THE BASIC PRINCIPLES OF PERSUASIVE WRITING

Persuasive writing is writing that sets out to influence or change an audience's thoughts or actions.

You are subjected to persuasion everyday from the time you wake up until the time you go to bed. When you turn on your radio, are you listening to the CBC or some local station? Which paper do you read while drinking your morning coffee? *The National Post*, *The Globe and Mail*? *The Vancouver Sun*?

Whenever you buy a product or use a service, your choice has likely been influenced by a persuasive marketing ad. There are, of course, many occupations where persuasion is a skill used on an everyday basis. Lawyers, teachers, clergy members, and journalists are just a few.

The point is that understanding persuasive strategies can help you in two very important ways:

1) Knowing the strategies helps you analyse the strategies other people are using to persuade you. This way you can protect yourself when, for example, unethical marketers are trying to take advantage of you.

2) Knowing the strategies helps you to choose which is the most effective way to persuade an audience.

HOW DO WE GET OTHERS TO ACCEPT OUR POINT OF VIEW?

- by appealing to their reason
- by appealing to their emotions
- by the appeal of our good character

1) APPEALING TO REASON:

Remember that an argument is an appeal to a person's sense of reason; it is not a violent fight, dispute, or disagreement. It is a measured, logical way of trying to persuade others to agree with you.

One critical thing to remember that there are at least two sides to every issue. If you take the attitude that there is only one side--your side--you will quite likely alienate your reader.

You need, then, to choose one side of an issue clearly in an effort to persuade others. If you're unsure of your own stance, how can you expect other people to assess, understand, and be convinced by your position?

Example:

Issue: Should my father stop smoking?

Position: Yes

Questions you may ask (Your reasoning skills often depend on what we call "common sense"):

Ask yourself the following questions:

- Do I have enough evidence? (Is it sufficient?)
- Will my audience believe my evidence? (Is it trustworthy?)
- What are the assumptions built into my argument, and are those assumptions fair? (Is it verifiable?)
- Does my conclusion follow logically from the claims I make?

There are two basic types of reasoning processes: ***Deduction*** and ***Induction***

DEDUCTION: begins with a general principle or premise and draws a specific conclusion from it.

ex. All people who smoke endanger their health. (major premise)

My father smokes. (minor premise)

Therefore, my father is endangering his health. (conclusion)

Is this a strong argument?

- you need to offer evidence in support of your claims
- it may be impossible to prove a cause-effect link between my father's smoking and his declining health

Other issues you may bring in to support your argument:

- 2nd hand smoke / impact on family and friends
- the staggering number of people over 60 years old who die from lung cancer

INDUCTION: supports a general conclusion by examining specific facts or cases.

Ex. If I was to argue that my father was endangering his health, I might cite specific symptoms:

- His teeth are yellowish and he's lost a considerable amount of weight.
- He's no longer able to cycle his 25km every morning.
- Whenever he exerts himself physically, he ends up coughing extremely hard.

Other Logical Appeals?

You could cite smoking/cancer statistics, authority in the form of the Surgeon General, financial costs etc...

2) APPEALING TO EMOTION:

The logical appeal is certainly an extremely persuasive tool. However, our human nature also lets us be influenced by our emotions.

One way of evoking emotion in your reader is to use vivid images.

Ex. (to my father who smokes): "I remember when Grandma died of lung cancer. It was the first time I had ever seen you cry Dad. I remember that you also made me promise not to start smoking."

You could also offer vivid examples in support of your argument. Use language and/or images that are emotionally charged:

- You might detail the pain of going through chemo therapy.
- You could use Xrays of diseased lungs, or photos of cancerous gums.

Be careful, however, that when you use emotional appeal, you use it "legitimately." You should not use it as a substitute for logical and/or ethical appeals. Don't use emotional appeals to draw on stereotypes or manipulate our emotional fears. Don't use emotional appeal to get an automatic, knee-jerk reaction from someone. If you use emotionally charged language or examples simply to upset or anger an audience, you are using emotion illegitimately. Your use of emotional appeal shouldn't oversimplify a complicated issue.

3) APPEALING TO OUR GOOD CHARACTER:

The appeal of your ethics can occur on one or more of the following levels in any given argument:

- Are you a reasonable person? (That is, are you willing to listen, compromise, concede points?)
- Are you authoritative? (Are you experienced and/or knowledgeable in the field you are arguing in?)
- Are you an ethical/moral person (Is what you're arguing for ethically sound/morally right)
- Are you concerned for the well-being of your audience? (To what extent will you benefit as a result of arguing from your particular position?)

The ethical appeal is based on the audience's perception of the speaker.

Therefore, the audience must trust the speaker in order to accept the arguments. Don't overlook ethical appeal, as it can be the most effective of the three.

ELEMENTS OF A GOOD ARGUMENT:

Remember to identify any unfamiliar or uniquely used terms in your argument.

If you forget to define your terms (or choose not to define them) you run the risk of alienating your audience, confusing them, or causing them to come to inappropriate conclusions.

For example, before making the argument that teachers should "monitor" their students, the word monitor should be defined. Does "monitor" include eavesdropping on their group discussions? Does it include accessing their registrar's files to see how well (or how poorly) the students are doing in their other classes? Does it mean reading their e-mail in an online course without their knowledge? You would want to be clear about such a term so that someone wouldn't misinterpret its usage in a particular context.

YOU MUST ENSURE THAT YOUR EVIDENCE IS CONVINCING:

Convincing evidence will satisfy the following questions:

- Is the evidence sufficient in volume? That is, is there is enough evidence to present a strong, indisputable case.

- Is the evidence trustworthy? Does it come from reliable, informed sources.
- Is the evidence verifiable? That is, can you corroborate it through other sources. Is the evidence factual, or does it rest solely on opinion?

APPEAL TO AUTHORITY:

If you are drawing on an authoritative, expert figure to back up what you say, is the authority actually reliable? When trying to determine whether someone is an authority, consider the following elements:

- Is your expert a current authority on the specific subject in question?
- Is your expert up-to-date on the most current procedures, statistics, testing programmes etc.
- Is your expert viewed favourably by their peers? Is he/she respected in the field?
- Is your expert associated with reputable organizations?
- Is your expert as free of bias as possible?

Remember that when quoting a source you must be careful that you don't accidentally (or intentionally) take the quote out of context, changing the original meaning.

Keep in mind, as well, that your authority should be knowledgeable about the subject; he/she should not simply be someone famous. A celebrity endorsement is not quite the same as expert opinion (unless the celebrity is endorsing a product that she/he uses.)

Canadian Olympic snowboarder Ross Rebagliati may be an expert when it comes to endorsing snowboard wax, but he's not necessarily an expert when asked about the national unity debate. Bryan Adams' celebrity status does not make his an expert authority on the national economy, but he would be a reliable, trustworthy source if you asked him about building recording studios.

In addition, you want to ensure that the authority you are using is still current in the field. For example, you might not want to use a long-retired politician like Pierre Trudeau as your focus expert on the state of the unity issue in Canada today.

Remember that the most successful arguments often combine the three appeals. With that in mind, be very careful about relying solely on logic in an argument. Use a combination of appeals to allow for a more balanced argument. An audience may readily become resistant to your argument if you rest solely on a particular line of reasoning that they fundamentally disagree with.

IMPROPER EVALUATION OF STATISTICS:

Using statistics, studies and surveys can be very persuasive if they are used ethically and accurately.

Ask yourself the following questions before using this kind of evidence:

- Were the survey questions as objective as possible?
- Was the sample pool representative or biased?
- Are the statistics accurately tabulated?
- Have the statistics been taken out of context?

- Is there enough context provided so that the reader gets a clear view of any pre-existing bias?

OTHER IMPORTANT TERMS FOR ARGUMENT:

Concession: When you concede a point in an argument, you are saying that you actually agree with your opponent on a particular issue. Remember that this is not a sign of weakness. In fact, you are strengthening your ethical appeal because you are coming across as a reasonable person who is willing to see more than one side of the argument.

Refutation: When you deliberately, directly attack an opponent's argument, point by point, you are said to be "refuting" the argument.

Anticipating and **Addressing Counter-Arguments:** When you are making your argument, you must remain aware of what points your opponents will likely take exception to. If you can anticipate what the likely objections will be, and then address them in your argument, you'll likely strengthen your position.

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