How to get closure on your endings

Here are 5 tips on crafting a finish that will satisfy readers

By Sharon Oard Warner

Tell me a story,” my sister Lisa used to say. As children, we shared a bed for a time. At 11, I was her elder; Lisa was only 4. “Once upon a time,” my stories began. These words were easy and comforting to utter, and without fail they evoked a story both pleasing and entertaining. Often my sister dropped off to sleep shortly after I began, so on the next night, I might start up where I left off or begin a wholly new tale. Such a luxury this was—to have a rapt audience and no real reason to conclude what I’d begun.

Every semester I ask a new group of students to tell me a story, on the page, with a due date and a grade. Most often they begin with energy and enthusiasm, but somewhere down the line the stories and their authors start to lose steam. Many are prone to “not finishing.” Arriving late to class and a little breathless, they shrug their shoulders and shake their heads. “It was coming along so well,” they say, “but I have no idea how to end it.”

They want help. They want ideas from me and from their fellow students. They’re willing to let any or all of us resolve their narratives, just to keep from having to do it themselves. If worse comes to worst, they’ll start a whole new story, assuming mistakenly that ending some other story will be easier than finding a way to finish this one. Not so. The problem is larger than any one story. Endings aren’t easy. They require patience, persistence and the willingness to look deeply into our material.

So, how do we take control of our endings, you ask. Well, when I taught at the Nebraska Summer Writers Conference, I had the opportunity to inquire into the subject with a number of accomplished short-story writers. Their responses are woven into these tips:

1. Avoid the too-neat ending. What not to do is easily dispensed with and amusingly cataloged in a book by Jerome Stern called Making Shapely Fiction. Just as it’s wise to avoid opening your story with a ringing alarm clock, so it’s recommended you be wary of last lines like these: “He slowly drew the thin razor across his wrists” or “It’s not a bad place to live—warm, dry, and nice padded walls.” Novelist and short-story writer Deirdre McNamer advises writers not to “wrap it up and seal it tight.” Endings like the ones above trivialize the story and its characters. Instead, McNamer says, “Keep going until you feel yourself and your characters to be in the shadowy presence of a new story.”
In recent years it's become customary for short-story writers to think in terms of an *epiphany*, which originally meant "a shining forth." James Joyce borrowed this term from the Catholic Church and applied it to short stories. The term has come to mean something akin to a *revelation or realization*. The epiphany marks a moment in the story, generally very near the end, where the character—or the reader—achieves a new understanding brought about by the preceding events. This moment of truth need not be dramatic, but it should be significant.

Robert Olen Butler, winner of the Pulitzer Prize for his short-story collection *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain*, has identified a second epiphany, one he discusses in his recent book on writing, *From Where You Dream*. (See excerpt on pages 21-25.) "What I would suggest," Butler says, "is that there are two epiphanies in any good work of fiction. Joyce's is the second, the one often called the climax or crisis. The first epiphany comes very near the beginning, where the sensual details accumulate around a moment in which the deepest yearning of the main character shines forth."

FROM THE FIRST DRAFT TO THE LAST, SEE THE STORY THROUGH. I advise writers to find at least a provisional ending from the first draft forward. As Aristotle observed so long ago, the essential element of narrative is the arrangement of incidents. A story is defined as having a beginning, a middle and an end. Far better to end your first draft badly than not to end it at all. Although it's tempting to show a partial draft to others and ask for their suggested conclusions, it's not advisable. The story is yours, after all. Why give up the most important part of the process to others?

During the first draft, one simply gropes for an ending and hopes to improve upon it the next time around. Try writing a new ending from draft to draft. Conclude with an image, say, or a snatch of dialogue, a gesture or a thought. Cast about. Don't be afraid to write something foolish or overly dramatic. You can always rework it later.

LET THE STORY SPEAK FOR ITSELF. Short-story writer Leo Otto says the most satisfying endings are those that focus a step or two away from the story's central conflict. A physical scene, a
Get the right rhythm

Problem

In my short story "Signs of Life" published in the Spring 2003 issue of Prairie Schooner, a teenage daughter presses her mother into fortune telling. Through a reading of tarot cards, the daughter hopes to test her mother's prescience and reveal a secret.

Following are the last lines from a late draft, which I found unsatisfactory in their rhythm and depth.

"I wanted to protect you," her mother admits, slipping around to the other end of the table to collect The Empress and The Fool, then handing them over to her daughter. "Too late for that."

Sophie says with a small laugh. She pinches the cards, yellow sky to yellow sky, and holds them steady above the fragile foundation. Her hands are perfectly still, waiting for the right moment.

Solution

Even after finding the right place to conclude, I often spend considerable time and energy fine-tuning the final lines. Among other things, the published version that follows makes clear the revelation of the secret—Sophie's pregnancy. It also reveals the mother's internal response, her ambivalence and her affection for her wild child of a daughter. The sentences have been polished, the cadence corrected.

I try not to let go of a story ending until it resonates for me as the writer. If I've done my work well, it will resonate for the reader, too.

No one is less interested in the future than a middle-aged woman, this middle-aged woman. Still, her heart lifts a little as she says the words: "If I had to guess, I'd say you're pregnant, sweetie."

Sophie pinches the cards, yellow sky to yellow sky, and holds them, trembling, above a fragile foundation. She doesn't look up, but she gives a slight nod. "I think you're right," she replies.

--S.W.

piece of dialogue, some sort of action, a reflective passage. However the story ends, Otto advises not to "clamp down too tightly on the core conflict." He compares a story's closing to the ringing of a bell. "It rings longest when it's held most loosely. But held. I think the ending has to hold the story!"

AVOID THE TENDENCY TO SUMMARIZE. Some endings are simply too preachy and didactic. They tell the reader what to think about the story, and most of us prefer to draw at least a few of our own conclusions. "End before the last breath," advises Jonis Agee, the author of a number of story collections. Writers want their stories to be appreciated and understood. Don't overexplain; by doing so, you underestimate the reader's intelligence. It's better by far to leave something unsaid, and to leave off in a way that invites the reader to complete the thought.

There are no easy answers to the question of endings. Asking the hard questions of why the story matters and what it means to you can shorten the process and increase the chances of discovering a resonant resolution. Remember this: Only when the story's meaning comes clear does a satisfying ending become possible.

Sharon Oard Warner

The director of creative writing at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque, Sharon Oard Warner is the author of Learning to Dance and Other Stories and the novel Deep In the Heart. She is the founding director of the university's Taos Summer Writers Conference.

RESOURCES

- Curious Attractions: Essays on Fiction Writing by Debra Spork
- Deepening Fiction: A Practical Guide for Intermediate and Advanced Writers by Sarah Stone and Ron Nyren
- From Where You Dream: The Process of Writing Fiction by Robert Olen Butler
- The Sincerest Form by Nicholas Delbanco
- The Story Behind the Story: 26 Stories by Contemporary Writers and How They Work, edited by Andrea Barrett and Peter Turchi