

A STEP-BY-STEP APPROACH TO WRITING THE PERSUASIVE PAPER

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High school teachers of English and members of the English Composition Board share common concerns about writing. Among these are their students' ability to organize written work and present well-developed ideas that support a paper's thesis. We all look for ways to inspire students who claim they have nothing to say about a particular topic or have difficulty understanding an assignment.

In our Writing Workshop at the university we have found that sixteen percent of the instruction directly involves organization while nine percent responds to requests for help in understanding assignments. Practice in focusing introductions and writing useful conclusions consumes eight percent of instructional effort while student need for aid in developing ideas and providing appropriate examples and details uses an additional eight percent.

These requests for help came from 572 students who made 1,131 visits to the Workshop in the fall term 1979. Very few of these students came to us for help that would make good writers of them. Almost all came because they had persuasive evidence of their own inadequacy and simply wanted to become survivors in their college work. I intend to devote much of my time in the June Workshop to sharing techniques we have developed in tutorial classes and in the Writing Workshop for making survivors of these students. The classroom activity I describe in this issue of forum is an example of the kind of work I will be doing with conference participants.

The exercise is designed to help students write a persuasive paper on an assigned topic; in particular, I will be addressing the problem of those students who "don't have anything to say." The discussions, pre-writing, and writing for this assignment all take place in the classroom and require several class days to complete. Because the exercise allows



the classroom supervision of writing activities, the teacher does not take home pre-writing lists to examine, thesis statements to evaluate, and rough drafts to correct.

The Assignment

The assignment is based on a short newspaper article that provides statistics and quotations from authorities on a familiar topic "Bottle Law Still Debated As Anniversary Looms." (Ann Arbor News, Dec. 1, 1979) If you have facilities to duplicate the article (which I am including for your consideration), students can refer to it when writing; if duplication is difficult, you can read the article aloud and ask your students to list the positive and negative arguments. If you decide to read the article and have them take notes, you will provide several learning activities: students will have to listen carefully, select important arguments, and record arguments and statistics accurately.

Identifying the Arguments

Individual students should copy their lists of main arguments on the blackboard under **pro** and **con** headings. You can see what they selected as important and how accurately they transcribed the ideas and statistics. By having the arguments written on the board, you and the students can make sure that all the arguments included in the article are listed.

The teacher can then call for personal experiences or special knowledge that supports the **pro** and **con** positions. Students can write all new ideas in the appropriate columns on the blackboard. When I used this exercise, one of my more vocal students had very strong feelings about the Michigan Bottle Bill. The experiences he shared made everyone aware of issues they had not previously considered:

Mike had worked in a small downtown grocery store that also sold beer and wine. Local clientele frequently tried to return containers that had obviously



not come from the store. If Mike refused to accept the containers, he faced angry people who were sometimes drunk. When customers had legitimate containers to return, they often did not clean them first and refused to turn them in at the back of the store. Mike frequently had to leave the cash register unattended to take the bottles to the storeroom. Because of dirty containers, the storeroom soon became an unpleasant place to go. Mike also told us about the problem of delivery men: since empty containers take space on trucks, less space is available for products being delivered.

Mike's comments reminded others of their experiences. One student pointed out that after the U of M - Ohio State game, the Ohio State side of the stadium was filled with litter. U of M fans, however, kept their containers or left them for young people who stayed after the game to earn some extra money collecting empties.

Focusing the Writing

Lists on the board should be lengthy after members of the class have shared their experiences. At this time students should pause to think carefully about the issues before writing one sentence that

represents the position they feel most comfortable supporting. Since students are then committed to one clearly stated point of view, they should not be confused about the focus of their writing. To sharpen that focus further the teacher should next invite students to determine their audience: are they writing to their peers? to their parents and other adults of similar beliefs? or to politicians who represent their interests in the legislature?

Before any extensive writing activity takes place, students should be asked to determine if terms need to be defined and if definitions can be found in the article. If not, students must decide whether dictionary definitions will be adequate. Another useful pre-writing practice is for students to evaluate the strengths and merits of arguments listed on the blackboard. This evaluation process can occur first in small groups and then expand to class discussion. The previous opportunity to share personal experiences should give added meaning to the arguments. In addition, the teacher should try to elicit comments on results of the proposed actions.

Arrangement

After discussion of the arguments and their implications, students should list three or four of the strongest arguments under their position statement. They should also re-evaluate their chosen position to be sure they have selected the position they want to argue.

Student questions about how to quote from an article and how to interpret and use statistics to support a position can be addressed at this time. The following sentence offers an opportunity for discussion: "It [Michigan United Conservation Club] has charged that price increases on beer and soft drinks of up to 25 percent since the law took effect are 'politically motivated.'" This fact could be used by students calling for repeal: a 25 percent price increase is too great for customers to pay. People favoring the bill could emphasize the "politically

motivated" aspect and argue that the increase can be traced to refundable deposits. The teacher can also present information on how to paraphrase and quote material, pointing out when paraphrase or quotation are most effective. The exercise also provides an excellent opportunity to discuss plagiarism and how to cite references.

Writing the Paper

Individually or in small groups, students can begin to write one paragraph in support of one argument. Their first attempts at writing a paragraph can be shared in small groups. The teacher can move from group to group checking for development and correct use of quotations and statistics. When they have successfully completed one paragraph, students should move on to their next argument. Small group sessions to evaluate paragraphs as they are written will enable the teacher to monitor the writing in progress.

After each student has written several well-developed paragraphs in support of a chosen position, the teacher can discuss strategies for effective ordering of arguments in a persuasive essay. Then students can reorder the paragraphs they have written.

The work so far has not taken into consideration an introduction or conclusion. Once the arguments are developed and ordered, the body of the paper is complete. The original position statement will appear in the introductory paragraph. A discussion of strategies for introductions is appropriate at this time. Perhaps one of the quotations in the article can be used to help provide information leading to the thesis statement. The earlier discussion on the implications of the arguments should provide ideas for the conclusion.

Each student's draft will consist of three or four paragraphs supporting a position, plus an introduction and a conclusion. Class time can be scheduled for writing the final paper or students

can write the final version at home. Since teacher and students have worked closely together on the process of writing, the amount of time needed to evaluate the finished product should not be great. One rewarding strategy that can be followed after the papers have been submitted is to have papers that favor one position read and commented on by writers who adopted the opposite point of view.

This classroom exercise is one that allows a fair amount of thinking and pre-writing to take place in the classroom where the teacher is available to the students. Class discussion improves student understanding of the topic and provides an opportunity to explore personal experiences. Because of its variety of activities, this exercise affords teachers the satisfying experience of guiding their students through the writing process to a final product.