
WORDS ON THE LINE

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PERSUADING POWERFULLY: Tips for Writing Persuasive Documents

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AS CAREFUL COMMUNICATORS, we plan, draft, and quality control our persuasive documents mindful of motives, methods, and missteps. We realize the tenuous territory we have entered when presuming to have the power of persuasion. How do we recommend a course of action for our clients or managers without appearing too aggressive? And by recommending anything, do we imply that their ship needs shaping up? Worst of all, how dare we assume that they themselves have not already considered the proposed course of action?

I often tell clients that persuasive writing offers unique challenges in the corporate and journalistic worlds. We know meaning ultimately emerges from the reader. However, creating clear policies, procedures, routine re-

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quests, or responses seems far less taxing to us as writers than crafting a high-impact proposal or position paper. With those thoughts in mind, this article describes some helpful ideas to writers seeking to move their readers to act.

Persuasive Motives

In a proposal, we aim to motivate management into action; in a position paper, to inspire a response or further investigation; in a legal analytical brief, to win a judge's ruling on our behalf; in a business plan, to secure funding; in an admissions essay, to gain acceptance into a university program; in an editorial, to persuade our readership into embracing or rejecting a public policy or issue. However, we also need to think about for whom must we *strengthen*, *create*, or *reverse* an opinion. And in doing so, we want to ensure that we address these readers' concerns related to the issue.

We *strengthen* the opinion of readers inclined to favor our viewpoint but who may lack sufficient information or rhetorical luster to support their position. Why would we bother strengthening the opinion of someone who already agrees with us? Because these readers potentially stand as our greatest allies — if only they had the ammunition to fire away on our behalf. When writing to these readers, we should arm them with as much statistical evidence or research-based opinion as reasonable.

We try to *create* opinions of readers with limited knowledge on the issue. In most cases, I have found that these readers represent my greatest opportunity. If they have not thought much about the topic or feel indifferent about it — yet suddenly find themselves in a situation where they must act — then perhaps they have hung around just waiting for someone like me to persuade them. A possible strategy for writing to these readers would include addressing the issue that affects them. For example, when asserting a position on reforming bankruptcy laws to a readership of corporate employees, we may want to focus the point on how Chapter 11s adversely impact on 401K plans.

Finally, we do not want to neglect readers inclined to oppose our viewpoint. For one reason: they may not possess a full awareness of the scope or gravity of the issue. Addressing those points may win them over. For another reason, these readers' allegiance to their position may be shaky because of the dynamic, volatile nature of the issue. Showing these readers a clear path to stability may encourage them to see things as we do.

Persuasive Methods

The ways we persuade matter as much as the content we convey. Unquestionably, our reader interest hangs in the balance.

1. Create powerful openings

Sir Francis Darwin, son of the famous biologist, said, “The credit goes to the man who convinces the world, not to the man to whom the idea first occurs.” With this thought imbedded in our consciousness, we realize that how we open the door to a conversation matters greatly. To mention but five opening techniques: *anecdote*, *quotation*, *intriguing question*, *startling statistic*, *threat/opportunity statement*. Examples appear below.

ANECDOTE

When in 1982 Johnson & Johnson’s most popular drug, Tylenol, was contaminated and caused several deaths, its management immediately acted to remove it from store shelves throughout the nation. In doing so, the pharmaceutical giant demonstrated its commitment to the health needs of its customers and led the way for many other companies, which recalled their products in subsequent security crises. In light of recent terrorist threats against civilian populations, companies in the security industry today must be steadfast in following this example.

QUOTATION

The Irish poet William Butler Yeats said, “Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire.” In your college search, select a school not only for the volume of its resources and the credentials of its teachers, but for its ability to kindle your passion for learning.

INTRIGUING QUESTION

How does our company express its core values through the services it sells? More importantly, do our clients perceive these values through our services, and do they share our commitment to those values?

STARTLING STATISTIC

The Asian population in the USA is close to 12 million, according to *Census 2000* — a number projected to double by 2030. Our firm must do more to address the needs of this burgeoning community of discerning consumers.

THREAT/OPPORTUNITY STATEMENT

For twenty years, the world has been besieged by numerous strains of the AIDS virus. Nevertheless, the chances of finding a cure have never been greater — if only the international medical establishment would share its wealth of research, the multinational corporations would galvanize their economic resources, and the world leaders would muster their political will.

2. *Bring it home*

The sales maxim “always be closing,” posits invaluable advice to the persuasive writer. Most of the time, we persuade our readers not only to agree with our viewpoint, but also to get them to act. Therefore, we should close with a clear course of action. Examples from three different worlds appear below:

FROM POLITICS

Now the political struggle is over and we turn again to the unending struggle for the common good of all Americans and for those multitudes around the world who look to us for leadership in the cause of freedom. — *Al Gore, concession speech, December 13, 2000*

FROM BUSINESS

Authorizing an ATM for First Savings Bank is a viable, cost-effective solution to realizing our corporate mission. It will reduce teller costs by \$15,000.00 annually, keep our Bank in step with area competition, and increase customer convenience and satisfaction. With your approval, Operations will launch this initiative before the end of the current fiscal year.

FROM LAW

The foregoing factual evidence proves that Cherub Hix has no legal basis for claiming discrimination; furthermore, it clearly documents that BBB exceeds all EEO requirements. Therefore, BBB respectfully requests that this court dismiss Mr. Hix’s complaint in its entirety.

3. *Anticipate objections*

By raising opposing positions, we strengthen, not weaken, our argument. We demonstrate a complete command of the subject matter and imply fearlessness by addressing the other side’s viewpoint. This gesture may go a way toward reversing some opinions. Here is an example.

Our Agency's management clearly intended to respond prudently to the current recession by implementing a recruitment moratorium well before the Mayor officially announced the City's hiring freeze. The hiring freeze, however, seeks to achieve a short-term fiscal objective; recruitment, on the other hand, addresses one of our Agency's critical long-term objectives, which impacts on our very survival.

4. *Offer concessions*

By accepting the veracity of certain viewpoints, we prove our fairness.

Example:

The HandyDandy 2x cannot entirely replace the paper-planning system our department currently uses. Users cannot get a "big picture view" of their timeline and assignments, and they find it difficult to write on demand with the same efficiency as they enjoyed with the paper system.

Persuasive Missteps

Watching pundits on the cable news networks will open to any viewer the world of rhetorical low blows. Obviously, we want to ensure that these failings do not crop up in our writing because our readers will lose their patience, dismissing us as immature at best or emotionally unbalanced at worst. Therefore, we should maintain our credibility by guarding against the following eight rhetorical flaws.

1. *Ad hominem attacks*

The writer attacks the opponent's integrity, intelligence, or lifestyle, and ignores the opponent's argument. Example:

Ms. Jones's irrational claims are clearly without reason — not a surprising fact at all considering her recent admission of marital infidelity.

2. *Ad populum commentary*

The writer appeals to popular opinion without addressing the specifics. Example:

Every American worth his oath of allegiance knows that Mr. Whitmore's investigation defied commonly accepted democratic principles.

3. *Post hoc ergo propter hoc reasoning*

The writer incorrectly assumes that one event caused another. Example:

The Vietnam War escalated out of control in the mid-1960s. Clearly, America lost its resolve to suppress the expansion of Communism in Southeast Asia because of President Kennedy's assassination in 1963.

4. *Non sequiturs*

The writer states an idea that does not follow from the original premise. Example:

George Bernard Shaw was a prolific playwright dedicated to his writing. No wonder he never married.

5. *Red herrings*

The writer raises unrelated points to advance the argument. Example:

The Ancient Greeks were a polytheistic people; therefore, we should take Plato's *Republic* and Aristotle's *Rhetoric* with a grain of salt.

6. *Guilt by association*

The writer associates an opponent or a proposition with a guilty party. Example:

How can we elect a man who serves as second in command to an impeached President?

7. *Absolutes*

The writer sloppily uses superlatives (e.g., anyone, every time, nobody) to advance a point. Example:

Nobody really expects a human being to land on Mars someday.

8. *Hasty generalizations*

The writer uses data carelessly by incorrectly generalizing about specific data. Example:

A majority of Democratic and Republican congressional leaders oppose stem cell research; therefore, this scientific application has no popular appeal and deserves no place in the United States.

A Closing Thought

As Don Vito Corleone said, "Keep your friends close but your enemies closer." We will write at our best when we know all sides of the issue and then frame the issue into a question that we feel capable of answering. Documents achieve nothing; people do. Therefore, we want to supply our readers with whatever they need in order to act as boldly as we have been exhorting them to do.