

Un-Persuasive Writing Assignment

Overview: The following is a writing project that is informed by the first section of our reading list on the writing process. I'm going to give you a little bit of background and then a quick thumbnail outline of the assignment. After that, I'll go into more detail about how I plan out the assignments using class activities over a 2-3 week period.

At the very end, I'm including the assignment sheet that I give to students.

Brief Explanation:

I ask my students to take a "persuasive" topic and write about it from different points of view. My goal is to get them to use the writing process to think through different possibilities. I contrast this to the "pseudo-genre" of persuasive writing which presents an argument without persuading anyone.

Background Readings:

There are two readings from our online list that I ask students to read early in the semester. I then ask them to post a short response to the Discussion Board on Blackboard, and we talk about them in class.

- "A Way of Writing" by William Stafford.

A writer is not so much someone who has something to say as he is someone who has found a process that will bring about new things he would not have thought of if he had not started to say them.

- "How to Improve Your Writing Through Freewriting Exercises" by Peter Elbow.

Freewriting may seem crazy but actually it makes simple sense. Think of the difference between speaking and writing. Writing has the advantage of permitting more editing. But that's its downfall too. Almost everyone interposes a massive and complicated series of editings between the time the words start to be born into consciousness and when they finally come of the end of the pencil or typewriter onto the page. This is partly because schooling makes us obsessed with the "mistakes" we make in writing. Many people constantly think about spelling and grammar as they try to write. I am always thinking about the awkwardness, wordiness, and general mushiness of my natural verbal product as I try to write down words. But it's not just "mistakes" or "bad writing" we edit as we write. We also edit unacceptable thoughts and feelings, as we do in speaking. In writing there is more time to do it so the editing is heavier: when speaking, there's someone right there waiting for a reply and he'll get bored or think we're crazy if we don't come out with something. Most of the time in speaking, we settle for the catch-as-catch-can way in which the words tumble out. In writing, however, there's a chance to try to get them right.

But the opportunity to get them right is a terrible burden: you can work for two hours trying to get a paragraph "right" and discover it's not right at all. And then give up.

Thumbnail Outline of Lesson Plan (Full Lesson Plan Below):

Class 1: Some in class writing about persuasion. We write and talk about what makes people change their minds—and what doesn't. Then we brainstorm for a range of different topics.

Class 2: We share topics and discuss a range of possible outcomes. It's not just a binary "are you persuaded or not?" Then students begin writing in class.

Class 3: Once students have a bit of rough writing, we begin working to imagine someone else, someone who would have a different perspective on the topic and react differently. We work in groups to flesh out who this "resistant reader" is.

Class 4: Students write from the perspective of this resistant reader and then compare the two versions, searching for both differences and potential common ground.

Class 5: We discuss where to go with the two pieces of writing. I encourage them to brainstorm multiple possibilities both in terms of genre and in terms of purpose.

Future Classes: They can work on extending this project right away or come back to it later in the semester. They can also extend it into a research project by doing identifying others with different points of view either through reading or interviews.

Full Lesson Plan:

Class 1: Writing and Talking about Persuasion

15 Minutes Writing: I ask students to write about a time that someone changed their minds. I give them about 10 minutes to write about this. Then I ask them to take about 5 minutes to analyze their writing. What is it, do they think, that changed their mind? Was it the words themselves? The person? The circumstances?

30 Minutes Sharing and Discussion: I ask students to share their writing. Once groups have a chance to share, I ask the groups to report back. We begin a discussion of what things do and do not change people's minds.

One of the things that I want them to take away from this discussion is how rare it is that people are actually persuaded of anything. And when it does happen, it often has very little to do with what words people use. More often it depends on the person who is doing the persuading or the particular time when they are hearing that point of view. They are persuaded when they come to a moment when they are *ready* to be persuaded.

I point out how futile traditional persuasive topics are for this kind of persuasion. How often do papers on abortion or capital punishment really change people's minds?

15 Minutes Brainstorming For Topics: I tell students that we're going to do a writing project that looks at persuasion from a different perspective. I want them to come up with a list of topics to write about. They must be topics where different people have different points of view. We spend some time in class brainstorming different kinds of topics. Some of them can be traditional cultural/current event topics—like abortion. But some of them have to be more specific topics, things that might only apply to a more local community, or even just to themselves or a small set of people.

I ask them to come up with three categories and to come up with several topics in each:

1. Large Topics – Issues that are debated widely by many people and which have an impact on many people. (Like abortion, global warming, immigration, etc..)
2. Medium Topics – Issues that concern many people, but which might be limited to a particular group. (Like parking on campus or requiring everyone to take a writing class.)
3. Small Topics – Issues that concern them personally. (Like whether they should continue to follow their parents religion or tell their best friend that to leave his girlfriend.)

Of course, these categories are arbitrary, but I want them to go beyond traditional topics. I also want them to think about the differences between tackling large issues and tackling small issues.

HOMEWORK: Come up with at least three topics in each category and write a few sentences about each one. Post to the Discussion Board on Blackboard, and print out a copy to share in class.

Class 2: Sharing Topics, More Talking about Persuasion, Some Writing

10 Minutes Sharing – I have students get in small groups and share their homework. I want them to get a sense of some of the possibilities.

10 Minutes Group Reporting – I have each group volunteer one or two items, making sure to get a full range of possibilities, including large, medium, and small topics.

20 Minutes Discussion – Once we get a range of possibilities, I talk about a few of them. I ask the class about these—I pose this question:

If you were going to discuss this topic with someone who had a different point of view, what would the range of possible outcomes be? (I'd probably put this question up on a screen while we were having this discussion.)

My point in having this discussion is that students tend to view persuasion in terms of winning or losing an argument. Hopefully, I've laid the ground for undermining that view, but I want to give them something to replace it with—or at least I want to complicate it. For some of the items, I want to talk about a range of possible outcomes. It's not just, yes that person is persuaded or no she's not. I want to talk about middle ground.

So we talk about a full range of possibilities:

1. Full persuasion. The other person leaves the conversation as a “convert,” totally seeing things your way.
2. Opening Awareness. The other person isn't totally convinced, but she sees some possibilities she hadn't before.
3. Understanding. The other person is just as convinced as she was before you began. But she now understands more about why you believe what you do.
4. Hearing. The other person still doesn't understand why you believe what you do. But your words have made her stop and think long enough for her to try to hear you.
5. No change. For whatever reasons (maybe it's her; maybe it's you), the other person just can't open up to what you're saying.

I might end up putting these possibilities on the screen as well, but I want to have a discussion first—I want them to really think about persuasion as a range of possibilities and not just a binary. I also want to talk about a sixth possibility:

6. As a result of this conversation—*you* change in some way.

For me, this is the most exciting possibility. I tell students it's my biggest hope for this particular writing assignment—that they end up somewhere different at the end; that *they're* changed by it. When you do writing that changes you, that's some *powerful* writing.

30 Minutes – More writing. I tell the students that I'm going to give them a block of time to choose a topic and do some freewriting from their own point of view. But before I do that, I want them to write a few sentences about a person who thinks differently—their potential audience for the piece. Who is this person and why do they have a different point of view? Once they do this, I tell them to write just freewrite from whatever their point of view is regarding their topic.

While they're freewriting, I go around the class and look at those first few sentences. What I'm trying to do here is to get them to be specific. So if they've written “I'm writing to a person who has a different point of view because they have a different opinion,” I'm going to push them to tell me more. What do you think makes them different from you? Why do they see things differently?

HOMEWORK: Flesh out what they've written in class. They don't have to polish it and revise it, just write more. In order to push them to write more, I'll put a word minimum on it. Maybe

600 words—which is probably more than they’ll write in class but not so much more as to make the homework assignment an ordeal. I’ll ask them to post it to the Discussion Board and bring in a copy to share in class.

Class 3: Imagining a “Resistant Reader”

15 Minutes Reflective Writing – I ask them to stand back from their writing and to try to imagine as fully as they possibly can, a person who approaches their topic from a different place. I want them to take some time to write about that person. In doing so, I suggest it might be useful to consider some of the following questions:

- How is this person different from me?
- Does this person have different values than I do?
- Does this person have different experiences than I do?
- Does this person have different assumptions than I do?
- Does this person have reasons to be suspicious or resistant of my ideas?
- Does this person have reasons to be suspicious or resistant to *people* who they think have similar ideas?

40 Minutes Sharing and Working in Groups – I ask them to share their homework (but not their reflective writing). Then I ask the other people in the group to respond by trying to imagine a resistant reader—to imagine who this reader is and why the reader might resist being persuaded—in other words, to do as a group, what the writer has already done in the reflective writing. I tell them that the goal is to really “flesh out” who this resistant reader is. I tell them that the goal is not to come up with a counter-argument. Their goal, instead, is to imagine who that person really is before trying to argue.

The writer needs to take notes because I expect those notes to be included at the top of the next homework assignment. I’ll usually give them a word-minimum (maybe 250 words?) because otherwise, they notes will be skimpy and uninformative.

10 Minutes Group Reporting – I might ask for a few examples of a group that thinks they’ve been particularly successful at imagining and fleshing out a resistant reader.

10 Minutes Writing – If they need time to work on their notes (those 250 words), I have them do that at the end of class. Otherwise, they can use this time to begin the homework assignment (below). This is a good time for me to go from desk to desk and help if some students are stuck or struggling.

HOMEWORK: Write about your topic but taking on the persona of the resistant reader. At least 600 words. Post to the Discussion Board. At this point you should have about 1,200 words total—including your original writing and your writing from a different point of view. Print out copies of both to share in your groups.

Class 4: Sizing Up Differences and Common Ground

10 Minutes Reflective Writing – Look back at these two pieces of writing and just write about what you see. What are the differences in the two perspectives? Do you see any possible common ground?

45 Minutes Sharing in Groups – Have everyone read both pieces and respond to the same questions: What differences do you see? Do you see any possible common ground?

10 Minutes Group Reports and Discussion – Ask the groups to share an example of finding differences and common ground.

10 Minutes Framing Next Assignment – So far, they’ve got about 4-5 pages of writing. Now it’s the time to think about what they’re going to do with this material. What can it become? I want to send them home thinking about what the possibilities are, and we can talk about them in class next time.

HOMEWORK: Just freewrite about what this writing could become. Where can you go from here? What form could this writing take? What do you want to discover next? The only thing that’s off limits is this: It can’t be a traditional persuasive essay. Students should post at least 300 words to the Discussion Board, and they should print out a copy of their post and bring it to class.

Class 5: Where do we go from here? Brainstorming and Discussing Possible Writing Projects

10 Minutes Getting in groups and sharing homework.

30 Minutes Groups report and we talk about possibilities.

I want to prompt them to think about as many possibilities as they can both in terms of “genre” but also in terms of their goals—what they want to accomplish with their writing both in terms of what they discover and what they have to give to readers. Some of the forms might include:

- A dialog, an exchange of ideas among two or more voices.
- A letter. (Or a series of letters.)
- A story.
- A graphic novel.
- A blog.
- A video (Or a script for a video along with a storyboard.)
- A reflection.
- Some combination of the above.

I'm trying to avoid the "persuasive paper" as a genre, but I allow for the possibility that a student might do this if they persuade me that it's not going to feel like the same stale thing that usually happens with such a paper.

But I also try to brainstorm goals and outcomes. Here are some possibilities:

- Trying to understand different people or perspectives.
- Trying to dramatize different people or perspectives.
- Trying to explain your own perspective—not to change someone else's mind, but to get them to understand you.
- Trying to better understand yourself.
- Trying to be playful with ideas—to see them from different angles.

35 Minutes Begin the project by writing in class – Students can begin writing and I can go from desk to desk checking in with them.

What next?

Students can take a week or so to work on this piece and then bring it to class for feedback. Or we can move on to another writing project, and students can decide for themselves if this is something they want to come back and work on further.

I also have a project later in the semester where students extend a piece by adding a research component. That can lend itself to this piece as students find additional readings or do interviews in order to find out more about other people's points of view on their topic.

Below is the handout that I give to students when we begin the writing project.

Writing Project: Un-Persuasive Writing

The Writing Project and My Reasons for Assigning it: Like I said at the beginning of the semester, I'm interested in powerful writing. Writing that changed people's mind about something would certainly be powerful. The problem is that most persuasive writing—at least the kind that's been traditionally assigned in school—is neither persuasive nor powerful.

So I want to try to revisit this kind of assignment. In this writing project I will ask you to think about a topic from the perspective of someone who feels and thinks differently than you do. I'll ask you to think deeply about this other person, whom I'll call your "resistant" reader. In thinking about this person, I'll ask you to imagine not only the reasons he or she might see things differently than you do, but to go beneath the surface and imagine this person's values, biases, assumptions, suspicions—anything that might make him or her think differently than you

do. Then I'll ask you to write about the topic from this resistant reader's perspective.

Here's my hypothesis. I think that power in writing can come not only from persuasion (though that does happen), but from *connection*. I'm hoping that this writing process asks you to imagine someone else's ideas, emotions, and biases in a way that may allow you to connect with that person. My goal is for you to end this process with an understanding that you didn't have when you began it. I think that you can use this understanding and this connection to produce powerful writing.

Where I'm Going With This--What Happens When You're Done: When you've written the two letters, you should think about what kind of writing can come out of them. As with your first assignment, I think there are many possibilities.

1. You can write a persuasive piece--but not in a traditional essay form. Use a different genre of writing--a story, a letter, a play, or something else--to try to accomplish your goal.
2. Don't write something persuasive at all. Use your writing as the basis for a different kind of piece with different goals. For instance, your piece might be about the topic and why people have different opinions. Instead of trying to persuade your reader, you could help your reader understand these differences and where they come from.

We'll brainstorm some possible ideas in class.

Bonus Assignment:

As you know, you don't have to develop everything you write in the class for your portfolio. But if you end up liking this piece, and you want to make it longer (since your final portfolio requires 12-16 pages of revised writing), you might decide to take this piece further and actually interview someone with a different opinion or go looking for writing from a different point of view. We can talk about this later.

How Long Does This Piece Have to Be? I'm going to set three full pages (900 words) as the minimum. But, once again, this will vary from person to person, depending on your project. If you think that you'd be better off with a shorter piece, then talk to me about it before the deadline. It's also a good idea to review the section in the *syllabus* about your final portfolio. Then you'll have an idea of how much writing you'll need to have to choose from at the end of the semester.