

THE ART OF PERSUASION: The 3 Keys to Selling Your Idea Successfully

Everything you write in the world of business is designed to **persuade** someone to do something or to respond in some particular way. A proposal, for example, may be designed to persuade your state's transportation department to give your company the contract to repair its highways. A report may be designed to persuade your boss to accept your recommendation about which steel vendor to choose for the stoves and refrigerators your company makes. A company-wide memo may be designed to persuade your employees to feel comfortable with your organization's new pension plan. Even something as simple as a daily internal email may be designed to persuade your co-workers to attend a meeting or to welcome your company's new human resources director.

Good writers understand the art persuasion. To make your writing persuasive, keep these three keys in mind:

1. Argue your case with strong evidence and clear logic.
2. Present yourself as credible, competent, and cooperative.
3. Generate positive emotions in your readers.

1. Argue your case with strong evidence and clear logic

Whatever you write you need to present to your readers the hard facts and information they need—and no more. This means that you must look at your writing from your readers' point of view: What information are they looking for to make a decision or understand a situation? Do they need facts and figures? Do they need to see dollar amounts and schedules? Do they need some history of the situation or some background? Do they wish to know the opinions of experts other than yourself?

In addition to presenting all the necessary facts, your role is to interpret those facts for your readers, which we call reasoning. This demands that you draw logical, clearly explained conclusions from that information. Sometimes a simple chart, graph, or table is the most logical way to present and interpret information. Sometimes, you'll need to write a paragraph that explains how the facts are connected and what conclusions they lead to. However you interpret your facts, you must be reasonable: your conclusions must be logical and unexaggerated, your cause-and-effect claims must be sensible, and you must acknowledge counter-arguments and deal with them fairly.

Strong evidence and logical thinking are the first key to persuasive writing.

2. Present yourself as credible, competent, and cooperative

Some professionals believe that fact-based, reasonable argument or explanation is enough to persuade readers. It's not. **You must also make your readers believe in you.** They must believe that you are honest and reliable, that you've done your best to gather all relevant information and to interpret it fairly, and that you have their best interests at heart. How do you make them believe this? Here are three ways:

First, you must **satisfy your readers' need for information and logic** (see Key #1). If you fail to do this, you've already lost your readers' confidence.

Second, your writing should **adopt an appropriate tone**. In most cases, you want to come across to your reader as confident and knowledgeable but not condescending or know-it-all. You want to suggest a "we're all in this together" rather than an adversarial, defensive, or superior attitude. (This is true even when you're telling your readers something they might not wish to hear; for example, in a company-wide memo announcing layoffs.) Only rarely is it appropriate to adopt an "I'm the boss" tone—and even then, it's better to come across as "I'm the boss, but I share your concerns."

Third, **your writing should be clear, correct, and straightforward**. It doesn't have to be perfect, but writing that is clear, concise, precise, and to the point will make you appear competent, believable, and considerate. Sloppy writing and pompous or jargon-filled language will have the opposite effect.

Persuasive writing demands that the writer be found trustworthy, cooperative, and capable. Even if your readers already know you personally, you must still make the case for your credibility and goodwill **in this particular document**.

3. Generate positive emotions in your reader

Some people assume that business writing doesn't deal in emotion. That assumption is wrong. We're not talking here about the sad-eyed-little-orphan or precious-puppy school of writing that you might find in a mailer from a nonprofit organization asking for your donations. But even in a straightforward business proposal or corporate report, you'll be generating some emotions in your readers, whether you like it or not. Your readers, after all, aren't robots.

Obviously, there are some emotions you don't want to generate in your readers: anger, frustration, disappointment, disgust, boredom, and apathy, for example. If your document displays poor writing, tangled organization, confusing design, weak evidence, poor logic, or an offensive tone, it might generate any or all of these negative emotions.

However, a well-researched, well-written, thoughtfully designed, and well-meaning document will generate any number of positive emotions in your readers: pleasure, satisfaction, confidence, interest, and goodwill, for example. Occasionally (rarely), a business document might even dip its toes in the pond of humor. But only occasionally, for the right readers.

We need to end with a confession. At the beginning of this article, we said that these are Hurley Write's keys to persuasive writing, but we must give credit where credit is due: The idea that the art of persuasion depends on evidence and logic, the writer's credibility, and the generation of positive emotions really goes back thousands of years—all the way to the Greek philosopher Aristotle. He called these concepts logos (logic/evidence), ethos (credibility/goodwill), and pathos (emotion). Thank you, Aristotle—your ideas are still alive and well and helping business writers persuade readers in the 21st Century.