



A Student Guide to Persuasive Essays and Debates

“Care in the choice of one’s words is the respect that the mind pays to the instrument of its own being.”

—Ashley Montague

The purpose of this guide is to offer strategies for preparing a strong persuasive essay or debate. It will sharpen skills you might not realize you already have, making your work more accurate, clear, concise, logical, convincing, and respectful of opposing arguments.

So just what is a persuasive essay?

It is a convincing argument in favor of or in opposition to an issue. What makes a persuasive essay different from a factual account? *Bias*, or taking a side, in a carefully argued point of view.

It’s in You

If you’re a little nervous about tackling a persuasive essay, relax. You know more about this than you think you do.

Every day you express your opinions on fashion, sports, current events, entertainment, classes, or people. When you try to convince others of your views, you give reasons. That is the start of any good persuasive essay or debate. Your best foot is already forward.

Gather Your Thoughts and Take the Next Step

Let’s take those everyday situations and shape them into a model.

1. Think before you speak or write. Outline your thoughts.
2. State your case.
3. Listen to the answer.
4. Respond with specifics. Offer good, truthful supporting evidence and/or additional information.
5. Be respectful. No personal attacks.
6. Don’t change the subject.
7. Sum up your case.

Organization – The Anatomy of Persuasion

The keys to an effective persuasive essay are organization and support. Some refer to the structure with the acronym POSSE, which stands for:

Position/Thesis

Organization

Support

Style

Effective Conclusion

Others see it as an introduction/thesis statement, the body, and conclusion. Either way, an effective opinion or persuasive essay must accomplish the following:

- Clearly state your purpose and opinion
- State a main point of argument
- Communicate the gist of that argument, with supporting evidence, and offer informed rebuttal of opposing views

Position/Thesis Statement – Express Yourself

The thesis statement is the mind of your essay. Everything else must point back to it, to truly make your best case. Generally, it should be one or two sentences long. The mind works when organized. Ask yourself some questions before you write your thesis statement. Take the time to clarify the answers.

- “What am I going to discuss?”
- “How will I argue and support my views?”
- “Which reasons will I give? Do I have evidence?”

Building the Body of the Argument – Stronger is Better

The body develops the thesis statement in order to give weight to your opinion and to advance the argument with each paragraph.

Organization & Support - Paragraphs and Topic Sentences

Paragraphs should have an organized flow of and progression thoughts; each one set off by a strong topic sentence. Topic sentences guide readers to each point in the argument, leading them steadily to the conclusion. They're your muscle, and they show that you...

- **Can demonstrate an understanding** of the opposing arguments relating to the issue. An understanding of the arguments makes one better equipped to persuade someone to accept a particular view.
- **Can counter another opinion** with relevant evidence, and sound, respectful analysis.
- There should be no personal attacks against another author or speaker, and no extreme language.
- **Can present a logical flow of thoughts.** The essay is organized and does not focus on unimportant details.
- **Can make a convincing argument.** The essay is more than a listing of facts.

Saying it with Style

What words should you use to make your essay crystal clear and well written? Before you write, read through some examples of Op/Ed articles in prominent newspapers and magazines and highlight phrases from the categories below — transition, emphasis, and counterpoint. Use a different color for each category.

Effective Phrases for Transition

Admittedly
Consequently
As a result
Ultimately
According to
For this reason
Therefore

Phrases for Emphasis

Additionally
As a matter of fact
In addition
Indeed
In fact
For example
Moreover

Phrases for Counterpoint

Although
Conversely
Despite
On the other hand
However
Instead
Nevertheless
Notwithstanding
Nonetheless
Yet

Effective Conclusion, The Big Finish

In the conclusion, restate the thesis and argument, with supporting detail. An author's goal in this instance is to have the last word, and have it effectively, leaving the reader with a strong impression.

Additional Resources

- Hamilton College - Writing Center - Persuasive Essays,
http://www.hamilton.edu/academic/Resource/WC/Effective_essays.html
- Scholastic Writing Workshop: Persuasive Writing,
<http://teacher.scholastic.com/activities/writing/index.asp?topic=Persuasive>

Persuasive Essay/Debate Worksheet

INTRODUCTION

Thesis

Discuss: What?

Discuss: How?

BODY

Topic Sentence #1 (First Supporting Evidence)

Topic Sentence #2 (Supporting Evidence #2)

Topic Sentence #3 (Supporting Evidence #3)

Topic Sentence #4 (Supporting Evidence #4)

CONCLUSION

Body Fitness Testing
A Writer's Persuasion Checklist

1. Does the author demonstrate an understanding of the opposing arguments relating to the issue? Y/N
2. Does the author counter the arguments with a rebuttal? Y/N
3. Are remarks thoughtful and respectful? Y/N
4. Is the essay organized? Y/N
5. Is the essay convincing? Y/N
6. Do all of the paragraphs work together to support the essay's thesis? Y/N
7. Is the conclusion sound and strong? Y/N