

# A Bare-Bones Guide to Persuasive Writing

By Reed Beard

**B**efore I became a teacher, I worked in business for many years. There, I learned that the most practical form of writing is persuasive writing. Why? Because it gets you what you want!

The art of persuasion is a lot like the art of debate. In persuasive writing, you take a position on an issue and convince your audience or reader that you're right. The key word is *convince*.

How should you begin? First, state your opinion. Then present evidence to support it. These eight techniques will help you come up with an effective argument in your next piece of persuasive writing.

**1. Personal Appeal.** Human beings are emotional, so establish common ground with your audience by making him or her *feel* the same way you do about your argument. To accomplish that, tell a true story your reader can relate to or sympathize with.

**2. Tone.** Your word choice determines the tone of your writing. If you are sarcastic, you might alienate your reader. If you are too aggressive, your reader will be defensive. If you are friendly and sincere, your reader will relax. You want your reader to like you and to nod in approval at your ideas, so pick your words carefully.

**3. Precision.** Avoid using lazy language. Generalizations are so vague, they are meaningless: *My idea is awesome*. Also avoid jargon and clichés. Jargon consists of words and phrases known only by people with specialized knowledge. A cliché is an expression that is so overused, it has lost its value: *If you let me go to the concert, you are the best mom in the whole world*.

**4. Concession.** Have you ever argued with someone who didn't allow you to present your point of view? That wasn't a good experience, was it? You don't want to close your audience's mind by being too one-sided.

Rather, acknowledge a point or two by anticipating what he or she might say to counter your position and then stating that argument. It's called concession.

**5. Rebuttal.** When you **cede** a point, you need to immediately counter it. *However* and *but* are the two magic words of rebuttal. They automatically erase whatever precedes them!

**6. Logic.** The Declaration of Independence is perhaps the greatest piece of persuasion ever written. Thomas Jefferson based his whole argument for the American Revolution on logic: "*If it is true that tyrannical rulers don't deserve loyalty, and it is also true that King George is a tyrant, then we can conclude that we don't need to remain loyal to him.*" Logic can work in the following way: If  $A = B$  and  $B = C$ , then  $A = C$ . If all the statements in your equation are true, then your conclusion must be true as well!

**7. Authority.** If you are an authority on a topic, it is difficult for someone who isn't an expert to argue with you. That is why so many expert witnesses testify at trials. Although you can't be an expert on everything, you can add expertise to your persuasive writing by conducting research and including facts, figures, and quotes from authorities to support your argument.

**8. Rhetorical Question.** This is the fun part, used toward the end of your persuasive piece, just when you think you have your reader almost convinced. A rhetorical question can be answered only in a way that will support your argument!

I am the adviser to my high school's literary magazine club, and the club members and I used the devices of persuasive writing in a letter (see next page) to our school's principal. The result? We got what we wanted!

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# Our Persuasive Letter

## The Criterion Magazine

Literary High School

800 Twain Road, Grammarville, N.Y. 10502

Dear Mr. Principal:

April 17, 2006

Use personal appeal. Tell a true story to create empathy.

It was past 10 p.m. and we were still in the office. Our software was out of date. The page designs of *The Criterion* weren't to our satisfaction. And the pizza was cold. We were frustrated, tired, and hungry. Disappointed with the creative process but having done our best, we emailed the file to the printer. The next day, the printer called to say he couldn't read the fonts. He said most printers don't use our program anymore and that we needed to convert the file to a different format. That would cost extra money, and we would lose yet another day in the production process.

Anticipate an argument through concession and rebuttal.

Each year, we experience similar difficulties using our current software program to lay out our magazine. Last year it was pixilation. This year, who knows? As a solution, we are hoping you will provide us with the funds to purchase QuarkXPress.

Use a non-threatening tone.

Yes, QuarkXPress costs nearly \$800. But it is expensive because it is a professional program.

According to Annette Benson of the Parsons School of Design, "QuarkXPress is the only true page layout program."

Quote the experts.

You may think that Quark is a Macintosh program and that we shouldn't buy it because our school's computers are PCs. However, a PC version of Quark is available, so all our students can have access to this state-of-the-art software.

Use precise language to provide another concession and rebuttal.

Use logic to boost your argument.

At a recent school board meeting, parents expressed concern that very little recognition is given to writing in our school district. Yet interest in our literary magazine is growing—club membership is at an all-time high. If it is true that the district wants to do more for writing, and if it is also true that the students are more interested in our literary magazine, then it follows that the school should spend more money to support it.

Each year, we enter our magazine in the Columbia University Scholastic Press contest. The competition is fierce. Three years ago, we won a bronze medal. Two years ago, we won silver. Last year, we won gold. Yet we can do better. Our goal is to win the **coveted** Crown Award, the highest honor a high school literary magazine can earn. Without QuarkXPress, our chances will not be as good.

Write in a tone that your audience respects; in this case, that means sounding like a principal.

What would winning that prestigious award do for our high school? Will you help us?

Ask a rhetorical question.

Sincerely yours,  
The Editors, *The Criterion Magazine*



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