



How to End a Story: Three Questions That Will Help You Find the Perfect Ending¹

The hardest part of writing a story might just be figuring out how to *end* a story. But what makes a good ending? How about a *great* ending? Is there a difference?

Endings are intimidating. They're heavy-laden with all the narrative weight of your story. And they're so much harder to write than we imagine when they play out in our heads. This is why so many trilogies end with a whimper, rather than a bang (*Star Wars*, *Alien*): Endings are hard.

But how do you write that rare, coveted third act that nails every beat and delivers on the audience's hopes and dreams? How do you conclude your story, or trilogy, or series with power and poise?

Let's dive deep into how to write a winning ending by exploring three essential questions that will keep you on track as you wrap up your next story.

What Does It Mean "To End?"

Before diving into the questions specifically, we need to review the purpose of a story's ending. This may seem self-explanatory. Isn't the purpose of the ending to . . . ya know . . . *end*?

Well, that depends on your definition of "end."

Writer-director Christopher Nolan (*Inception*, *Memento*) probably has a much different idea of an "ending" than J.K. Rowling does. For some, the ending is the chance to answer all the questions, or to resolve. For others, the ending is a chance to surprise, upend, and subvert the audience's understanding of the entire work with an ambiguous ending or a plot twist.

Sometimes an author will write an ending and believe that he has completely resolved everything in the story, but beta readers will quickly respond with helpful feedback like:

- "The ending was a little vague to me."
- "It was unclear whether the protagonist lived or died."
- "Did you mean for it to be unclear? Because I couldn't really see what happened during the big twist."

This kind of feedback is invaluable, and helps you know where your story needs fine-tuning, and may even give suggestions on how to tie up loose ends. In order to move forward, we're going

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to work with a unified definition of a story ending that can help you make sure yours is rock-solid:

A story's ending should resolve a story's physical and inner conflict, and provide all closure/continuity necessary for future entries in a series.

With this working definition, you'll have to the freedom to resolve what must be resolved, but also subvert and surprise as much as necessary depending on the book you're writing, and any future books you plan to write.

Three Essential Questions for Your Ending

So how *do* you write the perfect ending, wrapping your story up with just the right amount of clarity and punch? These three questions will help you end your story just right, whether or not you're writing a novel, short story, or novella.

Let's start finishing!

QUESTION 1. How is the Physical Conflict Resolved?

In the beginning of your book, you made a promise.

You started with a main character who wanted something (a physical object). Perhaps that something changed over the course of the story, but the theme and genre surrounding it did not. If the character begins by wanting a better job, but ends up robbing a bank, the theme and genre can still be the same: to gain wealth.

Every reader will want to know the same thing: Does your protagonist get what they want? How? And what are the consequences?

Even if the main character somehow steals the money, hides it, and has to serve a decade in prison, the reader knows that after that decade is up, the protagonist will get out and have the riches they wanted all along.

This is resolution of the physical goal. It absolutely must be there. Without it, the reader will feel a simple, irritated sense of dissatisfaction. Some might be so bold as to mutter, "Well, that was *dumb*." This is the common response to stories that don't resolve the physical conflict in a satisfying way.

Your first task when writing the ending to your story is to answer the audience's first question: "Does the protagonist get what he/she wants? If so, how? If not, why not? And then, what are the consequences?"

Answer this, and your ending will be off to a good start.

Example: Most Disney's fairy tales. Let's look specifically at *Beauty and the Beast*.

Belle wants more than her provincial life and Beast wants to *not* be a beast. Both gain this in the end by falling in love, and because Belle's positive influence on Beast pushes him to undergo a major character arc that proves his change in heart.

The consequences for this ending are positive: Belle and Beast have a happy ending since Belle's love for Beast transforms him into a human, and Belle gets to marry a man she loves, and live a more adventurous life.

The final scene in the movie illustrates this, with Belle and Beast dancing together, surrounded by people they love and other happy townspeople who have come back to the castle.

QUESTION 2. How is the Inner Conflict Resolved, or Settled?

You also made another promise. This promise was a little deeper: that the protagonist would wrestle with an inner need.

This need was also relevant to the story's theme and genre. If the protagonist is desperate for riches, perhaps they suffer from a lingering sense of inadequacy. Their whole life they have been told they were never good enough, never *valuable*. So after enough years of trying to find success and failing, they decide to seize value, even if it means breaking the law.

See the relationship here?

As a storyteller, you have to become a mini-psychologist. Readers are also knowledgeable about psychology, and they'll sense if your physical goal and inner need are not in thematic alignment. So as the physical conflict is being resolved, the inner drama must also reach some kind of resolution, or at least a settlement.

For the inner conflict may or may not *ever* be completely "resolved." This is the truth of human existence. We are always plagued with inner demons and struggles.

But the inner conflict in your story must be, at the very least, settled. Perhaps the protagonist accepts the fact that this inner need, this nagging hurt or want or desire, will always be with them, no matter what physical pursuit they undertake. This is its own form of settling.

Stories that fail to resolve the inner conflict often earn a more thoughtful criticism from readers: "It was okay. It didn't really go anywhere though. What was the point?" This, too, is a dissatisfaction that you want to avoid.

Make sure you answer your reader's second, possibly unspoken, question: "What's the point? What did we learn? Why did this all happen?"

And you answer that by resolving, or at least settling, the inner conflict that the protagonist struggles with throughout your story. For example, J.K. Rowling does this masterfully in each book in the *Harry Potter series*. *While each book masters how to create a twist ending, it also is an exceptional example on character development, which is best recognized by how a character changes by the end of the book.*

Example: *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*. In this book, Harry's inner conflict wrestles with the idea that he is 1) potentially the heir of Slytherin, and 2) destined to be a Dark wizard because the Sorting Hat confirms that he could have done well in Slytherin.

At the end of the story (spoilers!), Harry battles a basilisk by drawing the word of Godric Gryffindor out of the Sorting Hat—something Dumbledore insists is evidence that Harry was in fact placed in the *right* house for him (Gryffindor).

Harry matures in this novel by gaining confidence that his character strengths of loyalty, courage, and humility make him the kind of person he wants to be—and most importantly, that he has a *choice* in the kind of man and wizard he wants to be.

Overall, the plot in *Chamber of Secrets* makes an exciting, good story. But it's the combination of the plot and Harry's vulnerabilities and character arc that make it a great story—even a timeless one.

QUESTION 3. What Are You Going to Do Next?

This question may come as a surprise, but it's one you definitely need to answer before writing your book's ending.

What is your plan with this story? Is it self-contained? Are you planning a sequel? Are you planning a sprawling ten-book *series*?

You have to know this before typing "The End" or clicking "Publish." Because if you don't, you may write yourself into a corner.

For many authors today, writing and publishing a book series is a well-trodden path to success. The formula goes as thus:

1. Write Book 1, aware that it is the beginning of a series.
2. Write Book 2, aware that it is the continuation of a series.
3. Give Book 1 away for free as an email list subscription bonus.
4. Sell Book 2.
5. Write Books 3 through 12; sell Books 3 through 12.
6. Get rich and buy three houses.

Okay, while that final step is hardly a sure thing, the process has worked and *is* working for many authors, and there's nothing that says you can't be a part of it.

With this in mind, you need to answer this question by making a decision about your book's ending, based on the marketing strategy you have for it.

3 Strategies for How to End a Story

Here are the three typical positions you can take, and the pros and cons of each.

1. Closed Ending

You have no future intentions for this story or this book. It is a stand-alone story.

All character conflicts are resolved and all deaths/consequences are final. Any future projects in this world will be independent, and they will be unable to alter the details of this book. You intend to market and sell this book on its own laurels.

(Can you still come back to this world later and write a sequel? Of course! But recognize that this book and its ending won't be positioned to sell that sequel effectively.)

Many books in general and literary fiction have closed endings. Some examples could include:

- *The Great Gatsby*
- *A Christmas Carol*

2. Open Ending

You have mixed future intentions for this story or this book. It is currently a stand-alone story, but certain aspects of the resolution are not clearly resolved.

Deaths and consequences are left somewhat ambiguous. Any future projects will have the liberty to meddle with this story and make interpretations about these ambiguities.

You intend to market and sell this book on its own now, but maybe as a part of a larger series in the future. Currently, giving it away for free is an impractical option because there is not a second book to sell.

Also note that every book should have an ending, even if in a series. Each book should be able to stand alone, but that doesn't mean it can't be part of a greater end.

Take for instance, the *Lord of the Rings* series and how each book has its own story arc and even separate plot lines (more spoilers!):

- *The Fellowship of the Ring* follows the fellowship in the early stages of their quest. It ends with the fellowship falling apart. Merry and Pippin are captured by Uruk Hai, Aragorn, Legolas, and Gimli chat after them, Boromir is killed, and Frodo and Sam head off for Mount Doom alone.
- *The Two Towers* has separate storylines but we still see how each arc ends, even if the journey isn't over yet. The big moments in this book are the victory at Helms Deep, the destruction of Isengard, and Frodo and Sam's escape from Gondor. The main goal of destroying the ring hasn't happened yet, but the big expectations and battles for the story are complete.
- *The Return of the King* concludes the series and works as a standalone, with the end of the book concluding with an epic battle at the Black Gate and the destruction of the ring—and then later, the saving of the Shire.

3. Launchpad Ending

You have specific future intentions for this story. It is a part of a much larger story, and while the conflict of this specific book is resolved to satisfaction, larger conflicts in the world of the story are not. A few specific aspects of the conflict (both physical and inner) are not only left unresolved, but assaulted, resulting in the "cliff-hanger" ending.

Future projects will stay true to the story of this book but have the freedom to interpret its ambiguities. You intend to give this book away for free in order to sell the next book, or you are already giving away an earlier book to sell this one.

Make a Choice

Do you see how your intentions can change how much is resolved, and why?

Do you see the effective difference between an "Open" ending (where the reader is left to ponder certain aspects of the story that are left unresolved) and a "Launchpad" ending (where the reader is ravenous for your next book and will immediately click "Buy" on your sales page)?

It is essential that you know your purpose before resolving your story.

If you simply wish to write a single novel and give it a tightly-wrapped “Closed” ending, that’s great! The ten-book series isn’t for everybody, and for many writers, completing a single book is the achievement of a lifetime.

But if you wish to transition to a lifestyle of living off your craft, then make sure you end each book with deliberate purpose. Not only are you tying a bow on your current project; you’re also ramping up anticipation for your next project, and your next paycheck.

End Well!

We remember endings. We hold onto the emotions we feel during them. And we tell our friends and family about stories with mind-blowing endings and encourage them to experience them, too.

Don’t let the ending of your next story intimidate you. Take some time to complete the practice below, and then approach the ending to your current work-in-progress with confidence!

*“Wow them in the end,
and then you’ve got a
hit.” —Robert McKee*

PRACTICE

Take fifteen minutes to journal about your current work-in-progress by answering the three questions:

1. How will I resolve the physical conflict? What will the consequences be?
2. How will I resolve, or settle, the internal conflict? What lesson will the protagonist learn, or what change will he/she undergo?
3. What are my intentions with this book? Do I want my ending to be Open, Closed, or a Launchpad?