

Seven Simple Steps to Persuasive Writing

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Almost all technical writing benefits from the technique of persuasion. Grants and proposals must have persuasive elements to be effective; operating instructions should convince customers that they have bought the best product for the job; hospital literature should assure patients that they have chosen the most well-equipped place to recover from surgery; research results should leave no doubt in the reader's mind about the data's validity. This article will describe simple ways to add *subtle* persuasion to your writing, to make your company or organization the frontrunner in the minds of its clients.

Subtle persuasion is preferred over obvious persuasion, to which people are resistant. When someone uses obvious persuasive tactics ("Sir, that's a lovely tie you're wearing. Can I invite you in to our showroom? I'll make you an unbelievable deal."), you want to prove that these methods won't work on you. You're too smart and can see right through them. You're resistant to anything the sales agent has to offer.

Yet if a salesperson approached you asking, "Can I help you find anything?" and segued into "Did you see last month's *Consumer Reports*, which featured our widgets and described their money- and time-saving properties?" you would be more open to interaction. This approach is preferable because it's a soft sell; you're not put on the defensive right away, wary of what is to come.

Techniques of Persuasion

1. Attach an expert's name to a paper or statement.

The subtle approach described above

is persuasive not just because the salesman referred to the benefits of money and time savings but because he mentioned that the widgets were featured in *Consumer Reports*, a respected magazine. If you're selling results—enticing people to act on research data—people must believe those results to take them seriously. Attributing research results or conclusions to a respected professional is persuasive.

A writer for the fictive Water Conservation Organization of Utah (WCOU) has the job of writing data collection results in report form, thereby getting people to conserve water. Which of the following would be more effective?

The probable indication of the data is that there might be a serious water shortage in approximately twenty years unless conservation efforts are taken soon.

WCOU Executive Director Merle Reubens, P.E., says that recent data foretell a serious water shortage we can expect within twenty years unless we take action now by shortening our showers, reducing our lawn watering, and initiating other water conservation methods.

The second statement has greater urgency because of the words "take action now," and more credibility because an expert's name—with professional certification—is attached. Director Reubens is a professional engineer, a title relevant to the subject of the statement. A statement about a huge economic downfall for the citizenry of Utah would not be persuasive if attributed to this director, for she is not an expert economist, or at least is not identified as one. Crediting research results or conclusions to a respected professional is persuasive.

2. Reward people for following through with a desired action.

The citizens of Utah would be more inclined to practice methods of conservation if they were rewarded for their efforts, like a tax incentive for a set volume of water saved. A reward doesn't have to be tangible or cost your organization anything. Medical literature, for example, may reward readers with the promise of complete healing:

Continuing to take the medication as prescribed by your doctor ensures that the infection is healed.

Assembly instructions may reward readers with the prospect of a properly functioning finished product:

PedalCrazy, Inc. guarantees that, by following the instructions step by step, you will have an exercise bike ready for riding after only fifteen minutes of simple assembly.

Compare this statement to patronizing directions such as the following, which is more a threat than a reward. Notice how less motivating it is.

Please follow the instructions. Failing to do so may lengthen assembly time.

Rewards, tangible or intangible, are persuasive. Threats are not necessarily so.

3. Use numbers—but not so many as to confuse your audience.

A startling fact that is news to your audience is persuasive. Consider again the water shortage example:

Increasing our conservation efforts now will ensure that we will not have to import water from other states, an effort which would cost Utah an estimated \$490 million, or \$1,120 per year for a family of four.

Surprising statistics can be very persuasive, and sometimes move people to action. According to Patricia J. Parsons in her e-book *Beyond Persuasion: The Healthcare Manager's Guide to Strategic Communication*, the statistic should be something "that is not likely to be known already by

your audience, something that happened, a startling amount of money, something that is quick, to the point, and wakes up your audience.” Consider this example:

According to the March of Dimes, 2,500 babies are born with brain and spinal cord defects each year. Taking 400 micrograms of folic acid each day before you get pregnant and through the first trimester can prevent these types of birth defects. [Data taken from www.modimes.org].

The startling, persuasive statistic is that 2,500 babies a year are born with defects of the brain and spinal cord. That 400 micrograms of folic acid is important for fetal health is not very startling.

Peppering your writing with statistics makes it persuasive.

4. Omit hedge words.

The first statement in Item 1 is less urgent because of hedge words—words that indicate less commitment or confidence. Confidence **itself** is inherently persuasive. Hedge words that you should avoid in your writing include *may, might, perhaps, probably, approximately, likely, and suggest* (as in “results suggest”: results don’t suggest, results show or indicate).

Sometimes a hedge word is necessary (“This medication *may* cause drowsiness”), but hedge words usually lessen the integrity of your writing. If you are not confident in the results, the reader won’t be confident, either.

5. Echo your reader’s concerns and allay them.

Everyone wants empathy when experiencing something negative. Readers’ obstacles may be serious or minor, but showing that your organization cares about its customers is a way of convincing them that they have chosen the right company.

Recently I edited some patient education material for a children’s hospital. Several of the home health care procedures ended with a section headed “Tips,” followed by a list of recommendations for making home care easier. But there was no introduction explaining the

purpose of the tips. I inserted the following introductory paragraph:

We at Children’s Hospital understand that maintaining a clean catheter can be stressful. Please understand that it is only temporary. We offer the following tips to help make the process easier for you and your child.

A warm, thoughtful introductory paragraph helps parents know that they have chosen a hospital with compassion for their child and their situation.

Let readers know that you understand their concerns, and offer solutions if you can.

6. Use repetition—but don’t overdo it.

Nothing brings home your message like repetition. When writing a report, putting a summary of the results in the introduction, the discussion section, and the conclusion is an effective persuasive device. But too much repetition can backfire. Repetition of a single word or phrase, for example, can become obvious, and, as mentioned previously, many people are resistant to obvious persuasion.

You can make your writing more persuasive by phrasing the central theme differently each time it appears in the text:

If you experience any of these symptoms, please see your doctor.

It’s important to seek medical advice if you become lightheaded or anxious.

Your doctor can help you manage any side effects you experience.

Repetition, in moderation, helps your readers see the point of your writing.

7. Persuade through careful charting and graphing of data.

Invariably, some in your audience are more comfortable processing information verbally and some visually. Just as some verbal learners prefer oral over written communication, some visual learners prefer charts over graphs. Presenting data verbally and in chart and graph form will affect a wider range of readers, making your communication more persuasive.

But be aware that charts and graphs can distort or misrepresent data. For information on questionable charting and graphing methods, please see John Bryan’s article, “Seven Types of Distortion: A Taxonomy of Manipulative Techniques Used in Charts and Graphs,” in the *Journal of Technical Writing & Communication*, Volume 25, Number 2 (1995).

Summing Up

Becoming comfortable with these persuasive methods will improve your writing. If you want to find other ways to make your writing more effectively convincing, entering “persuasive writing” into the search engine at Amazon.com yields dozens of good titles. Most are general, but some are specific to economics, education, law, business, the news media, even job-seeking.

Persuasion is appropriate to every specialty. No one is immune to it. Use it to your advantage. ☛

SUGGESTED READINGS

Carrick, Nancy, and Lawrence Finsen. *The Persuasive Pen*. Sudbury, Mass.: Jones and Bartlett, 1997.

Cross, Mary. *Persuasive Business Writing*. New York: American Management Association, 1987. (highly recommended)

Parsons, Patricia J. *Beyond Persuasion: The Healthcare Manager’s Guide to Strategic Communication*. Boulder, Colo.: net Library, 2001.

Stonecipher, Harry W. *Editorial and Persuasive Writing*. New York: Hasting House, 1979.

Whalen, D. Joel. *I See What You Mean*. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1995. [LOC lists year as 1996.] (for those who have a good grasp of persuasive communication)

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