

WORKSHOP HELP DESK

A QUICK GUIDE TO Teaching Persuasive Writing K-2

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Workshop Help Desk Series

Edited by Lucy Calkins

with the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project



HEINEMANN
Portsmouth, NH



An imprint of Heinemann
361 Hanover Street
Portsmouth, NH 03801-3912
www.heinemann.com

Offices and agents throughout the world

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Taylor, Sarah Picard.

A quick guide to teaching persuasive writing, K-2 / Sarah Picard Taylor.

p. cm. — (Workshop help desk series)

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 13: 978-0-325-02597-1

ISBN 10: 0-325-02597-5

1. English language—Composition and exercises—Study and teaching
(Early childhood). I. Title.

LB1139.5.L35.T39 2008

372.62'3049—dc22

2008027305

SERIES EDITOR: *Lucy Calkins and the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project*

EDITOR: *Kate Montgomery*

PRODUCTION: *Elizabeth Valway*

COVER DESIGN: *Jenny Jensen Greenleaf*

COVER PHOTO: *Angela Jimenez*

INTERIOR DESIGN: *Jenny Jensen Greenleaf*

COMPOSITION: *House of Equations, Inc.*

MANUFACTURING: *Steve Bernier*

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

12 11 10 09 08 VP 1 2 3 4 5

To Bob and Terry Picard

The courage needed to revise and edit this book seemed small compared with the courage you gathered this year. Thank you for teaching me to laugh, work hard, and empathize.

I am proud to have come from both of you.





C O N T E N T S

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	ix
INTRODUCTION	xi
1 Persuasive Writing in the Primary Grades	1
2 Writing Persuasive Letters	14
3 Writing Persuasive Reviews	42
4 Delivering Persuasive Writing to an Audience	64
WORKS CITED	77
BOOKS RECOMMENDED BY THIS AUTHOR	79



CHAPTER ONE

Persuasive Writing in the Primary Grades

One morning I walked into Carmella Wittman's sunlit kindergarten classroom in Sun Prairie, Wisconsin. Something was not right. Only a few children were gathered at their meeting area. The rest sat openmouthed, gazing out the floor-to-ceiling windows.

"It's a bike rodeo, and we can't be in it!" said Hunter. As I looked, he explained that the bike rodeo was a program offered by neighborhood police officers to promote bicycle safety.

"No kindergartners allowed," Hunter continued, "but why can't we be in it?"

No wonder the kids were distracted. They could not help it. The injustice of not being included in the rodeo was staring them in the face.

Teachers are always looking for ways to teach their students to be active citizens, to think independently and try

things on their own (Bomer and Bomer 2001). Teachers who hope to channel children toward persuasive writing and who want children to see that writing can be a form of social action can seize upon moments when children perceive that there has been an injustice in their school. When youngsters barge into the classroom after recess, all in a tizzy because of a fight on the playground, or when they argue that a school policy is unfair, I am apt to muse, “I wonder if there is something you could write in writing workshop today that might help you address this problem? Who needs to hear your feelings in order for the problem to be solved? What ideas do you have to solve the problem?” My goal is to teach children that writing can be part of their response to injustice and to teach them, too, that writers mull over possible genres and audiences for persuasive writing. Of course, there are bigger lessons being taught. When we equip our children to write persuasively, we help them go from whining and complaining toward taking positive action. We help them learn that any one individual can make a real-world difference.

Back in Carmella’s classroom, I looked at the children gazing out the windows. Carmella and I had been in the middle of a unit of study that asked our students to write true stories from their lives, but I looked at her and said, “You know, Carmella, I think we need to change our plans a little.”

In the next few minutes, the youngsters gathered at the meeting area and I said, “Writers, sometimes writers write true stories from their lives, as we’ve been doing. Sometimes we write for other reasons. Sometimes we write so as to persuade people in charge to do things differently. Because it sounds like many of you are really upset about the bike rodeo, I was

wondering if you'd like me to teach you how you can use writing to try to persuade people to change that policy about kindergartners."

"Why can't we be in it?" Hunter asked again. A few of his friends chimed in with "Yeah!" and "It isn't fair!"

"Well, one thing you can do is write a letter to the people in charge and ask them that question. You might be able to change their minds, and if not, at least you might understand their reasons for the policy," I said, silently hoping the principal would not mind the deluge of letters that would soon appear in his mailbox.

In the days that followed, that group of children continued to write and receive letters from the principal, the police officers, and other members of the school staff. When older children in the school heard the buzz about the rodeo letters, they were impressed! Soon letters were flying across the school about wobbly tables, leaky faucets, reading spots that were not working for independent reading, and the need for more books of one kind or another. Teachers began meeting to think about the qualities of effective persuasive writing and to study student work, thinking, "How can we take what our children are doing another step?" That school had officially begun its first persuasive writing unit.

Why Persuasive Writing in the Primary Grades?

My colleagues and I in the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project hope that all primary teachers consider providing children with a unit of study designed to help them

write persuasively. Different schools and especially different grade levels of teachers have decided on different ways to teach persuasive writing. Some kindergarten teachers have worked to develop a unit of study that invites children to write signs and posters that affect people's actions. Many primary teachers have embraced the idea of designing a unit of study to help children write persuasive letters. Many other teachers—and especially those in the second grade—have embraced the notion of teaching children to write persuasive reviews. The reviews can be designed to promote or to critique television shows, restaurants, games, and, of course, books. All of these options help children feel their writing can make the world a better place.

My colleagues and I teach persuasive writing in part so children come to know the real-world power of writing. The persuasive writing genre opens opportunities for writers to work on several qualities of good writing. Specifically, persuasive writing requires writers to:

- ▶ write with purpose for a selected audience
- ▶ decide upon and then elaborate on the most important parts of their message
- ▶ write and edit for readers, making sure the text is easy to read

Writing with Purpose for a Selected Audience

When a child yearns for the latest toy, he considers which parent to ask and even weighs the best way to win over that parent. “If you say yes, I’ll start taking Toby for a walk every

day,” one child might promise, eyeing the family’s restless pet. “If you don’t let me, then I’ll never forgive you,” another might say, hoping threats will seal the deal. We, as teachers, have the opportunity to tap into children’s innate ability to use language to persuade.

In a unit of study on persuasive writing, children will need to learn that their lives are full of reasons to write persuasively. We can expect that their first topics will be centered on their own lives: campaigning for a later bedtime or more time to play video games after school. But as soon as we take students on trips around the neighborhood and help them live their lives seeing injustices and seeing possibilities for goodness, even our youngest writers will discover that they can act on the behalf of others—that writing a persuasive text can improve not just their own lives but the lives of many people. When a cluster of first graders at P.S. 59 grew tired of kickballs hitting their windowpanes and interrupting their learning several times each day, they decided to write a letter. Katherine Nigen taught her students that first they needed to think about whom could help them solve the problem. They considered writing to the principal to “tell on the big kids.” However, after some thinking, they considered writing to the teachers of the big kids for the same purpose. Finally, one of students suggested they actually write to the big kids directly, asking them to play more carefully. Needless to say, their letters worked!

Once a writer has decided upon an audience, they need to think carefully about how to convince that specific audience. Children can plan a roleplay. If writers want to argue for longer recess time (or any other cause) they can think, “What reasons might be persuasive if we are arguing this cause to

the principal?” or “What reasons might be persuasive if we are arguing for this cause to other children, perhaps in hopes that they’ll cosign a petition?” People can assume different roles and role-play an effort to persuade.

When the first graders hoped to persuade older kids to try to keep balls from slamming on the first-grade classrooms’ windows, they rehearsed for their letter by asking themselves and each other, “What do we want to say to the big kids?” They pictured the big kids in their minds and thought, “What exactly do they need to know?” As they composed their message on a big piece of chart paper, it was clear these writers had discovered a way to write with focus. (See Figure 1.1.)

Choosing and Then Elaborating on the Most Important Parts of a Message

Just as we teach students to elaborate in their narrative writing, we also want to teach this in persuasive writing. We teach students to think of reasons that their request is important, list each of those reasons, and then, if they can, illustrate each reason with a quick narrative description—just the part of a story that shows the reader why this request is important. Some writers may do this elaboration work through pictures on the page, others through words.

There are many qualities of good writing that are important in every genre, and focus is one of these. If a writer wants to channel a reader to act differently, the writer needs to decide what exactly it is that she wants to say and then work hard to say that one thing. If a writer really wants a dog, then that writer is wise to devote her full attention to explaining the

advantages of a dog. As the writer works on this text—presumably a persuasive letter—she might remember experiences with a dog that weren’t especially positive. The memory of moments spent scrubbing the rug might come to the writer’s mind, but it won’t be hard to teach her to choose evidence and details that help advance her cause . . . and to delete distracters.

In a unit of study on persuasive writing, then, the fact that the writer’s purpose, the writer’s focus, is embodied in a person, a reader, helps teach children the skills of focus and elaboration. Writers are given very real reasons to control their message—to channel their reader!

Writing and Editing with Readers in Mind

A unit of study on persuasive writing gives children reasons to invest themselves zealously in their writing. Children will have real-world reasons to make the stories they tell ones that actually touch readers enough to stir them to action. And children will also have lots of reasons to write as clearly as they can, using all they know about the conventions of written language. The text will be mailed, sent, delivered. Someone will open the envelope, hold the child’s letter, and work as hard as possible to decipher what the child has said. The reader will need help, and it is the writer’s job to provide that help.

Rules and conventions of written language come to life when a child knows that his text will be passed into the hands of a reader. All of a sudden there is a very real reason to write with end punctuation, to stretch words out and listen

to and record as many sounds as possible, to rely on known words to spell unknown words.

This book does not specifically address ways in which a teacher can help children write more conventionally, but I do advise teachers to mail children's actual writing, when possible. Recipients of letters and readers of reviews will know the writers are five- or six- or seven-year-olds and will not expect perfection—and children, in the meantime, will be galvanized to use all they know and can learn to write in ways that reach readers.

What Might Some Units of Study Look Like?

It always helps to be able to imagine the big picture of a unit of study before embarking on the day-by-day sequence of that unit. Of course, a unit on persuasive writing will look very different if writers are kindergartners or if they are second graders. Younger writers may rely on signs and posters to persuade; while more developed writers will be able to write longer texts.

Persuasive Letters Unit

During this unit of study, children will zealously churn out letters that are designed to persuade people to take action. They may request that someone stop or start doing something (see Figures 1.1 and 1.2). Sometimes children will go so far as to suggest new solutions to a problem (see Figure 1.3). Additional

Dear ms. talish
 It's to LOW when
 your class
 is exclud we
 can not work
 on ~~when~~ ms. Katherine
 is talking to. maybe
 when your class is
 exclud they can do a sit
 there since
 graham I am your naber

FIG. 1.2 *Graham's Letter*

examples of letters and Alexandra's full six-page letter from Figure 1.3 are on our website, www.firsthand.heinemann.com. Of course, sometimes solutions are not so easy to devise, and so a youngster may request to meet to discuss a problem. In all of these letters, children will need to elaborate by providing reasons to back their requests, and often, they may decide to embed little examples into their letters. Of course, children will need to revise and edit with their audience in mind, pushing themselves as writers to make each persuasive letter the very best it can be before it goes out to an audience.

Dear Melanie,
There is a big problem
that I think you can
fix.

BULLYING!!!

One day I was with
my friend at recess and
I saw one kid grab
another kid by her shirt
and throw her against the
gate. It makes me want

to cry when I see
this stuff.

One reason we should
solve this problem is because
kids are getting hurt both
ways and feel like they
have NO friends!

Another reason we should
solve this problem is because
kids aren't telling teachers.
Some kids just sit in

FIG. 1.3 Alexandra's Letter

Persuasive Reviews Unit

This unit will begin with students studying other reviews from online sources, newspapers, and magazines. In Chapter 3, I suggest ways to help children notice the structure of published reviews. Then the chapter explains how to teach students to craft their own reviews. Students first develop lists of things they feel they could review for other people and of audiences who might read the reviews. The young writers will need to decide how they really feel about the subject of the review and consider if the audience will feel the same way. When they begin their reviews, the students will start with a little description of the book, video game, movie, or restaurant and then write specific details about the characters, actors, or food that were pleasing or displeasing. Finally, they will end the review with their opinion of the subject and perhaps consider the circumstances in which a person may want to read the particular book, watch the given movie, play the video game, or eat the mentioned food. (See examples on our website, www.firsthand.heinemann.com.)

The Road Ahead

The pages that follow reflect my investment, belief, and experience around persuasive writing in the primary grades. To think, it all began with a rodeo. I left the experience in Carmella's kindergarten room stronger in my belief that if we want our students to grow up to be active citizens in this democracy, we must teach them to be active citizens from an early age. Primary teachers are integral in this process. We

cannot wait for kids to get older and cross our fingers and hope we did our job. Teachers need to carve out opportunities to have young students' voices heard. And heard early.

Students have a sense of passion for the things they love to do. They also have a keen sense of what is fair and unfair. They want to do what is right, and when they see something that makes someone else feel bad, they want to do something to make it better. They are beginning to develop empathy, and we can foster all of this through persuasive writing.



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