Writing a Persuasive Letter

When you were younger, did you write letters to ask someone for a special toy? Maybe you wanted a certain doll or a new bicycle, so you described the toy and explained why you wanted it. Were you later thrilled to discover that your wish had been granted?

Now that you are older, you may know that letters can achieve results more important than toys. Here is your opportunity to use the power of persuasive writing to make a difference in the world around you. This workshop will teach you how to write a persuasive letter that will help make a positive change in your school, neighborhood, or town. The thrill of making a difference can be even more satisfying than receiving a new toy!

Choose an Issue

Dare to Care  Given a choice between soup or sandwiches for lunch, you might answer, “I don’t care.” For you, the kind of food is not an issue. In persuasive writing, though, issues are important. An issue is a topic with at least two sides about which people disagree. In a persuasive letter the writer tries to make the reader agree with his or her opinion on an issue. Persuasive letters also may ask readers to take action on an issue.
Take Your Pick  The issue you choose should be one that is important to you. If you do not feel strongly about an issue, how can you convince your readers to care about it? Ask yourself what issues most affect your world. Completing the following sentence starters will help you identify issues that matter to you.

My school would be a better place if ___.
I become upset when I see ___.

Little by Little  You should also choose an issue that is small enough for one person or group to have an effect. For example, one student chose the issue of littering. Although she also felt strongly about the issue of homelessness, she felt that by taking on a smaller issue, she would be better able to make a difference. She also knew that an anti-littering campaign for her soccer league would be an issue she could tackle in a letter.

Write Your Opinion Statement

Take a Stand  If you have chosen an issue that is important to you, you probably already know what your opinion on it is. You simply need to put that opinion into words. An **opinion statement** should clearly state what the issue is and where the writer stands on it. Here is how the writer who chose the issue of recycling came up with her opinion statement.

**Issue:** litter at soccer games
**How I feel about it:** soccer fields should be kept free of litter
**Opinion statement:** We need to start an anti-littering campaign to keep the soccer fields clean.

Choosing an Issue and Writing an Opinion Statement

Brainstorm issues that might make your community or the world a better place. Choose an issue that is both important to you and small enough to tackle in a letter. Write down your opinion about the issue. Then, put the issue and your opinion together into a single clear sentence—your opinion statement.
Consider Audience and Purpose

**Dear Sir or Madam . . .** You would not ask the President of the United States to shorten the school day. Yes, the President can do many things, but your request is likely to get lost in the shuffle of national issues. Because your **purpose** is to persuade your reader, it is important to write to someone who cares about the issue and can do something about it. **Contacting the right audience to consider your request is an important part of your letter’s effectiveness.** Identify local people who have the power to do what you want. Your audience may be one person or a group of people. Notice how one student used the following questions to help identify her specific audience.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What part of your community does the issue involve?</th>
<th>Starting an anti-littering campaign at the soccer fields would involve my soccer league.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What is the specific name of the person or group you need to contact?</td>
<td>My league handbook says the president of the Eastside Soccer League is Jake Matsuo.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do you know about this person or these people? (How old are they? What interests or concerns them? Why might they disagree with you, or object to your opinion?)</td>
<td>I know he’s an adult, and he is interested in soccer. I think he is interested in keeping things running smoothly and in keeping fees low for players. He might object to my opinion if he thinks an anti-littering campaign would be time-consuming or expensive.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**TIP** In writing, **voice** reflects your tone and attitude. To persuade readers, you need to use a believable voice. In other words, you should sound as if you know what you are talking about and you take the issue seriously. You should also appeal to your audience by making it clear that you understand and care about their interests.

**YOUR TURN 5** **Considering Audience and Purpose**

Your purpose is to persuade someone who has the power to grant your request. Use the questions above to figure out who that person or group of people is and think about what you know about them.
MINI-LESSON  CRITICAL THINKING

Understanding Your Audience

Imagine sweltering under the hot summer sun at the beach when a vendor selling mugs of steaming hot chocolate comes along. Are you tempted to buy? Of course not. The vendor has forgotten the basic rule of persuasion: Appeal to your audience’s interests. Once you know your audience’s interests, you can predict their main objection, or reason why they might disagree with you. Objections often revolve around how much time or effort a proposed change would take, or how much the change would cost. By appealing to your audience’s interests, you can make objections such as these seem less important.

TIP  An objection is also called a counter-argument.

THINKING IT THROUGH

Addressing Objections

You want to persuade the city council to support a Latino cultural festival. Here’s how to address their objection.

► **STEP 1** Identify the main reason your audience might disagree with you.

The city council might say that having a Latino cultural festival would be expensive.

► **STEP 2** Consider what is important to this audience.

- saving money
- bringing people together

The festival can be a fun activity for the community, and it can be inexpensive. To save money, volunteers can organize the festival, and vendors can pay a fee to sell food and crafts.

► **STEP 3** Based on your audience’s interests, identify a reason for your opinion that makes the audience’s objection seem less important.

Suppose that you want to organize a tutoring program at your school. Older students would tutor younger students for one hour after school. Using the Thinking It Through steps above, identify a possible objection each of the audiences to the right might have. Then, list reasons that would address each audience’s objection. Explain each reason.

1. the school principal
2. parents
3. students who would serve as tutors
Develop Reasons and Evidence

**Answering the Big Question** Understanding your audience’s interests will help you to answer their main question—“Why should I care?” Your audience will want to know the reasons why they should accept your opinion. You can begin developing solid reasons by asking why your opinion makes sense.

Your opinion needs more support than reasons alone, though. Evidence must support each reason for the reasons to be believable. Facts, which can be proved true, and examples, which illustrate a point, can provide support for reasons. See how the following reason is supported by a fact and an example.

**Reason:** Volunteers help people.

**Fact:** Since 1961, Peace Corps volunteers have helped people in 134 countries around the world.

**Example:** My older sister volunteers by helping two fourth-graders with their math homework.

In the chart below, a student lists several reasons to begin an anti-littering campaign. In the middle column, the student gives facts and examples to support each of her reasons. In the right-hand column, she decides whether each reason and its supporting evidence will appeal to her audience.

**Go to the Chapter Menu for an interactive activity.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reasons</th>
<th>Supporting Evidence</th>
<th>Appealing to Audience?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>An anti-littering campaign will make people aware of the trash problem.</td>
<td>My parents had to pick up trash left by others. That made them be more careful not to litter.</td>
<td>Yes. Most people want to enjoy the games and not worry about litter.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An anti-littering program will earn money.</td>
<td>By recycling, we can earn 32 cents for each pound of cans. This money can help pay for clinics to train new coaches.</td>
<td>Yes. If we pay for clinics with recycling money, the league won’t have to raise fees to cover these things.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participating in an anti-littering program helps players earn badges in Scouts.</td>
<td>I can earn 2 badges. Several players I know participate in Scouts.</td>
<td>No. This will help a few of us, but not the president of the soccer league.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
From the chart on the previous page, you can tell that this student realized that the last reason might not appeal to her audience. The president of a soccer league is probably more interested in soccer than in scouting. The student thought about possible objections the president might have to the project. Then, she came up with a reason that would take his objection into account. See her revision in the chart below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>New Reason</th>
<th>Supporting Evidence</th>
<th>Appealing to Audience?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>This project will not take very much time or effort.</td>
<td>Teams will make posters and rotate collecting the recycling containers. Parents and players do all the work.</td>
<td>Yes. He won’t have to find people to do the work. This reason will also show that picking up trash and recycling is not too much trouble, which I think might be his objection.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Developing Reasons and Evidence**

- Create a chart like the one on page 241, listing reasons and evidence to support your opinion. (Use the library to find facts to support your reasons.) Use the right-hand column to decide whether each reason will appeal to your audience.
- Replace any reasons that will not appeal to most of your audience. You should have at least two good reasons, each supported by facts or examples.

**Choose and Focus a Call to Action**

**911 Means Action!** When you dial 911, the operator knows instantly that you are asking for help. In a way, your persuasive letter is also a 911 call because it includes a *call to action*. A *call to action* tells readers how they can respond to your ideas. To get your readers to take action, your call to action must be both *reasonable* and *specific*. 
A **reasonable** request is financially possible and within the audience’s power. There is no point in asking a local audience to spend billions of dollars to end all wars or to house all homeless people. Instead, your call to action should focus on smaller actions. Suggesting that your audience sign a petition or volunteer a few hours of time is not too much to ask.

A **specific** request is clear and tells exactly what you want readers to do about an issue. How can a reader tell whether “Please do more for our children” is a call for more sidewalks or for a new playground? The specific call to action, “Start a tutoring program for elementary students,” would be more effective.

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**THINKING IT THROUGH**

**Writing a Call to Action**

Here is how to write a reasonable and specific call to action.

1. **STEP 1** Decide exactly what action you want to take place.
   - I want to see trash picked up and recycled at our soccer games.

2. **STEP 2** State the call to action in concrete terms so there is no confusion about what you are asking.
   - Maybe my call to action is too vague. I can ask the league to get recycling containers and put them at the soccer fields.
   - “Please buy and place recycling bins for aluminum cans at the soccer fields. Then, ask teams to participate in the anti-littering campaign.”

3. **STEP 3** Address your call to action directly to the audience.

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**YOUR TURN**

**Choosing and Focusing a Call to Action**

Decide what you want to ask your readers to do about the issue you have chosen. Then, use the steps above to write a call to action that is reasonable, clear, and specific. Be direct, but remember a call to action is a request. Therefore, be polite, too.
**Persuasive Letter**

**Framework**

**Introduction**
- Attention-grabbing opening
- Opinion statement

**Body**
- Reason #1
  - Evidence supporting reason #1
- Reason #2
  - Evidence supporting reason #2
  - and so on

**Conclusion**
- Summary of reasons
- Call to action

**Directions and Explanations**

Grab your readers’ interest right away with an interesting beginning. For example, you could begin your letter with an anecdote (a brief story), or a question. Next, include a clear opinion statement that tells your audience exactly what you think about the issue you have chosen.

- Support your opinion with at least two good reasons. Write a paragraph for each reason. You can arrange your body paragraphs in order of importance, starting with the most important reason, or in climactic order, ending with the most important reason.
- Support each of your reasons with at least one specific fact or example each.
- Elaborate support by explaining the meaning of each fact or example or by summing up your point.

Remind your audience why this issue is important by summarizing your reasons in a single sentence. Next, tell your audience what they should do about the issue with a reasonable and specific call to action.

**Drafting Your Persuasive Letter**

Now, it is your chance to write a first draft of a persuasive letter. As you write, refer to the framework above and the Writer’s Model on the next page.
Dear Mr. Matsuo:

My soccer team won its game last Saturday. I was happy and excited until I started walking toward the parking lot. I passed cups and candy wrappers left in the stands and six trash cans overflowing with aluminum cans. Seeing all the trash that people did not throw away and the cans that could be recycled bothered me. With your help, we can improve the Eastside Soccer League. We need to start an anti-littering campaign to keep the soccer fields clean.

An anti-littering campaign would help people become aware of the trash problem. Since I talked to my family about the problem, they have noticed how bad the trash is, too. After last Saturday’s game, they made sure they picked up their trash so that they were not contributing to the problem. Letting people know there is a problem is the first step to solving it.

If we make recycling part of the plan, the anti-littering campaign can earn money. By recycling aluminum cans, the Eastside Soccer League can earn 32 cents per pound. Since there are twelve trash cans at the soccer fields that each can hold about two pounds of cans, and there are fifteen games in the season, we could earn as much as $115.20. This money could be used to pay for clinics to train new coaches. That way, more people could get involved in the league because training would be available.

Finally, this project will take little time and effort. This can be a project for the parents and the players. Each team will make posters encouraging people to be responsible for their trash. Also, the two teams playing the last game on a field will pick up trash left in the stands and empty the two recycling containers on their field. Once all twelve
containers are emptied, one parent can drive the cans to the recycling center. This work will take just a few minutes of time. Since the teams already rotate playing times, no one team will be stuck with this chore every week.

An anti-littering campaign will help people become aware of the trash problem and earn money for the league without becoming a time-consuming or expensive project. Please buy and place recycling bins for aluminum cans at the soccer fields. Then, ask teams to participate in the anti-littering campaign.

Sincerely,

LaVonne Barton

Reference Note

For more on business letters, see page 758 in the Quick Reference Handbook.

TIP

If you have access to a computer, show your reader that you are serious about your issue by typing your letter. If you do not have access to a computer, write your letter using your best cursive or printing.

Business Letter Format

To add to your persuasive letter’s impact, use a business letter format like the one below.

(audience) name and address

(date)

(introduction)

(body)

(conclusion)

(closure)

(signature)

(typed or printed name)
My name is Tyler Duckworth, and I am a sixth-grade student at Liberty Middle School in Morganton, North Carolina. I think the first thing you should do, Mr. President, is take specific action to protect our environment. As an avid reader of books about science, I am concerned about the natural wonders of our nation and of the world being preserved both for my generation and for future generations.

First of all, the pollution of our earth seems to be on the increase; factories, cars, and people continue to pollute. Statistics show that acid rain is on the increase, and the hole in the ozone layer is widening at an alarming rate. I feel action must be taken now, before it is too late. . . .

Also, the land in the rain forests is essential to our survival. Each year, more and more land in the rain forests is destroyed. If man continues to destroy the rain forests, the species present in them and the plant life present in them can never be replaced. The action taken must be firm and bound by law.

I believe that you, Mr. President, care about our country. You have stated in many speeches that I have listened to and in many articles that I have read that you care about our environment. It is essential that you, as our leader, do what is necessary to preserve the earth for future generations.

In my dad’s office, he has a quote that reads, “We do not inherit the earth from our ancestors; we borrow it from our children.” That, too, is my belief as a twelve-year-old citizen of the greatest country in the world. Mr. President, I ask you to please act now to save our country and our world.
Evaluate and Revise Content, Organization, and Style

Twice Is Nice  Double the persuasive power of your letter by giving it at least two readings. In the first reading, focus on the content and organization of your first draft. The guidelines below can help. In the second reading, look at the individual sentences using the Focus on Sentences on page 250.

First Reading: Content and Organization  When you edit your letter, you evaluate what you have written and revise it to make it better. Use the following guidelines to make your letter more persuasive. First, answer the questions in the left-hand column. If you need help answering the questions, use the tips in the middle column. Then, use the revision techniques in the right-hand column to make necessary changes.
ONE WRITER’S REVISIONS  This revision is an early draft of the letter on page 245.

With your help, we can improve the Eastside Soccer League. An anti-littering campaign would help.

An anti-littering campaign would help people become aware of the trash problem. Since I talked to my family about the problem, they have noticed how bad the trash is, too. After last Saturday’s game, they made sure they picked up their trash so that they were not contributing to the problem. Letting people know there is a problem is the first step to solving it.

Responding to the Revision Process

1. Why did the writer revise the sentence at the end of the first paragraph?
2. Why did the writer add a sentence to the end of the second paragraph?

Second Reading: Style  You have taken a look at the big picture of your letter. In your second reading, you will look at the pieces of that picture by focusing on the sentences. One way to improve your writing is to make stringy sentences more compact. The following guidelines and the Focus on Sentences on the next page will help you evaluate your sentences.

**Evaluation Question**

Does the writer avoid long sentences made up of strings of ideas connected by *and*, *but*, or *so*?

**Tip**

Highlight long sentences that use *and*, *but*, or *so* to join two or more complete thoughts—ideas that can stand alone.

**Revision Technique**

Break a long sentence with two or more complete thoughts into two shorter sentences.

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Eliminating Stringy Sentences

When your purpose is to persuade, your style should also be persuasive. Avoid using stringy sentences. Reading long, stringy sentences is like listening to a person who goes on and on. They bore readers, and a bored reader is an unconvinced reader. To eliminate stringy sentences, follow these steps.

- First, find the conjunctions and, but, or so in a very long sentence. Put a slash mark before each conjunction.
- Then, see if each part has a subject and a verb. If each part of the sentence has both a subject and a verb and expresses a complete thought, then it can stand alone.
- Revise a stringy sentence by breaking it into two or more separate sentences. Each complete thought may have its own sentence.

Reference Note
For more on parts of speech, see Chapter 12.

TIP
If part of the sentence does not express a complete thought, that part will not be able to stand alone in its own sentence.

ONE WRITER’S REVISIONS

My soccer team won its game last Saturday, so I was happy and excited until I started walking toward the parking lot and I passed cups and candy wrappers left in the stands and six trash cans overflowing with aluminum cans.

Responding to the Revision Process

How did breaking the sentence above into three sentences improve it?

Evaluating and Revising Your Persuasive Letter

Use the guidelines on page 248 and page 249 to evaluate and revise the content, organization, and style of your letter. If a peer read your letter, consider his or her comments as you revise.
Proofread Your Letter

Edit for Oomph  Careless mistakes decrease the persuasive power of your letter. Proofread your letter for mistakes in grammar, spelling, and punctuation.

Punctuating Possessives Correctly

The possessive form of a noun or pronoun shows ownership. Using possessives helps writers make their points more concisely. Read the example below.

the playground equipment at our school

our school’s playground equipment

Here are four rules to remember about possessives.

To form the possessive case of a singular noun, add an apostrophe and an s.

girl’s sweatshirt  car’s bumper

To form the possessive case of a plural noun ending in s, add only the apostrophe.

books’ pages  stores’ signs

Do not use an apostrophe to make a noun plural. If you are not sure when to use an apostrophe, ask yourself, “Does the noun possess what follows?” If you answer yes, you need an apostrophe.

Do not use an apostrophe with possessive personal pronouns. These pronouns include its, yours, theirs, his, hers, and ours.

The dog missed its owner.

PRACTICE

Write the following sentences on your own paper, adding apostrophes where they are needed. If a sentence is correct, write C next to the sentence on your paper.

Example:
1. In visitors eyes, our towns trash is its biggest problem.
   1. In visitors’ eyes, our town’s trash is its biggest problem.

1. Recycling helps meet the citys goals as outlined in its long-range plan.
2. Other towns have recycling programs.
3. Theirs are successful. Ours still needs the councils approval.
4. The countys landfill is quickly filling up from the four towns trash.
5. Voters signatures filled page after page of one groups petition.

For more information and practice on possessives, see page 598.
Publish Your Letter

Post It! Publishing a persuasive letter is simple. It requires an envelope, a correct address, and a stamp. Just mail it to the person or the individual people in your target audience. Here are two other ways to reach your readers:

- Even if you will not be mailing your letter, but handing it to someone you know well, use a business envelope to show that you mean business.
- If you have access to e-mail, you can send the letter electronically. Make sure you carefully type the message to avoid introducing mistakes. Be sure to confirm your readers’ addresses before sending your letter.

Reflect on Your Letter

Building Your Portfolio The best way to judge your letter’s effectiveness is to see what response you get. You may have to wait a while. Factors you may not know about may lead to a “No,” a vague response such as “We will consider your request,” or no response at all. However, you can judge your letter in the context of your entire portfolio by answering the following questions.

- What are my strengths as a writer? What did I do well in this piece and in other pieces in my portfolio? Which piece was my best or favorite? Why?
- What writing skills do I need to work on? If I had the chance, what would I do differently in this piece or in other pieces in my portfolio? Why?
- What are my goals as a writer now? What kinds of writing does my portfolio seem to be missing? What would I like to try next?

Proofreading, Publishing, and Reflecting on Your Persuasive Letter

- Correct mistakes in punctuation, spelling, capitalization, and grammar. Pay particular attention to possessives.
- Publish your letter to your target audience.
- Answer the Reflect on Your Letter questions above. Record your responses in a learning log, or include them in your portfolio.
Answering Questions That Ask You to Persuade

Some writing tests ask you to choose and support an opinion on an issue. Your response may be a persuasive letter or essay. If the following prompt were on a test, how would you approach it?

The city council has a limited budget for a new park. It is trying to decide between spending money for large shade trees or for an in-line skating path. Decide how you think the money should be spent. Then, write a letter convincing the city council to vote in favor of your decision. Give three reasons for your opinion.

STEP 1 Identify the task the prompt is asking you to do.

The prompt asks me to decide how the council should spend the money. I have to write a letter stating my opinion and give three reasons to support it.

STEP 2 Decide on your opinion.

I like in-line skating, but I think trees are more important.

STEP 3 Develop three reasons to support your opinion.

1. More people will enjoy trees.
2. Trees give shade, which makes the park more comfortable.
3. Trees take time to grow, so we need to plant them now. A skating path can be added any time.

STEP 4 Develop evidence (facts and examples) to support your reasons.

1. All people appreciate trees. I only know people my age who skate.
2. Summer temperatures are in the 90s. Shade will keep the playground and picnic tables cool even in hot weather.
3. We planted a tree when I was six, and it is still not as tall as our house.

STEP 5 Write your essay. Include your opinion in the introduction, make each reason a paragraph—with support—and give a call to action in your conclusion.

STEP 6 Edit (evaluate, revise, proofread) your essay.
Writing a Humorous Advertisement

Is all persuasive writing serious? Not at all. Many people, in fact, find humor more persuasive than logic. Advertisers often rely on humor to persuade their audiences to buy their products. Humorous advertisements usually include these elements: a specific **product** being sold; a **reason** for buying the product, and funny **sounds** or **visuals**. Here is an example of a humorous print ad. Can you identify the elements?

*Must be the Grow Strong Vitamins you gave her...*

Grow Strong Vitamins give your children the boost they need to grow strong bones and healthy bodies. Who knows what your child could do with **Grow Strong Vitamins**? Try them and see!
A Little Imagination  To come up with an idea for a humorous ad, begin by identifying a product you would like to advertise. Next, think of a brand name for your product. Brainstorm a list of reasons why people should buy your product. Then, choose a humorous way to get one of those reasons across to an audience. Consider these techniques.

- **Exaggeration**  Exaggerate one of the claims of your product. This is the technique the ad on page 254 uses, exaggerating how strong and healthy children who use Grow Strong Vitamins become.

- **Irony**  To create humor, say or show the opposite of what readers expect. You might show a family riding in a car. The dad says, “How much longer?” Then, the mom says, “Are we there yet?” The slogan would read, “Kids aren’t the only ones who look forward to the fun at Giggles Amusement Park.”

- **Silliness**  Use silly sounds, voices, words, or visuals, or create a silly character to pitch your product. Talking animals, aliens, and cartoon characters are all used to sell products. For example, a cartoon version of a computer virus might complain about an antivirus software that keeps killing him off.

Sell It  Once you have a good idea of what will be in your ad, you can produce it. Create one of these types of ads.

- **Radio Ad**  You can turn your idea into a radio ad if the humor is in the words and sounds you include. To do this, you will need to write a script, create sound effects, and record the ad.

- **Print Ad**  If the words and pictures are the funny parts of your idea, you can create a print ad like the one on page 254. You may create your ad by cutting and arranging pictures and words, or you might try creating it on a computer with copyright-free pictures.

- **Television Ad**  If both sounds and visuals are important in your ad, turn your idea into a television commercial. You should write a script for the ad and find a good location to shoot, as well as any costumes or props that are important for your idea. Cast classmates to act in your ad if you wish, and videotape it using your school’s video equipment.

(For information about speaking, see page 719. For information about graphics, see page 687. For information about video production, see page 79.)

**YOUR TURN**

**Writing a Humorous Advertisement**

Using the guidelines above, develop an idea for a humorous advertisement. Then, produce the ad as a radio ad, print ad, or television ad, and share it with your class.