type of ending often earned the most votes.

Here is the authentic ending to "A Birthday Party":

You looked at him and you saw this and you thought, "Oh, now, don't be like that!" But he was like that, and as soon as the little cake had been deposited on the table, and the orchestra had finished the birthday piece, and the general attention had shifted from the man and the woman I saw him say something to her under his breath--some punishing thing, quick and curt and unkind. I couldn't bear to look at the woman then, so I stared at my plate and waited for quite a long time. Not long enough, though. She was still crying when I finally glanced over there again. Crying quietly and heartbrokenly and hopelessly, all to herself, under the gay brim of her best hat.

Short story writers will have plenty to explore here, including the consistency of point of view, and especially the surprising use of "you" in the first sentence. But all writers might appreciate how, in the all-important last sentence, Brush resurrects another detail, one that

seems far more important than the burning candle: the “gay brim of her best hat.” This detail seems to knot together many of the feelings the unnamed observer might have watching the scene unfold, including the awkward embarrassment of the women and the defilement of her good intentions. We don’t want to witness her humiliation, nor does she want us to, so she hides under the “gay brim” of her hat. But seeing this spectacle can’t be avoided, and it breaks our heart, too.

This seems to be an honest, truthful ending. The man’s behavior is consistent with his observed character, and so is the women’s. Neither would wield a knife or storm out of a restaurant. It also hints at the meaning of this moment—how quiet and ordinary cruelty can be. My students hated this ending, and rarely voted for it. Not only were they thrown by the point of view, but the incident seemed unresolved, the conclusion unsatisfying. The ugly behavior of the man goes unpunished. “So, what’s the point?” my students ask.

This was a fictional sketch. Brush felt no obligation to resolve the ambiguity of the ending. In contrast, nonfiction narratives often make meanings explicit, usually in reflective turns where writers pull away from what happened to think about what *happens*. In that sense, essays do often make “a point” of some kind, though it might be tentative and uncertain. Personal essays aren’t arguments. Writers aren’t obligated to force endings to be some form of the paragraph that begins, “In conclusion...” Essayists know that an ending that simply summarizes what they’ve learned from a complicated experience is bound to be dishonest and carry the scent of moralizing. And yet, essayists always have something to say either implicitly or explicitly and often both.

The Work That Endings Do for Writers

Even before drafting endings to our stories that will satisfy readers, writers must ask themselves not only what is left to say, but *why*. For example, the endings in personal essays are where new understandings emerge. For essayists, then, this is the moment to offer judgments about what the narrative might mean. It is a promising moment of discovery driven, at least initially, not to satisfy readers but to find out what the essayist still wants to know or has come to understand. When this works, writers are often surprised by what they say, and readers sense that whatever insights emerge, they are “earned,” or the result of genuine struggles over meaning.

An ending like this is in James Baldwin’s “Notes of a Native Son,” where he attends his father’s funeral, and meditates on his father’s failings. Meanwhile, not far from the church, race

riots consume Harlem. The essay exploits the irony that the death of Baldwin's father, who was consumed by hatred, is set against scenes of violence on the streets. An examination of the father's life becomes an opportunity for Baldwin to reflect on his own experiences with racism and his own vulnerability to a hatred that threatens to consume him as it did his father.

Hatred, which could destroy so much, never failed to destroy the man who hated and this was immutable law. It began to seem that one would have to hold in the mind forever two ideas that seemed in opposition. The first idea was acceptance, the acceptance, totally without rancor, of life as it is, and men as they are: in light of this idea, it goes without saying that injustice is a commonplace. But this did not mean that one could be complacent, for the second is was of equal power: that one must never, in one's own life, accept this injustices as commonplace but must fight them with all of one's strength. This fight begins, however, in the heart and now it had been laid to my charge to keep my own heart free of hatred and despair. This intimation made my heart heavy, and now that my father was irrevocable, I wished that he had been beside me so that I could have searched his face for answers which only the future could give me now.

Notice how much exposition there is here, and how the ending of Baldwin's essay doesn't use a final scene or image to complete the narrative. The language of exposition is the language of thought, and here Baldwin is trying to think through the personal meaning of his father's death, searching for insights that he didn't have when he began telling the story. Language that renders, which is more concrete—that *shows* rather than tells—is less helpful to Baldwin here because it isn't as well suited for that reflection.

The Temptation to Lie

Other essay genres like lyric, segmented, and flash nonfiction that have some kinship with the short story often minimize explicit reflection. They may show rather than tell in endings, and are much more likely to resort to scene, telling detail, image, dialogue, and other narrative elements that hint at meaning. Again, the decision here is much more complicated than it seems. The ending that might please readers' sense that this is a "good story" may not be the one that helps writers find what they've come to say. For one thing, there is a temptation to lie. As we search for that "perfect" ending for a story, nonfiction writers might resort to concocting an ending that satisfies readers, forgetting that when writing real stories our highest obligation is not to create a "good story" but to the truth of what happened. Fiction writers are free to make things up. We are not.

I once had a student who wrote a compelling personal narrative of her experience as a lifeguard. The story focused on a summer afternoon when she was bored and distracted and didn't notice that a boy had sunk to the bottom of the pool and was laying there motionless. Another lifeguard leapt into the pool retrieved the boy's limp body and attempted to revive him. Wracked by guilt and blinded by tears, the narrator ran from the scene and mistakenly wandered into the boy's bathroom, where she pressed her back against the cold concrete and slid down, sobbing uncontrollably with her head between her knees. Then she heard someone peeing in a nearby urinal, looked up, and to her amazement it was the boy.

I initially thought this was an extraordinary ending and told my student. "You liked that, huh?" she said. I immediately had a sinking feeling--the ending was invented. "But it makes it a good story, right?" she said. I've had variations of this conversation many times over the years, and the misunderstanding was almost always the conviction that telling a "good story" is more important than sorting out difficult questions.

Endings That Explain and Endings That Render

New insights often emerge in an ending like Baldwin's when the narrator shifts from the remembered self to the remembering self, a move that invites reflection. But narrative essays that read more like short stories may end with a scene, image, anecdote, or detail—or language that renders. For example, consider the ending to Lia Purpura's extraordinary lyric essay, "Autopsy Report," in which she describes her experience spending the morning in a morgue, surrounded by deceased men and women—a drowned seaman, an alcoholic businessman, an 18-year-old woman who died from an overdose. Purpura witnessed the "rote gestures" of the doctors opening chests to confirm cause of death, and she found the unveiling strangely familiar, a feeling she struggled to understand. She exquisitely describes how organs removed from an opened body and placed on a scale resemble a "cornucopia of dripping fruits," and "yellow layers of fat" were the color of a "cartoon sun" or "sweet cream." These poetic images are suggestive rather than explanatory, though even in work like this there are often moments of reflection that provide readers with handholds guiding them towards meaning.

"Autopsy Report" ends with a scene at a grocery store later that afternoon. She sees other shoppers as anatomical exhibits, with "scalps turned over faces, everyone's face raw and meatlike, the sleek curves of skulls and bony places exposed." After seeing human dissections earlier in the day, this perceptual shift seems unsurprising. The dramatic images of human dissection would certainly linger. The essay could end there and would still be fairly compelling. But it doesn't end there. Purpura then writes that we trust in the skin as a boundary, one that protects us from what is underneath—the strange "sweet cream" yellow of fat but also the unseeable vulnerability to how "small a thing" can undo us: "one sip, just one too many, mere ounces of the water of water in the lungs too much."

This reflective turn is quick, and then the final paragraph returns to how Purpura sees the “abundance” of items in the grocery store—the “pyramids of lemons, red-netted sacks of oranges and papery onions”—reminds her of the colorful abundance of human organs on stainless tables in the morgue. The essay says it obliquely, but I read this ending as a meditation on seeing, what Purpura writes is “a practice, a form of attention paid, which is, for many the essence of prayer.” The daughter of artists, Purpura says that “looking” was “the sole practice I had available to me as a child.” Her ending shows us this in how suddenly she sees other shoppers through the images she carried from her morning at the morgue, and then, just like that, “everything look as it always had—bright and pearly, lush and arterial after the rain.”

Closing Seams

What might we learn about endings from Purpura, Baldwin, and Brush?” Both “Autopsy Report” and “The Birthday Party” demonstrate how effective it is to reach back into the material that came before to resurrect some key image or telling detail—a “favorite hat,” or colorful organs arrayed on a tray—a move that reinforces their significance. Good endings are tethered to what came before, and these attachments can be as fine as a single detail that reappears in the end, charged with new meaning. Returning to a telling detail, image, or scene in an ending is like pulling on a thread that closes the seams in the work. This is especially important in segmented essays but applies to all essays as well.

The ending in Baldwin’s “Notes of a Native Son” is less subtle. He says what he means to say. What holds the work together isn’t the implied significance of a telling detail, scene, or image but ideas about his vulnerability to hatred, and how the death of his father was the occasion that led to these understandings. Though Purpura’s and Baldwin’s ending are very different—one extended reflection and the other a scene—they both address the meaning of the significant event in each narrative. For Purpura it’s a morning spent in a morgue and for Baldwin it’s his father’s funeral. Endings ask writers to comment—explicitly or implicitly—on why this event was significant, and it raises causal questions that endings try to answer: why did this happen or what are its consequences (or both)? Endings that fail to that can seem disappointing and unmoored—why is the writer telling me this story?

Last Lines That Burn Brightly

Both Purpura’s and Baldwin’s endings show what most writers already know about endings: the last line does the most work. A good one is like a dry log tossed on a fire, suddenly illuminating everything that came before it, putting things in sharper relief. In rewriting, we labor

over these sentences more than any other in the draft. Finding the right one is often intuitive and difficult to analyze. But last lines are particularly vulnerable to dishonesty, cleverness, and sentimentality. Many years ago, I wrote a personal essay for the *Boston Globe* in 1985 about my father's alcoholism. In the ending, there is a reflective turn where I write that children of alcoholics should always live their lives "a little afraid" of their vulnerability to the disease.

I was very proud of the last sentence of the piece back then:

Maybe it's that fear that has brought me back to this old typewriter, to peck away at painful memories and to try—through the writing—to understand the loss of a man who could give me a rose bush on my 21st birthday, and then drink himself to death before it had a chance to bloom.

It's not a horrible ending, and I received hundreds of letters from *Globe* readers who appreciated the essay. But as I read this sentence now I cringe a little, not just at the sentimentality, something that writers should always risk, but the sense that it's a little too clever, and maybe slightly dishonest. (Did he really die before the rose had a chance to bloom? Am I making that up to make this ending poignant?) Last lines, perhaps more than any other sentence in the work, should be honest and true. But maybe most important, they should surprise the writer a little and seem earned, the result of struggles to understand complicated things. I'm not sure this ending did that for me. It did, however, neatly tie things up, which is why I liked it.

Finding an Ending

Obviously, there are no formulas for writing good endings or rules to follow, except perhaps one: It should always *add* something to the work. If it merely repeats an already established idea or fails in some way to exploit whatever new understandings the writer has come to in writing the essay, then it should be cut. Sometimes the better ending is a few paragraphs earlier in the draft, which may be where the writer isn't trying so hard to neatly wrap things up. The only formulaic ending that sometimes works is what I call the "snake-biting-its-tail" ending where writers attempt to find their way back to the beginning of the work. This can give the story a satisfying sense of wholeness. But if the beginning isn't fertile ground for rethinking an essay's meaning the approach may not be useful. Another approach is to revisit the significant event or trouble that inspires the story. For Baldwin, this was his father's funeral. For Purpura, it was a morning visit to the morgue. This approach encourages a final re-reading of the event's significance, which seems likely to produce new insights.

In that spirit, I'll return to where we began: the problem that we don't seem to say much about endings, despite their enormous importance. I have creative writing friends who believe that this analysis of craft isn't particularly useful because writers often perform a kind of magic when they write that defies explanation. Perhaps more than any element of storytelling, endings seem a little like that. As I reflect on my own endings, I remember inspired moments in which a strong ending arrived unexpectedly, like a beautiful bird suddenly alighting on a nearby branch. Yet far more often, composing an ending is labor—write and rewrite, write and rewrite. There are no colorful birds, just the gut feeling that something isn't working. It seems helpful to unravel this mystery, at least a little, by understanding not what readers demand of endings but what endings demand of writers.

BB