

PERSUASIVE, ARGUMENTATIVE WRITING

Here are some guidelines, including examples taken from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail" ("Letter"), that you might find helpful as you write a persuasive essay.

1. Do not waste time telling your reader what you are for or against in your introduction. Note how quickly King gets to work answering his critics and giving his implied thesis at the beginning of his "Letter":

"My Dear Fellow Clergymen:

While confined here in the Birmingham city jail, I came across your recent statement calling my present activities 'unwise and untimely.' Seldom do I pause to answer criticism of my work and ideas. If I sought to answer all the criticisms that cross my desk, my secretaries would have little time for anything other than such correspondence in the course of the day, and I would have no time for constructive work. But since I feel that you are men of genuine good will and that your criticisms are sincerely set forth, I want to try to answer your statement in what I hope will be patient and reasonable terms" (181-82).

2. Be forceful but not rude. Antagonizing your reader is not as effective as treating her or him as an equal. So the **tone** of your persuasive essay is important. Notice how in King's writing above, he describes his audience as "men of *genuine good will*" (emphasis added) and states that since "*your criticisms are sincerely set forth*, I want to try to answer your statement in what I hope will be patient and reasonable terms" (**emphasis added**).
3. Since very often the reason that someone does not agree with your point of view is that he or she sees things differently than you, it becomes very important that when you write persuasively, you use **imagery, analogy, simile, metaphor**, thereby fixing clearly in your reader's mind what it is **you** feel. King is a master at this.

Imagery in King's "Letter":

"The nations of Asia and Africa are moving with jet-like speed toward gaining political independence, but we still creep at horse-and-buggy pace toward gaining a cup of coffee at a lunch counter" (185-86).

Analogy in King's "Letter":

"But though I was initially disappointed at being categorized as an extremist, as I continued to think about the matter I gradually gained a measure of satisfaction from the label. Was not Jesus an extremist for love: 'Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you.' Was not Amos an extremist for justice: 'Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.' Was not Paul an extremist for the Christian gospel: 'I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus.' Was not Martin Luther an extremist: 'Here I stand; I cannot do otherwise, so help me God'" (192).

Simile in King's "Letter":

"*Just as the prophets* of the eighth century B.C. left their villages and carried their 'thus saith the Lord' far beyond the boundaries of their home towns, and *just as* the Apostle Paul left his village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to the far corners of the Greco-Roman world, *so am I* compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my own home town. *Like* Paul, I must constantly respond to the Macedonian call for aid" (182, emphasis added).

Metaphor in King's "Letter":

"We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever

affects one directly, affects all indirectly" (182).

4. Since your goal is to persuade, make sure that your reader understands your topic. Do not, therefore, dismiss the age-old ploy of repetition and exaggeration. You probably used those devices when you were two years old, and when you were a teenager wanting to stay out late or to drive the family car. Now use those techniques again: **repetition, exaggeration**.

King writes, "*I*, along with several members of my staff, *am here* because I was invited *here*. *I am here* because I have organizational ties *here* . . . *I am* in Birmingham because injustice is *here*" (182, emphasis added).

Don't be afraid to parallel the structure of significant phrases or to repeat words.

King also writes, "What else can one do when he is alone in a narrow jail cell, other than *write long letters, think long thoughts, and pray long prayers?*" (197, emphasis added).

5. Until you have told your readers what's in it for them, you really will not get your readers' attention and therefore will not persuade them. So, explain to your readers how the problem that concerns **you** concerns them too.

As King puts it, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere" (182).

With this sentence he has moved away from a **race** issue to a human issue. Freedom concerns everyone, so everyone listens. You might decide to make your persuasive essay revolve around a universal theme such as birth, death, love, hate, well-being, pain, and basic needs such as food, drink, sex, shelter, etc.

6. To be persuasive you must show those you are trying to persuade that you know, as they say, "Where they're coming from." This is what is called, "Reckoning with the opposition." This technique usually entails repeating or quoting what "the other side" says and following it with a "but."

For example, King writes, "You deplore the demonstrations taking place in Birmingham. But your statement, I am sorry to say, fails to express a similar concern for the conditions that brought about the demonstrations" (183).

You might even pretend to agree with the opposition. That would give you a way of further clarifying your point.

"You express," King says, "a great deal of anxiety over our willingness to break laws. This is certainly a legitimate concern. Since we so diligently urge people to obey the Supreme Court's decision of 1954 outlawing segregation in the public schools, at first glance it may seem rather paradoxical for us consciously to break laws. One may well ask: 'How can you advocate breaking some laws and obeying others?' The answer lies in the fact that there are two types of laws: just and unjust" (186).

Again, anticipating a question before it is asked gives you the opportunity to provide an answer and explanation. Along the same lines, King writes,

"You may well ask, 'Why direct action? Why sit-ins, marches, and so forth? Isn't negotiation a better path?' You are quite right in calling for negotiation. Indeed, this is the very purpose of direct action. Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront an issue" (184)."

7. If you want to persuade, you must be ready to say **WHY** you want someone to believe as you do. Therefore, you must be armed with as many **facts** as you can find or think about. As you know, facts alone don't always do the trick. So try to quote people, use dialogue, and give as much first-hand knowledge as you can. The more specifics you have, the stronger your case. King, too, uses personal experience:

"When you take a cross-country drive and find it necessary to sleep night after night in the uncomfortable corners of your automobile because no motel will accept you; when you are humiliated day in and day out by nagging signs reading 'white' and 'colored' . . ." (186).

8. **Limit your topic** and state clearly what you are going to tackle and what you are not. If you are concerned with DWI, better limit yourself. For example, you could focus on **teenagers** who drink and drive, or upon **adults** who do so (considering that some statistics show that the highest rates for DWIs are for people between the ages of 32 and 38). In his "Letter," King focuses on segregation and the need to eradicate it.
9. Try to **keep a balance between emotion and reason**. Don't be afraid to pile on the emotion-hitting examples, as King does when he answers those who would have African Americans wait for justice:

"When you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six-year-old daughter why she can't go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on television, and see tears welling up in her eyes when she is told that Funtown is closed to colored children, and see ominous clouds of inferiority beginning to form in her little mental sky, and see her beginning to distort her personality by developing an unconscious bitterness toward white people. . ." (186).

Be ready, also, to provide reasonable facts and figures, something King does here:

"We should never forget that everything Adolph Hitler did in Germany was 'legal' and everything the Hungarian freedom fighters did in Hungary was 'illegal.' It was 'illegal' to aid and comfort a Jew in Hitler's Germany" (188).

10. Finally, it is essential that you try to be convinced yourself of what you are urging others to believe. If you don't believe in what you are saying, no one else will believe. Try to choose a topic/problem that you find troublesome or upsetting and yet one that you can speak about with enough reason as to be logical and convincing, as King does when he writes that

"A law is unjust if it is inflicted on a minority that, as a result of being denied the right to vote, had no part in enacting or devising the law. Who can say that the legislature of Alabama which set up that state's segregation laws was democratically elected? Throughout Alabama all sorts of devious methods are used to prevent Negroes from becoming registered voters, and there are some counties in which, even though Negroes constitute a majority of the population, not a single Negro is registered. Can any law enacted under such circumstances be considered democratically structured?" (187-88).

