

Satisfying Story Endings¹



The ending of a story forms readers' (or viewers') final impression of what they have read or seen.

An effective ending leaves readers thinking and maybe talking about it long after they have finished reading. A story ending can be either happy or sad; it can leave the reader uplifted or pensive or heartbroken. But it has to feel "right."

What makes a certain ending feel right? How can you write endings that leave your readers "satisfied"?

What follows are not black and white rules, but rather guidelines to help you write endings that will make readers glad they invested their time and emotion in your story.

1) Effective endings show (or suggest) the result of the story's conflict.

The conflict of a story is a problem that the main character has to solve.

Examples of story conflicts:

- Cinderella wants to go to the ball -- but her stepmother wants to keep her scrubbing floors at home.
- Rosa loves John. But John is in love with Amy.

Readers keep reading to find out if the character will succeed in solving their problem. Will Rosa make John fall in love with her? Or will he marry Amy instead?

The story conflict gives readers a reason to turn pages. At the end of the story, readers expect a payoff—especially an *emotional* payoff. Your story, hopefully, has raised a question readers want answered and stirred emotions that need fulfillment.

Some story endings supply this answer in a tidy package. Cinderella suffers at first but later meets and marries the prince, and they live happily ever after.

Other successful endings only hint at the result of the conflict and trust readers to fill in the blanks.

For example, let's say that Rosa has saved up to buy an expensive present for John. When she goes to his house to deliver it, she looks through his living room window and sees him sitting on the sofa with Amy. Rosa sees how comfortable they look together, how intimate. Then she notices that Amy has an engagement ring on her finger. Rosa goes to ring John's doorbell, hesitates, then turns around and walks back down his front path to the street, where she drops her expensive present in a garbage can.

This story can end here. It might even end a moment sooner, when Rosa turns around and walks off John's porch. The reader has enough information to guess how the conflict will probably end. It looks as if John will probably stay with Amy. And it looks as if Rosa has decided to stop fighting for him.

¹ Source: <https://www.creative-writing-now.com/story-endings.html>; revised for class by Joseph Sigalas

Short stories often use this subtler approach. There might not be time to wrap everything up, or a tidy package might seem artificial. It might not be necessary. So the author gives the reader a hint of how things are likely to go.

What is the main conflict in your story? If you're not sure of the answer to this question, you need to work on that before you worry about your story ending.

I've noticed that when writers tell me they don't know how to end their stories, the real problem is often that they haven't developed a clear story conflict. They need to go back and work on the beginning and middle of their story. The right ending depends on what comes before it.

2) Effective story endings come from the main character's actions.

You might be familiar with the movie *The Emperor's New Groove*. The emperor, Kuzco, wants to build a summer palace on a certain hillside and asks the peasant who lives there, Pacha, if things are nice there. Once he has an answer, Kuzco has Pacha thrown out.

Pacha later discovers that Kuzco has been turned into a llama and that the emperor is completely dependent on him to get back to the palace. Kuzco commands Pacha to lead him back, but Pacha refuses to do so unless Kuzco builds his summer palace elsewhere.

That is the central problem, or conflict, in the story. Will Pacha get to keep his family's home?

In case you haven't seen the movie, I won't tell you how the story actually ends. Instead, let's imagine a different ending for the story. Pacha and Kuzco argue about what should be done. But before they reach a decision, Pacha learns that he has inherited an even better piece of land with loads and loads of gold mines, so he happily moves his family off the land Kuzco wanted. Problem solved!

Although this would be great news for Pacha and his family, it would be a terrible story ending because it's a matter of pure luck. It feels random. And instead of resolving the main story conflict, it avoids the conflict altogether. It gives Pacha an escape route that gets him out of his predicament. His decisions and actions don't matter at all.

Story endings are generally much more satisfying when the main character makes them happen. The character confronts a conflict with her strengths and weaknesses. Maybe she'll win the battle. Or maybe too many odds are stacked against her and she'll fail in the end. Either way, the reader is there to watch the confrontation and will be disappointed if it feels like you've fixed the fight.

3) Satisfying story endings use elements from the story's beginning and middle.

Imagine writing a story about a millionaire who is murdered in his vacation home. The main suspects are the millionaire's wife and two children, as well as the butler (of course). As the story progresses, the reader gets to know each of these suspects better.

The oldest son, Donovan, seems rather heartless. Maybe he did it, the reader thinks. But Edgar, the younger, sensitive son, is clearly hiding something. And what about the blood stains on the butler's clothes? The reader forms opinions and theories, then changes his or her mind.

Now, let's say that in the story's final chapter, the reader learns that the millionaire also has an illegitimate son, Jimmy. The millionaire abandoned Jimmy's mother years ago, and the adult Jimmy has murdered the millionaire out of revenge.

This is not a satisfying ending if it seems to come out of the blue. The reader has spent a lot of time

speculating about a cast of characters that didn't include Jimmy at all. If I introduce Jimmy at the last minute, I'm not playing fair.

To fix this problem, we don't necessarily have to change the story's ending. Instead, we could edit the earlier chapters to hint at Jimmy's existence. That way, when the reader reaches the end, his or her reaction will be "Aha!" instead of "Huh?"

Even a twist ending, designed to surprise the reader, should not come out of the blue. A great twist ending makes readers see the story beginning and middle in a different light. "Aha!" the reader says. "I should have realized that.!" "Why didn't it occur to me that.!"

This "Aha!" reaction comes when the reader realizes afterwards that the seeds of the surprising ending were in the beginning and middle, even though he or she didn't recognize them at the time.

Think of the famous twist at the end of the movie, *The Sixth Sense*. I'm not here to ruin movies for anyone, so, if you don't already know how that movie ends, I'll let you go rent it on DVD.

I'll just say that the audience gets a surprising piece of information at the end and realizes that the events in the movie were not what they seemed. But with this last piece of information, it all fits together. The clues were there. Recalling earlier scenes in the movie, the audience thinks, "Why didn't I realize what was really going on?"

Remember that, as an author, you can "cheat" to set up your story ending. Once you know how you want the story to end, you can go back and plant hints here and there for the reader, so that when she reaches your ending it will feel logical -- even inevitable.

4) Great story endings make the reader *feel* something.

If you bring your characters and conflict to life, readers will care how everything works out and will feel something when your character succeeds or fails.

Experiment to get the most emotional impact out of your ending. Try ending your story a little sooner; try ending it later. Try phrasing it differently. Push the words around until you get the spark that makes the magic happen.