

The Art of Arguing: How to Write a Persuasive Essay

By Caleb Jones

Persuasive essays are great. They are an opportunity to formally tell the world why you're right and everyone else is wrong. So, whether you like writing or arguing, a persuasive essay is an excellent opportunity to try your hand at both. However, it isn't easy, because for every opinion you have, there will be countless other people who will have the audacity to disagree with you, no matter how right you may be. Writing something that will convince people who are just as stubborn as you that they are wrong is a difficult task, but not an impossible one, as long as you do it right. And here's how...

First, you must pick a topic that's worth arguing over. Of course, having a compelling topic is important for any type of essay, but it is especially important for persuasive essays. You could write an expository essay about how to bake a soufflé, or a descriptive essay describing a vintage car (not terribly evocative topics) and people would still read them because they just so happen to be interested in those things. The subject of a persuasive essay requires a bit more thought. You have to choose a topic that's hard-hitting, and is worth having a strong opinion on, so as to spark debate. A persuasive essay on whether or not soufflés are good probably would not be worth arguing over. The topic must not only be deep, it must be something that people are definitely not yet agreed on, to make writing it a challenge. There wouldn't be much fun in writing an essay whose purpose is to convince people that Stalin was a bad person, because pretty much everyone has already agreed with that assessment. A topic that is more current, or perhaps more

obscure, would fair better. For example, an excellent topic would be, “Why we shouldn’t have Columbus day,” as it is a little known fact that Christopher Columbus committed genocide when he arrived in the Americas. This would surely spark debate, as it is a grand enough subject for people to care, and people’s opinions may differ. Some may recognize that we shouldn’t celebrate genocide and agree, and others may wish to remember Columbus as the explorer who found our home. As well, make sure you write about something you genuinely care about, because nothing inspires excellent writing like being passionate about your topic. Once you know what you are going to write about, you are ready to go about convincing your audience you are right.

The first thing you must do in order to convince others you are right is to actually be right. Because no matter how clever and eloquent your writing is, if your core argument is just plain wrong, people will shoot it down very quickly. And really, people are always going to shoot you down no matter what you write, so you have to choose who you want to be shot down by. You could write an essay about how global warming is a myth, and be shot down by smart people who think about things objectively. Or, you could say global warming is real, and be called out by people such as Donald Trump who think global warming is a concept “created by and for the Chinese in order to make U.S. manufacturing non-competitive.” I’m guessing you would like to be on the side of the smart, objective people, so think about your point of view as objectively as you can. Think about it from every possible angle, and tweak what you want to say until you are sure it is right. Because

if you are right, truly right, it will be very hard to argue with you without sounding like Donald Trump.

Once you have confirmed you are right, the task at hand becomes minimizing the number of things in your essay that people may criticize. I'm not talking about the actual argument and what you actually say, but how it is presented — things such as grammar and punctuation. This step may seem less important because bad grammar really doesn't make an argument less valid, but for a persuasive essay, in which people may be inclined to disagree with you after just reading the title, you're going to want to have as few things open for criticism as possible. Because people will take you less seriously if your essay looks like it was written by someone who is even more stupid than they are. Basically, if people want to disagree with you, they are going to criticize anything they can find. "Your argument is invalid because you should have used a semi-colon here," they'll say, so don't leave grammar and punctuation open to criticism. Having poor, or even mediocre, grammar will make you look less smart, which will make your readers take you less seriously. So be careful, and be professional and competent in your writing.

Finally, here is how to develop a nearly irrefutable argument. First, be fair. Don't make any arguments against those who disagree with you that you know are unreasonable, because your readers will likely notice this, which will discredit you. If they are wrong, there should be enough real fallacies in their arguments to point out. Debates should not be won with coy misdirection and low blows, but with the statement of cold, hard facts. Being fair will also make any neutral readers respect you, which may make them inclined to take your side. Second, be objective.

Obviously there is going to be some opinion in your writing, but you must state your opinion as if it is fact, where possible, to make it more convincing. Highly opinionated writing is basically made to be disagreed with, but the statement of fact is another matter. This also ties in with Step 2: being right, because if you know you are right, why write as if there's room to argue? Write confidently and don't waver in your opinions. This will not be enough, however, because if you simply state your opinion objectively and move on, people may immediately disagree with you. You must say why you are right and everyone else is wrong. That is to say, address all possible counter-arguments. This may sound like a lot of work, because it is. Think of the argument you wish to pose, consider the points of view of any opposition, and figure out what they would be likely to say to discredit your argument. Make sure you address all counter-arguments in-depth — even make a list, and don't be afraid to over-analyze anything. You'll find that if you write in this manner, in extreme detail, it will be very hard to argue against you, because everything the opposition has to say has already been addressed and debunked. Again, if you did Step 2 — being right — correctly, your counter-counter-arguments should come naturally. If you write in this way, considering all possible points of view and rooting out only yours as being the correct one, your essay may almost begin to take the shape of an expository. You are no longer a know-it-all writer of a hipster-y blog; you are an omniscient being who knows everything there is to know about your topic, and who can also seemingly read the minds of all who dare oppose you. Because really, a persuasive essay isn't about the topic, it's about the arguments. A topic is made to have opinions on and therefore is made to be disagreed on. A persuasive essay's

purpose is not to argue about a topic, but to argue about an argument — your argument, and why it is right, and all other points of view on the topic are flawed.

In summation, the steps to writing an exceptional persuasive essay are: pick a compelling topic, be right, write professionally, be fair and objective in your arguments, and address all possible counter-arguments.