

# Re-Assessing Persuasive Writing: An Essay-Free Approach

Alyssa Randall

As many of you may be aware, the ninth grade Utah persuasive writing test was changed to the eighth grade year. The state core requirements, however, did not reflect this change, and as many of you probably did, I began thinking of the challenge I faced to fit a persuasive writing unit into my already tight schedule. The more I thought about how to implement this new requirement, the more I thought about the typical persuasive essay that seemed mandated by the test and I cringed. While I believe the five-paragraph essay to be an important writing tool, I did not want to hear the unavoidable groans from my students as they started another bland essay.

And I did not want to read a stack of them either! My desire to avoid another essay drove me to consider breaking away from the popular persuasive writing format. As I researched such a change, I asked three questions: 1) Am I validated in trying other persuasive teaching methods? 2) If I choose to expand beyond the essay, what methods would I use? and 3) Will my students still succeed on the state test if I teach persuasive writing without the expected 5-paragraph essay focus?

## Validating A New Approach

As I began my research into new methods of teaching persuasive writing, I found almost immediately that branching out to new genres was validated. In this research, I found that by focusing on the persuasive essay genre we often limit our students to the perspective that persuasive writing equals a persuasive essay. In reality, the essay is merely a genre under the larger umbrella of the persuasive writing

mode. Editorials, political cartoons, advertisements, newspaper articles, commercials, blogs, letters, proposals, applications, petitions, speeches, and public service announcements also serve the function of persuasion writing.

So why do we limit our students to the narrow-minded viewpoint that the essay is the only way to go? Branching out into different writing genres allows students to explore the idea that form is a function of purpose. And purposes change based on audience. An essay might work wonderfully for a standardized test but its tone and format certainly would not convince a newspaper editor to include students' opinions. Breaking away from the essay format will encourage students to experiment while educating them in the real-world applications of persuasion beyond the essay. It will also make them educated writers who can make good writing decisions without direction from the teacher.

My research also confirmed that limiting my students to the persuasive essay reduced any passion or emotion involved in the writing for two reasons. First, students relied on the formula as a crutch and refused to experiment or include any sort of emotion or creativity. Bernabei and Lane (2001) discuss this problem, stating:

We want students to have opinions, to be passionate about these opinions and to defend them with strong, well-thought out and elaborated arguments. Yet more often than not, they end up listing three supporting details for each bland topic sentence. And sometimes the more we encourage them to get passionate

about a topic, the more they cling to the old formulas of success, all the time protecting the more authentic voices which lie within them. (p. iii)

Freedom from strict formatting rules opens new doors for students to rediscover the passion in writing, even if it is only hesitantly at first.

Secondly, persuasive essays also tend to lack passion due to the frequent assignment of bland writing prompts and use of imaginary audiences—thus the writing has no real value, no real purpose. I can see my students retreat to another world the minute they hear a prompt like, “Your school is considering wearing uniforms next year. . .” They hardly even hear the rest of the sentence because they know that the school is not considering uniforms and they are very aware that the essay will never get past my desk. Wollman-Bonilla (2004) suggests that all teachers consider how to teach persuasive writing “in a way that would make the writing personally meaningful to students, widen its social purpose, and address a real audience beyond the teacher” (p. 503). Addressing a real audience would mean taking risks as a teacher, widening the writing prompts, and expanding the writing genres to include more student choice, but it would also mean providing students with a sense of purpose and ownership. In my experience, this sense of purpose and conviction created involvement in an entire class of thirty-six students who produced writing that was polished and passionate.

### **The How**

I had found my answer: Yes, I should branch out to teach other persuasive genres. But how? In considering what I wanted from these new genres, I set three goals. First, the genre needed to encourage my students to think about persuasion in a personal sense. Why do you argue? How do you convince others? What

strategies help to convince you? As the students reflected on their personal persuasive strategies, they would come to recognize the value in the persuasive skills they learn, making them applicable and valuable. Second, the genre needed to encourage an element of creativity that would allow more passion and voice to fill the students’ writing. Students should feel like they were using the form to meet a purpose rather than completing a bulleted outline. Third, the genre needed to either demonstrate real ways we use persuasion beyond the classroom or encourage active participation in society. Either way, the genre must have real purpose. In reading several books and articles and in talking with countless other experienced teachers, I have found five exciting persuasive writing genres that I feel effectively meet these goals and teach the skills and elements of persuasive writing.

### ***The Surprising Reversal***

The reversal piece is a genre I learned from Dr. Deborah Dean at Brigham Young University (2006). In summary, the reversal encourages students to choose a topic that they know a great deal about so that they can educate those who might have an incorrect perception of their topic. The reversal is a subtle persuasive piece that initially starts out addressing the common perspective of a topic. Let’s take tarantulas. The writer might start out discussing how disgusting and terrifying tarantulas are with their fangs, giant body, and hairy legs. This hooks the reader who adamantly agrees with this common view of the nasty spider. After this first paragraph or two, however, the author shifts his tone to an “I will educate you” perspective and spends the next several paragraphs reversing the common view. The tarantula writer might discuss how harmless the spiders truly are with very little tendency to bite. The goal by the end of piece is to educate the reader and reverse their initial perception.

I implemented this in my classroom and found great success, especially with motivating students to write. Students thoroughly enjoyed the pre-writing process as they brainstormed ideas that they were experts on and interviewed peers and others to discover the common view of their topics. Their creative voices came out as they addressed the exaggerated common view, pulling their readers into what seemed like an easy agreement. Students loved this genre of writing because they were the experts. They were telling the world what was wrong with its biased thinking.

As another twist, I had one class write on stereotypes that they could disprove. Some chose to write about the “druggie skateboarders” or the “blond, stupid cheerleaders.” Students often wrote these as a defense against stereotypes where they had been wrongly classified, focusing on making a change in the world around them. Thus the writing was the most engaging I’d seen all year with an expression of voice I have yet to see in any other assignment.

### ***The “Make a Change” Letter***

The persuasive letter is another common form of persuasive writing because it so closely mirrors the five-paragraph essay. However, if done correctly, the letter can be a powerful writing tool to teach students the skills of persuasion. In my classroom, I had my students write the “Make A Change” letter. Together, we brainstormed issues that really bothered us in the world, in our school, or in our community and the students were informed that they were going to write a letter that would be mailed to their choice of audience. Students then chose an issue that was personal to them. This assignment allowed us to discuss appropriate tone, audience, voice, word choice, and other skills necessary to write a letter that would be taken seriously.

I had students write to the city to tell the mayor where a crosswalk was needed because

they felt in danger when they walked to school. One student wrote to the city to tell them about his street that was in need of street lamps so that children would feel safe at night. Each student approved their topic with me and then set to work.

The finished work that I received back was astounding. Their letters were detailed, polished, and passionate; their desire to make a difference had shown in their writing. Even after the letters had been turned in, students continually followed through to see if I had sent the letters out and if I had heard anything back.

The students finished their letters two days before our persuasive writing state test. I then transitioned into test preparation and we spent the next two days discussing how persuasive letter skills might transfer to persuasive test writing skills. This transition to a new genre offered another teaching opportunity to discuss form and purpose and to further solidify the idea that there are many genres within the persuasive writing realm. These students performed exceptionally well on the test, despite our focus on the letter rather than the essay.

### ***The Advertisement Commercial***

The media is full of persuasive texts and techniques that students are bombarded by every day. By utilizing these real-world texts as options for persuasive writing, students will see real value in the learning. Thus, I thought an important genre to explore was the analysis and creation of persuasive texts from the television. The most solid idea I found in my discussions with teachers was the creation of a commercial.

In a large group, students would create an item to be sold. This would engage them in creative thinking and provide them with the opportunity to become invested in the sale of their product. Students would research the competition, considering counter-arguments

that should be addressed. They would consider target audience and the elements of the commercial that would need to be tailored to that specific audience: word choice, tone, thesis. They would write a script with a thesis and supporting points and consider other elements like visuals and sound that could be key to providing a persuasive commercial.

During the creation of their commercials, I would model with them different advertisements and commercials, analyzing the persuasive techniques used. Students would have the opportunity to see what drives the commercials they view every day and learn how they are impacted by those techniques. Once students had completed the scripting, students would film their commercials and present them to the class.

This would be a great tie-in with any media literacy unit and could easily be transferred to essay writing. Again, the skills needed to write a commercial are very similar to the skills needed to write an essay. The difference is that we are teaching our students that the form of our writing or presentation needs to be changed to fit our purpose.

### ***The Editorial***

Another approach that I would like to use perhaps in place of the “Make A Change” letter is to have my students submit an editorial to a local or online newspaper. I would first encourage students to read the newspaper or follow an online newspaper for several weeks. As they read, I would require students to take notes on issues that they have strong feelings towards and have them note why they have such strong emotions. In class, we would work through example editorials and discuss the format that editorials follow and the purpose for the form.

After students are aware of the issues in the news, I would allow students to choose their topic but would work closely with them on the form of the genre. Again, the focus on

supporting details, a strong thesis, a counter-argument/rebuttal, and other elements of the persuasive essay will arise and can later be tailored for test-taking preparation.

The key to writing this editorial is to be sure that it will be submitted to the newspaper. With a real audience and an editor other than myself, my students will be more motivated to polish their work and create solid arguments. And in this instance, more than one audience could be reached if the editorials are published, reinforcing again the real-life applications of persuasive writing.

### ***The Blog***

While this might be a branch off of the editorial, it seems that a popular way to voice an opinion in our technologically savvy world is to blog about it. I would like to have students see a very tangible, modern format where they can apply their persuasive knowledge. Perhaps in place of the commercial, I would include this technological genre.

I would begin by having my students research an issue that bothers them or that they feel very strongly about. Again, this emphasis on choice will result in much better writing and a much higher level of engagement. As students come to a decision on their topics, we would focus on the blog-specific requirements for writing. A close look at the word choice and tone of the blog articles will show students that online writing can have very different rules from printed writing. And again, recognizing that the writing format is key to the writing purpose and audience will encourage students to reach for their arsenal of persuasive writing genres before automatically reaching for the essay.

After students have drafted and revised and revised some more, we would turn to the process of publishing. I have my own class blog where students could post, but I would also like them to find an outside blog that addresses the same issue or a similar issue and

post their work there. Knowing that their work could potentially be read by another reader, perhaps even sparking a debate where they could be an educated contributor, will give my students purpose and motivation to create the best product they can.

## Success

There were two forms of success that I found with these new genres that I implemented. First, students were incredibly engaged. They saw a purpose to their learning and they were involved in every step because the learning was real and applicable. Proof of their avid participation: the assignment turn-in ratio for the reversal and the letter were dramatically higher than any other assignments we turned in all year.

Second, I found that it was easy to transfer the persuasive skills and techniques to a simple two-day essay test prep class after focusing for a whole unit on the persuasive techniques. Every single one of these new persuasive genres uses a thesis; they each rely on solid topic sentences (perhaps in a different format or place, but they still exist) and detailed support. They consider counter-arguments and claims. Therefore, once the students understood the basic persuasive principles and writing skills behind them, I could guide the students to recognize how they could apply them to a new persuasive form and purpose. The classes

with which I experimented this year returned very high test scores and I believe that they returned higher test scores than they would have had we simply focused on the 5-paragraph persuasive essay.

In sum, I've reassessed my pedagogical values and found, again, that my goal is to have students learn the skills to make them successful in the world beyond my classroom. By teaching these students the skills to be persuasive beyond the essay, we enable them to voice their opinions. And by teaching them the skills to choose a form of writing to meet their purpose, we make them educated writers. And by teaching these students that with their writing, they can make a change, we empower them.

## References

- Baines, L. (1999). Losing the product in the process. *The English Journal*, 88(5), 67-72.
- Bernabei, G., & Lane, B. (2001). *Why we must run with scissors: Voice lessons in persuasive writing 3 -12*. Vermont: Discover Writing Press.
- Caine, K. (2008). *Writing to persuade: Minilessons to help students plan, draft, and revise*. New Hampshire: Heinemann.
- Dean, D. (2006). *Strategic writing: The writing process and beyond in the secondary English classroom*. Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English.
- Wollman-Bonilla, J. E. (2004). Principled teaching to(wards) the test? Persuasive writing in two classrooms. *Language Arts*, 81(6), 502-511.

---

A recent graduate of Brigham Young University, Alyssa Randall previously taught eighth grade English and currently teaches ninth grade English at the Orem Junior High in Orem, Utah. Alyssa lives in Provo, Utah with her husband of a whopping (and wonderful) two and a half years. She may be reached at arandall@alpine.k12.ut.us.