

## **The Art of the Ending**

*By Joni Sensel, [www.jonisensel.com](http://www.jonisensel.com)*

### **Ending Possibilities Worksheet**

*Best used in revision, or at least after the first half of your work is drafted. If you don't have one at an appropriate stage, answer the questions for a book or movie you're familiar with.*

Jot down a few lines about your opening scene.

Ditto your ending scene, if you already have it or know what it is (optional).

What are a few significant questions raised in the first third of your work? (Consider what your MC wants or what primarily motivates him/her through the story, if he/she gets it, and how he/she feels about it by then, if so. Also consider your thematic premise as a question — e.g., “Does love conquer all?”)

What are the answers to those questions?

What remains unanswered? Should it be answered? Why or why not? (For realism and lingering reader thought, often something should remain unanswered.)

What is the absolute soonest you could end?

What aspects of the opening can you echo to help create a bookend? (Setting, characters present, issues/conflicts, symbols, lines of dialogue...)

Alternately, how could your setting for your final scene reflect the character's change/movement?

What balance has been upset in your story? How could you indicate that balance has been restored? What kind of marriage/union symbolism could be used?

Can this ending indicate a new beginning/new adventure? How? For who? (It may not be the MC.)

Who is your hero? What "spoils" does he/she capture? (It may be insight, the answers to questions, the love interest — or actual treasure.) Who/where could he deliver them to? How/where could he or others enjoy them?

Suppose you abandoned a happy or even hopeful ending. What would represent the bitter end? (Typically, this is a death, real or symbolic.) How could a bitter end restore balance for others, if not the MC?

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**A good ending:**

- **Gets the characters to a place where they can rest, emotionally and thematically**
  - Usually indicates MC growth
  - Establishes theme
  - Answers story questions and the promise of the premise
  - Unexpected or surprising, yet inevitable, gets extra points
- **Evokes emotion in the reader**
  - **Satisfaction**, not happiness, is the key.
  - Resonance/resolving note, like in music/jazz
- **Comes before the reader wants it to.**
  - Provokes the reader to additional thought
  - Stops when it should stop, and not a moment later

**Some common ending styles and techniques**

- Bringing back the spoils
- The spoils were there all along (perhaps full reversal)
- Balance restored (can be tragic as well as comic)
- Full circle/New beginning. Often more “hopeful” than “happy.”
- Bookends: (“the last scene is the first scene in disguise”)
- To the bitter end, including “burst of glory”
- “And we get by”
- Twist
- Reflective
- Ambiguous
- Deus ex machina

**How do you do it?**

1. Identify key questions raised by the story’s external plot.
2. Identify the story’s action climax
3. What questions remain unanswered by the results of that climax?  
(Often these will be aspects of the emotional or internal story.)
4. Identify the story’s emotional climax. This often comes quickly before or quickly after #2, often depending on the genre.
5. Identify the most important impression you want to leave with readers.  
Usually this is a function of theme.
6. Complete the ending possibilities worksheet to load your imagination and use the answers that resonate with you most to write one scene (or chapter) that gets you from 4 to 5.