

English 11

Writing Persuasive Essays

The goal of writing a persuasive essay is to persuade or convince the reader to believe something. Writers do this through the use of logical arguments and emotional appeals. While there is no one correct way to write these essays, this article will show you some good practices to consider when learning how to write a persuasive essay.

The introductory paragraph is the first-paragraph in the persuasive essay. I teach my students that their introductory paragraphs should have three parts: an attention-catcher, a thesis, and a preview. The introductory paragraph is perhaps the most important paragraph in the essay because it is the first and possibly last chance to make an impact on the reader. It should clearly express the subject of the essay as well as the writer's position. While it is generally not required, previewing the main points shows readers that the paper has been thoughtfully composed rather than free formed. Every introductory paragraph should begin with an attention catcher.

Attention Catchers

The attention catcher or lead should be the first sentence in the persuasive essay. It is the writer's first chance to make an impression on the reader, so it should not be spent thoughtlessly. A good attention catcher is angled in a way that immediately pushes the reader toward the writer's position. Here is an example:

Example of a Weak Attention Catcher

Do you think students should have to wear uniforms?

Notice that this question is open-ended and does not provide an opinion. If my students wrote this, I would not know which side they were arguing. This should not be the case. The writer's position should be clear before they even mention it based on the strength of their attention catcher.

Example of a Strong Attention Catcher

Do you think students should be forced to wear

pants when it is over 100 degrees?

This example is much stronger because the writer's position is clear from the first line. They ask a question to which they already know the answer. Persuasion is about forcing others to think along your lines. Practice this in your writing by using attention catchers that are angled toward your position. It may take more time to write your attention catcher than any other sentence in your essay, but this is time well spent in my opinion.

Attention Catching Techniques

Here is a short list of attention catching techniques for persuasive essays. This list is not to be thought of as exhaustive, but rather as a few guiding examples to help you get started. You are encouraged to combine and experiment with these techniques as your writing develops.

Asking a Question: This is can be used on any topic at any time. It has a strong rhetorical effect on readers: people are conditioned to think about questions because answers are often expected of them. When you ask a question in your paper, readers are more likely to consider your ideas. As with any attention catcher, you'll want to take your time making a good one that begins persuading your audience immediately.

Quotation: A wise person once said, "No matter what you're trying to say, someone else has probably said it better." I find that in most cases this statement is true. Using an appropriate quote is a classy way to start off your essay. Just be sure that the quote is connected to your topic in some easily identifiable way.

Anecdote: An anecdote is a short story. Beginning your essay with an anecdote that is clearly related to your topic is another great way to get the reader's attention and briefly demonstrate your descriptive writing ability. There are a couple things to keep in mind, however, when using an anecdote to catch the reader's attention:

Stay on Point: as with everything in your paper, your attention catcher, especially if it is an anecdote, should be related to your topic and position.

Stay on Mode: Remember that you are writing a persuasive essay, not a narrative. Your anecdote should be limited to a few sentences, lest your writing may be perceived as off mode.

Startling Fact or Statistic: Did you know that two out of three persuasive essays do not begin with a proper attention catcher? Using a startling fact or statistic is another great way to pique the reader's interest, assuming that you can locate just such a fact.

Imaginative Scenario: Picture this! You have forty-five minutes to write an essay and you need an attention catcher fast. What do you do? One way to do this is to create an imaginative scenario such as the one that I just described. Immerse your reader in an example of the problem and show them why they should care. Use descriptive writing and sensory details to either positively or negatively charge your writing; however, as with telling anecdotes, be careful not to stray off mode. Remember that your main purpose is to write arguments not to tell stories.

Combinations: You might find yourself using some combination of two or more of these techniques, which is completely acceptable. You can begin with an imaginative scenario and end with a question. Try something wild. When it comes to writing, the most restrictive limitations are the bounds of your own imagination. You are encourage to stretch those bindings whenever you have the opportunity.

Thesis

A thesis is a clearly worded statement telling readers exactly what the writer intends to do in the essay. Good persuasive writing does not make the reader guess as to what the author's intentions were. The writer's intent should be made very clear. The best place to do this is immediately after the attention catcher. After gaining the reader's interest, clearly state the position of your essay, as in the following example:

Do you think students should be forced to wear pants when it is over 100 degrees? Of course not. Students should not have to wear uniforms.

The emboldened text represents the thesis or central argument in an essay. Every sentence in your paper should in some way connect to that central argument. Any sentence that is not furthering your thesis is distracting from it and should be removed. Clearly state your thesis in your introductory paragraph and spend the rest of the essay trying to support it. If your position changes during the course of your writing, don't be afraid to go back and revise your thesis, but your thesis must align with the arguments in your essay.

Preview of Main Points

The preview briefly states the main points that will be argued in the essay. The preview is not where the arguments are developed. The preview merely summarizes each point in as few words as possible. Each body paragraph should have one main point. All of the main points should be concisely stated in the preview. An appropriately structured five-paragraph essay will preview three main points. It is important for writers to preview their main points in the exact order that they will be developed. For example, if you claim that your essay will argue square, circle, and triangle. Your first body paragraph should be about squares, the second should be about circles, and the third should be about triangles. Your previews should come right after the thesis statements in their introductory paragraphs.

Body Paragraphs

The term body refers to all paragraphs after the introduction and before the conclusion. The metaphor that comes to mind most often in describing this structure is the hamburger sandwich: the introductory and concluding paragraphs represent slices of bread while the body paragraphs are the meat and cheese of the essay, so to speak. There are three body paragraphs in a five paragraph persuasive essay. Each body paragraph should focus on one argument, called the main point.

Main Points

A main point is the purpose of the body paragraph. Each body paragraph should have one clearly stated main point that is expressed in the topic

sentence of the paragraph. The main point should then be developed and supported with emotional or logical arguments. A five-paragraph persuasive essay should have three main points and each main point should support the thesis of the essay.

Topic Sentences

Topic sentences clearly state the purpose of the paragraph. Each body paragraph should begin with a topic sentence. A topic sentence may or may not restate your thesis or position but always should state the paragraph's central argument. The goals of a persuasive essay are somewhat opposite to that of a mystery novel: when writing a persuasive essay do not attempt to build suspense by keeping secrets from the reader. Write topic sentences that are clear, direct, and upfront about your purpose.

Example: Students should not have to wear school uniforms because they limit students' ability to express their individuality.

Supporting Details

Supporting details are arguments, examples, or descriptions that justify, explain, and develop main points. My students perennially struggle with properly supporting their main points. The thought stems are something like training wheels for writing: once you learn to write they won't need to them; but when you are first learning, you can learn to better sequence and develop their support by using thought stems.

Persuasive Essay Thought Stems

What I mean by this is...

Another way to say this is...

This connects to my argument because...

The reason for this is that...

To put it another way...

This shows that...

This is important because...

For example... With a little bit of practice, you can use these thought stems to better explain and support your arguments.

Making the Connection

Making the connection is when the last sentence in a body paragraph connects the support back to the

main point. To support next to the main point try to follow the analogy of the prosecutor in a criminal case: the attorney doesn't just say, "There were some blood drops in the defendants car," and then end his argument. Having evidence is not enough. The prosecutor must explain what the evidence shows. Likewise, writers need to explain what their evidence shows to make the connection. Don't make the readers draw their own conclusions; that's your job.

Example: We should not have to wear school uniforms because they limit our ability to express our individuality. What I mean by this is that students have the right to express who they are and how they are feeling. One of the most important ways they do this is through dress. This is how we show the world who we are, particularly in an environment where we are forced to be quiet for 90% of the day. Our fashion makes a unique statement. If students are forced to wear uniforms, their ability to express themselves will be severely limited. Schools should promote student expression not restrict it. Because of this we should not have to wear uniforms.

This paragraph begins well by clearly stating the position on the topic and the main point of the paragraph. The paragraph is well developed with logical arguments, and then it closes strongly. But imagine if it ended without the parts in bold? This is how many of my students write: they state their point, they support it with some evidence, and then they move on with the essay. Bringing the argument back to the topic sentence is an essential and often overlooked step. By connecting the support to the main point, writers help readers make the connection. This is entirely essential to writing excellent paragraphs.

Concluding Paragraphs

The conclusion is the last paragraph in the persuasive essay. A good conclusion will not only restate the main points of the argument, it will bring something new to the table and end with strength and resolution. It's been compellingly argued that readers or listeners best remember the first and last things stated. With this notion in mind, you should allot yourself an appropriate amount of

time to craft a resonant introduction and conclusion. One way to write a strong concluding paragraph is to restate the thesis and main points of the essay, but then attempt to leave a strong impression on the reader by ending on a clinching statement.

Restatement of Points

A restatement of points is when the writer briefly reviews the main points of their argument. It is similar to the preview in the introduction but, while maintaining the sequence of the arguments, the writer should not repeat it word for word. Having a preview and review in the introduction and conclusion develops a strong sense of the structure of a persuasive essay.

Clinching Statements

The clinching statement is the last idea in the persuasive essay. Since it is your final opportunity to leave an impression on the reader, you should attempt to close with finesse. Here is a list of a few techniques that may help you end your persuasive essays more effectively.

The Better World: The writer attempts to describe an idyllic scenario that will occur if their proposal is accepted. The sun will shine brighter and the sky will be bluer if the writer's resolution is adopted, so to speak.

Example: If students aren't forced to wear uniforms, our school will have a much more pleasant and productive environment in which everyone will learn and grow.

The Worst Case Scenario: The writer again attempts to describe a scenario, this time imagining how bad the world might become if their proposal is rejected. Fear is a highly motivating emotion, so the writer should strive to make their scenario as frightful as possible without sounding ridiculous.

Example: If students are required to wear uniforms, the environment of our school will become drab and colourless, and the structure of our hallowed institution will be further from a college and closer to a prison.

The Call to Action: Another good way to end your essay is to ask or demand that your reader take some action in support of your proposal. Perhaps you ask them to write a letter or email to their congressman or relevant authority. Perhaps you ask them to recycle their trash instead. The scope of your call is dependent on the topic.

Example: If you understand how important it is for students to have the right to dress themselves, it is your civic duty to attend your local school counsel meeting and demand that this proposal be rejected.

These are just a few suggestions to get you to think about how to effectively close your persuasive essays. No matter which approach you choose, remember the importance of your audience and the parting words to the reader. You should dedicate an appropriate amount of time to closing your essay with finesse.