Script Doctor

Diana Fuss

A high-energy exercise for thinking about narrative closure.

Genre: any, especially fiction
Course Level: any
Student Difficulty: moderate
Teacher Preparation: low
Class Size: small to medium
Semester Time: any
Writing Component: in class
Close Reading: medium
Estimated Time: 40 to 50 minutes

EXERCISE

Choose a novel, short story, or play with a curious ending—an ending that is complex, unsatisfying, disturbing, controversial, unnerving, or simply surprising. Script doctoring for narrative closure can be performed on almost any fictional or dramatic text and even on poems like Robert Browning’s dramatic monologues (“My Last Duchess” or “Porphyria’s Lover”), with their strong narrative thrust and complicated, demented speakers. I find it works best, though, for novels with sad or tragic endings: George Eliot’s The Mill on the Floss, Henry James’s The Turn of the Screw, Thomas Hardy’s Tess of the d’Urbervilles, Nella Larsen’s Passing, Edith Wharton’s The House of Mirth, Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man, Salvador Plascencia’s The People of Paper.

If the passage you have selected is short, begin by asking a student to read it out loud; if the passage is long, invite students to refresh their memories by skimming it quickly. Then identify some general problems with the ending—interpretive questions that have preoccupied scholars for years, or simply things that have long puzzled, worried, or intrigued you. If there is time, pause and ask students why these problems and debates might be important, or whether they have questions and concerns of their own about how the text comes to rest. This preliminary discussion might take ten minutes or so.

Next, invite students to think like script doctors: if they were charged with rewriting the ending, how might they conclude it differently? Remind them that script doctors are those unsung, uncredited writers whose primary job is to retool specific elements of scripts that need fixing—be it plot,
dialogue, characterization, tempo, or theme. Give students roughly five to six minutes to jot down one or more proposals for an alternate ending. Students may have several ideas; ask them to pick one. Then ask them to share their ideas with the class as a whole. Make a first pass around the room, so everyone has a chance to talk about at least one of their doctored endings. Consider using a one-minute time limit so that everyone has a chance to speak and no one gets too carried away. And leave a few minutes at the end of the round for comments and conversation. For a small class this portion of the exercise should take roughly twenty minutes.

If your class is medium sized, it is better at the outset to divide students into small groups of three to four. Ask them to generate together one or more new endings within a ten- to fifteen-minute time frame. I find that even when done collaboratively, “Script Doctor” works most efficiently if students still have a moment to generate some of their own thoughts first, so recommend that each group take a contemplative moment before they begin discussing ideas. When the groups are done, ask each group to share what they agree is their best or favorite idea first. If there is time, you can go around the room a second or even a third time to solicit more endings. Leave time for other students to respond, or even vote as a class on the ending they like best. For this group work and class discussion, you’ll need at least thirty minutes.

To bring things to a satisfying close, take at least ten minutes at the end to circle back and reconsider the logic, purpose, or value of the story’s original ending in light of its many possible alternatives. What have the new endings made more legible about the original text? What crucial elements of the original might be lost in the alternative endings considered as a whole? Is there anything about the original ending that no one dared to change? Why or why not?

**REFLECTIONS**

Script doctoring provides a high-energy (and often hilarious) way to talk about larger questions of narrative form and literary endings. Teaching closure is more challenging than it looks, posing any number of literary conventions to unknot: plot, character, structure, framing, sequencing, foreshadowing, denouement, resolution, suspense, irony. Working with students’ doctored revisions as points of contrast immediately helps to sharpen both local questions of authorial choice (why does the author choose this incident, this image, this word, this tone?) and larger questions of narrative closure (What constitutes a successful ending? What changes when an ending changes? Why does a story conclude the way it does?).

The results can be fascinating, as I discovered teaching Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*, a novel that famously concludes with the heroine swimming
languidly out to sea. While students usually wish to debate the meaning of Edna Pontellier’s ambiguous act (choice or fate? action or passivity? triumph or tragedy?), an exercise like this can yield much fresher results. The alternate endings students imagined were notably diverse: Edna returning to the beach, Edna swimming across the channel, Edna washing up on shore, Edna dreaming of swimming, Edna painting the scene. But the one thing every doctored script had in common was the return of Edna’s body (dead or alive) to land.

This strong desire to put the body back on terra firma, and back into the text, returned us to what we had not yet understood about the body of the novel itself—namely, its gradual dematerialization of language, its wavelike and oceanic structure, and its subtle narrative drift. An ending that at first seemed so disappointingly vague suddenly made perfect sense. And the novel’s narrative problems actually appeared more like literary strategies—a fitting finale to an exercise all about endings.

There are several variations for a script-doctoring exercise like this one. For longer classes or seminars with an emphasis on in-class writing exercises, you can really kick things up a notch. Consider asking students to rewrite the text’s final paragraph. Or invite them to craft a short epilogue to the tale. Or, if you have already spent some time on narrative exposition, invite them to draft the first paragraph of a proposed sequel. Once again, be sure to allow enough time for students to read their efforts aloud and to comment on one another’s literary imaginations. The point of this exercise is to augment and amplify the method of close reading with the practice of creative revision.

Alternate Endings

Melina Moe

A comparative exercise for thinking about endings.

Genre: fiction
Course Level: any
Student Difficulty: moderate
Teacher Preparation: low
Class Size: small to medium
Semester Time: midterm or late

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