DIFFERENT TYPES OF WRITING place different demands on students. These lessons focus on persuasive writing and demonstrate how I teach my students to craft effective essays. Presented as seven sequential days of instruction, the lessons could also be spread over two weeks or longer according to your school calendar or the length of your teaching period.

You may also wish to intersperse your writing curriculum with literature lessons. I have presented the lessons as an intensive writing workshop to help you see how the entire unit fits together and how the teaching builds on what has gone before. As always, you will want to take your cue from your students and not ask for more than they can deliver.

That said, I believe that we often spread out due dates over such a long period of time that we build in too much time for procrastination. For me, focused work on improving students’ writing skills has always worked best.

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student resources
Why Teach Persuasive Writing?

Most young people are masters at the art of persuasion. The teenagers I work with have been convincing parents and friends to behave as they would like since they first could talk, some with remarkable finesse. This collection of lessons will help you build upon that innate skill as you develop your students’ facility for crafting a written argument that can persuade others to think as they do.

Some writing instructors argue that all writing is fundamentally persuasive. Others view persuasive writing as the construction of a pro or con argument that must conclude with a call to action. I believe persuasive writing is more defined than the first view but less constraining and more interesting than the second. Writing to persuade is a subtle dance between reader and writer during which the writer makes his way of thinking so attractive to the reader that, as night follows day, the reader completes the essay fully convinced by the writer’s argument. Nothing else would seem to make sense.

According to the National Assessment for Educational Progress Writing Framework, “Human beings communicate as a means of accomplishing goals or meeting needs. Writing, then, can be thought of as a relationship or negotiation between the writer and reader to satisfy the aims of both parties. In a complex society with a plurality of perspectives and opinions, students need to be capable of expressing their viewpoints clearly and logically in many forms, such as essays, editorials, or position papers.”

—NAEP

Most ninth- and tenth-grade students have already been exposed to persuasive writing in middle school. Although I recognize the need for reteaching the fundamentals of writing to persuade (thesis, counterarguments, supporting evidence, conclusion), I let my students know that they are ready to write about more complex issues than the arguments for and against the school dress code or a longer school year. It is time to tackle the issue of influencing how other people think.
Getting Organized

The Thinking Behind the Lesson

In today's lesson you may find yourself rowing against the tide. Many students have been so thoroughly trained to use organizational structures that they approach a writing task as an almost mechanical process. They believe a thesis paragraph plus three supporting paragraphs plus a conclusion equals an essay. While such an organizational pattern is clearly superior to stream-of-consciousness writing, it can also seem artificial, not only to readers but also to students themselves. Formulaic writing is rarely joyful. Nor do such structures and strictures invite the kind of writing in which students deepen their understanding of the subject as they write.

Not every persuasive essay needs the customary three points of proof. Certain topics invite a host of supporting points. Others might involve long explanations of research or data. Sometimes the thesis is most effectively revealed at the very end of an essay. Occasionally an essay might begin with an extended anecdote illustrating the situation the writer plans to persuade readers to avoid. The challenge for writing teachers is to find a balance between offering students too little guidance in terms of organizing their ideas and giving them too many rules to follow. Instead of listing a number of organizational patterns during this lesson, I watch for opportunities to point out examples of different organizations and how they can help a writer make a strong argument.

Some years ago I read a news item about Louisiana Governor Mike Foster sponsoring a “Respect” bill that required students to say “Yes, Sir” and “No, Ma’am” to their teachers. The governor and the legislators who passed the bill apparently believed that forcing students to speak with courtesy would improve discipline in classrooms. I didn’t know exactly what I thought about the idea of passing a law enforcing respect, but I knew that this was something I cared deeply about. In the process of writing an essay, I found myself exploring the ways in which teachers...
show—and sometimes fail to show—respect for their students. I concluded the essay with, “Legislating for respect will likely achieve nothing. One can only wonder how the Louisiana governor plans to punish 10-year-old offenders who refuse to parrot ‘Yes, Sir; no, Sir.’ Instead of passing another law, let’s earn—by our teaching, by our character, by our dress—our students’ respect.” Only in the very last sentence had I figured out what I wanted to persuade my readers to think and do.

Even as we help students craft a plan for their persuasive essays, we need to allow them the freedom to let their writing be a vehicle for their thinking. As E. M. Forster said, “How can I know what I think till I see what I say?”

Come to Class

Connect today’s lesson on getting organized with what students learned yesterday about gathering ideas.

“Students, please come to class. Today we are going to discuss the ideas you found last night that you feel are most compelling. This is the first step toward organizing your thoughts into an essay that can persuade others to see things the way you do.”

Rather than collect the homework, have students use the writing ideas they brought to class.

“I see that you have all arranged yourself in groups with your friends. Before you get too comfortable, everyone who was absent yesterday or who forgot to collect ideas for persuasive essays last night, please come and sit at this table where I’ve put newspapers. While the rest of us are rearranging ourselves, could those of you who were here yesterday please explain to those who weren’t what they should be looking for in the newspapers?”

Organize students into groups.

Quickly count heads of students who did the homework and divide by three. This will give you the number of triads needed for the following activity.

“Please count off from one to eight. Now would the ones raise your hands? The twos and so on? Find the group of desks marked with your group number.”

“Now would you please greet the writers you will be working with today? Then share with one another the one idea from yesterday’s news about which you’d
most like to persuade others to think the way you do. As you describe the news item, be sure to explain why you care about this issue. If your triad has trouble deciding which of you should go first, start with the person with the longest hair. You have 15 minutes.”

**Check that students are on task.**

As students begin sharing their ideas for persuasive essays in their small groups, stop first at the table where the students who haven’t done the homework or who were absent are working, making sure they understand their task. To help them catch up with the rest of the class and get ready for today’s lesson, instruct students to choose quickly and to begin sharing what they found and why they care about this issue as soon as possible. They can always change their minds about topics to write on later.

Move around among the groups, listening for an example that you can use to help the whole class begin to think about organizing a persuasive argument. Alert students when 5 and 10 minutes have passed to ensure that everyone has a chance to talk.

It is usually better not to choose a student whom others already believe is an outstanding writer. By selecting a student who does not ordinarily stand out, you can both build his confidence as a writer and help others see that they can all be successful on this assignment. When you find a seed idea you think will work well, ask the student if she would mind if you used her idea with the whole class. You can promise the student that the class will be doing some of her work for her.

**WHAT DO YOU DO WITH STUDENTS WHO DIDN’T COMPLETE THEIR HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT AND ARRIVE WITHOUT ANY IDEAS FOR THEIR PERSUASIVE ESSAYS?**

To help these students—some of whom may have been absent on the previous day—keep up with the class, I bring in a stack of newspapers and have the students look for issues they care about while the rest of the class is working in triads discussing possible writing topics.

**WHEN THINGS GO AWRY**

What do you do with students who didn’t complete their homework assignment and arrive without any ideas for their persuasive essays?

To help these students—some of whom may have been absent on the previous day—keep up with the class, I bring in a stack of newspapers and have the students look for issues they care about while the rest of the class is working in triads discussing possible writing topics.

Identify what you want students to learn in today’s lesson on getting organized.

Revisit David Brooks’ essay to see how a sophisticated writer organizes his ideas.

“Could I please have your eyes and ears front and center? Thank you, students. As I eavesdropped on your conversations, I heard a lot of terrific ideas. You know, it won’t be cheating to use an issue that someone else shared in your group for your own essay. Just because you are writing about the same news item doesn’t mean you will be writing the same essay.
“The next step we need to take is to create a framework for our essays. You all know that every essay has a beginning, middle, and end; but there are many different ways you can structure these essential pieces. The most important question writers ask themselves when planning is, ‘What kind of organizational structure would best support my persuasive purpose?’ Let’s look again at the David Brooks essay we read yesterday. In your groups please discuss what you notice about the organization of ‘Your Brain on Baseball.’ Feel free to mark up the text as you identify supporting evidence. You have 10 minutes.

Reconvene when the time is up and discuss the essay’s structure.

“Shall we come together once more?” (Wait until all eyes are on you.) “So what did you notice? How did Brooks structure his essay?”

Jenny’s hand shoots up. “Well, it sure wasn’t a five-paragraph essay.”

“No, it isn’t. Did it seem organized to you, though, Jenny?”

“Yeah, kinda. I mean, he talks about baseball and then about how the brain works and then about baseball again and then about intelligence and then about baseball again and then puts it all together at the end. It wasn’t confusing to read, just hard to explain.”

“So an essay can be organized without following an outline or other traditional structure. What held Brooks’ ideas together then?”

Jorge has an answer. “It seemed like he was talking on paper about something he was thinking about. The essay takes you step by step through his argument, so maybe that’s how he organized his ideas. It’s like he goes, ‘Here’s what I saw. Here’s what I read. Here’s what I think. Here’s what baseball players do. Here’s what else I know.’ See? Kind of like he’s walking us through the steps.”

Use a selected student’s idea for a persuasive essay to model how a writer considers a working organizational plan.

“Let’s hold onto Jorge’s idea about how an essay can unfold for a reader while we look at the issue Max plans to develop into a persuasive essay. Max, could you come up and explain the news item you found and explain why you care about this issue?”

Max shares with the class an article on teenage obesity and explains how he thinks young people should stop eating so much junk food because the bad habit could do permanent damage to their health.

“You really seem to care about this issue, Max. Do you have any idea how you might organize the paper to persuade readers to think as you do?”

SUCCESSFUL GROUP WORK

One reason group work sometimes founders is that we give students too much time for a task. When students are pressed for time I find they are more likely to get down to business sooner and less likely to wander into gossip. I always give students a shorter period of time than I believe they will actually need to complete the work and then have them beg for more. I want students to feel that our work has urgency, that there is no time for lollygagging.
Max hesitates, but Jenny, who was part of Max’s triad, is bursting to offer a suggestion. “What if you opened with scary statistics about diabetes and gastric bypass surgery gone wrong and other gross things that can happen when people are obese?”

“I like that,” Max responds, “but I was thinking about re-telling this story from the article first.”

“Why?” Jenny asks.

“Well, I thought that would put a face on the problem. You’d have to think about a real person getting fatter and fatter and still eating. Then I could add statistics and stuff later. I’d need more information for that, though.”

“How else might Max organize his essay?”

Andre offers, “You could lay out the problem in your introduction and then have most of your essay be about ways kids could eat healthier—like a section on the problem, then a couple of sections on solutions.”

I interject: “That would be a really effective plan, Andre. Another kind of essay might do it the other way around and have several paragraphs about different aspects of the problem of teenage obesity, saving the solution for the conclusion. There is no one “right” way to do this. What makes an organizational structure “right” is if it will carry your argument forward and persuade readers to think the way you do.”

Assign homework.

Have students begin in class the work you want them to complete as homework. In small groups have them discuss how they might begin to organize their ideas for their persuasive essays.

“Before we begin drafting our essays tomorrow, you need to sketch out a plan. It is likely that you will change the plan as you write, but having a framework to work from will help you proceed. Please copy this simple graphic organizer from the board onto a sheet of paper.

“In the last 10 minutes of class, please turn to the friends who have given you so much help already today and offer one another ideas about how your persuasive essays might best take shape. Any questions?”
Getting Organized

Create the Context
Connect today’s lesson on getting organized with what students learned yesterday about gathering ideas.

Share and Consider
Ask students to refer to their homework notes and share their best ideas for a topic in triads.

Discuss
Revisit the persuasive essay and discuss how a sophisticated writer organizes his or her ideas.

Model
Discuss a selected student’s idea for a persuasive essay and model how a writer crafts a working organizational plan. Consider a number of possible organizations.

Assign Homework/Answer Questions
Set up the homework assignment and have students begin the work you want them to complete for homework. Ask students to discuss in small groups how they might begin to organize their ideas for their persuasive essays.