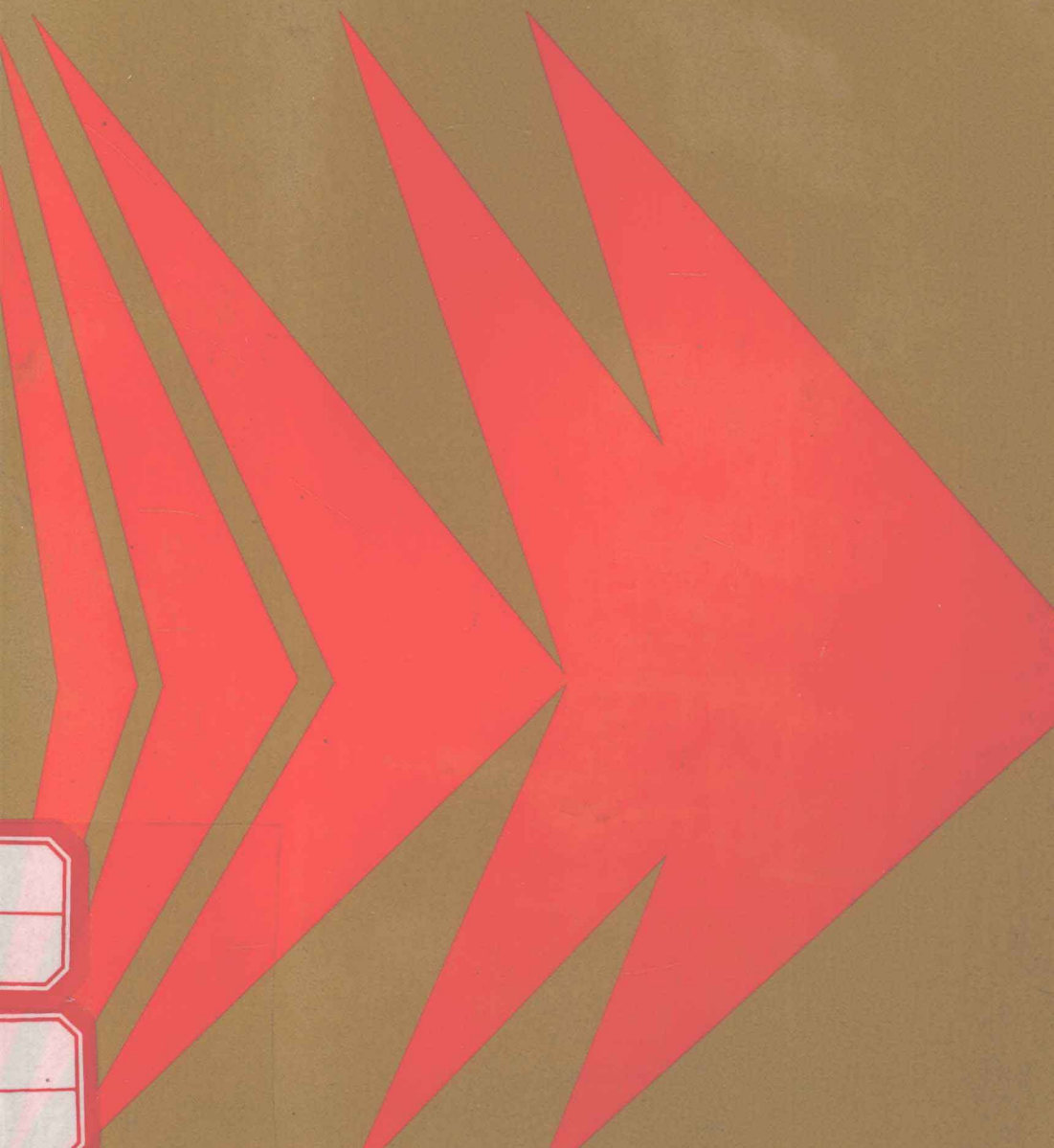


PERSUASIVE WRITING

KARL ZENDER
LINDA MORRIS

A COLLEGE READER



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University of California, Davis



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preface

Persuasive Writing: A College Reader has three purposes, one innovative and two traditional: The traditional purposes are to illustrate the characteristics of the various rhetorical modes and to provide student writers with examples of good writing to read and imitate; the innovative purpose is to demonstrate the importance of *persuasion* to the writing process.

We take the term *persuasion* to apply to any writing in which writers seek to convince their readers that their subjects are significant and interesting and worthy of serious consideration. Viewed in this manner, persuasive writing has a broad range indeed. It can move us to action or can simply have us look at an object or idea in a new way. As the essays in this book show, persuasive writing can be exuberant or restrained, ornate or simple, fanciful or matter-of-fact, humorous or somber. In all its varieties, though, its defining characteristics are an alertness to the needs of the audience and a willingness to serve those needs. Studying persuasive writing, we believe, can help students recognize the importance of developing a mature sense of audience in their own work.

The organization and content of *Persuasive Writing* reflect its threefold purpose. The book contains an opening chapter on the writing process, eight chapters of essays illustrating the various rhetorical modes, and a final chapter of readings for further analysis. Both the opening chapter and the introductions to the succeeding chapters are aimed at helping students learn how to write effective persuasive essays. In the opening chapter, we suggest that the need to persuade is central if we are to write well, and we outline a practical step-by-step procedure students can use to gain command of the writing process. In the introductions to the chapters that follow, we discuss and illustrate the characteristics of the different rhetorical modes. Here too, we emphasize the persuasive aspect of writing, showing how it manifests itself in each of the different modes.

The eight middle chapters of *Persuasive Writing* are arranged in a logical progression, beginning with description and narration, continuing through the expository modes (definition, classification, comparison and contrast, process analysis, and cause and effect), and culminating in argumentation. The chapters are all self-contained so that instructors can use them in any order or omit some

of them entirely if they wish. Within each chapter, the selections are arranged in order of increasing rhetorical complexity; readers interested in studying the modes in their “pure” forms should therefore begin each chapter with the initial selection.

The apparatus accompanying each selection is of three sorts: a biographical headnote, a set of questions for discussion, and a set of suggested activities. The questions for discussion focus on style and content and on the interaction between the two; the suggested activities combine essay topics and ideas for class discussion with small, informal research projects. In the final chapter (“Readings for Further Analysis”), we have omitted all apparatus except the biographical headnotes in order that students may have the opportunity to apply their analytic skills without assistance. Also, we have frequently included two selections by the same author, in the hope that comparing these pairs of essays will allow students to trace stylistic continuities and will help them to see how a writer’s subject matter influences his or her choice of rhetorical mode.

In selecting the readings, we have been guided by the definition of persuasion discussed earlier. In addition, we have been guided by two other main criteria: richness of style and content, and appropriateness to the rhetorical mode being illustrated. We have tried to strike a balance between writers like Orwell, Woolf, and Swift, whose writings have long withstood the test of classroom use, and exciting contemporary writers like McPhee, Hoagland, Kingston, and Abbey. Most of the readings are of average length, though a few are quite brief and one or two are somewhat longer than the current fashion in composition texts would seem to dictate. However, even the longest selection—James Baldwin’s “Notes of a Native Son”—can easily be read in a single sitting. Almost all the selections are either complete, independent essays or whole chapters from books. In only one instance (Calvin Trillin’s “Low and Slow, Mean and Clean”) have we made any substantial internal elisions.

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the writing process

1

Writers all write differently. The French novelist Marcel Proust was so easily distracted by noise that he had to write in a cork-lined room. Samuel Johnson, the English poet and essayist, could write effectively only when he was so close to a deadline that the printer was practically standing at his door. Another French writer, the poet Guillaume Apollinaire, claimed to be inspired to write by the smell of rotten cucumbers. So how can teachers of English tell anyone how to write? Well, the truth is that we can't, at least not at a very fine level of detail. We can't tell you whether you need to outline or not, whether you'll write best in bits and pieces or in one steady flow, whether you should revise as you go along or after you're done. Only you can answer these questions for yourself.

When can we do, then? Basically, two things: we can give you some practical advice that will be useful regardless of the particular way you write, and we can provide you with examples of good writing to read and imitate. Doing these two things is the purpose of this book. The examples of good writing—quite interesting ones, we think—make up the bulk of the following eight chapters. The advice comes in two places: in the introductions to the chapters of readings, and in this opening chapter. In the chapter introductions, we will give you information about the different *rhetorical modes*. In this opening chapter, we will offer suggestions about the *process* of writing. Central to the writing process is the idea of purpose. So let's begin there.

Purpose

We write for many reasons. We write to explain things and to express ourselves, and many of us write as well to experience the sheer delight that comes from making something beautiful out of words. Underlying all these reasons for writing, though, is a basic desire to persuade. Whenever we write, we're trying to convince someone to look with favor on what we have to say. Even if our readers are only imagined—like the hypothetical readers of a private diary—they are nevertheless present in our mind, and we write to gain their approval. To use Robert Grave's memorable image, every time we put pen to paper, someone peers over our shoulder.

In a very real sense, then, learning how to write well is the same as learning how to persuade. This doesn't mean that it's the same as learning how to lie, or to soft-soap a teacher, or to sling bull. No reader was ever persuaded for very long into believing something that a writer didn't believe himself. But on the other hand, blunt, unadorned expressions of opinion aren't very persuasive either. When we cheer or boo, we express our true feelings, but we don't persuade the people who are rooting for the other team to agree with us. Persuasion means moderating between our feelings and ideas and the needs of our audience. It means presenting our beliefs in a manner that will convince a fair-minded reader that they are reasonable ones to hold. Persuasion, in short, means dressing to advantage what we truly feel and think.

How does one learn to write persuasively? For most people, doing so takes a lot of practice and some tough, fair criticism. A place where you're likely to receive both of these is the course in which you're using this book. But whenever you're writing, whether for a course or not, you can help yourself improve by keeping the idea of persuasion in the forefront of your mind. In the pages that follow we will suggest some practical ways of doing this at each stage of the writing process.

Topic and thesis

When the Greeks first looked at composing as a process, they divided it into three stages: invention, arrangement, and delivery. Today, scholars prefer to call the first stage "prewriting," but the change in name hasn't changed the nature of the stage or its importance. Prewriting is the crucial work that takes place *before* you begin to write, and it consists basically of two activities: finding your topic, and deciding what your thesis will be.

These two terms—topic and thesis—are so often confused that we ought to take a moment to distinguish between them. Simply stated, the *thesis* is the persuasive point of an essay, the one central, unifying statement around which the essay is organized. The *topic*, by contrast, is simply the specific subject of the essay. For example, say you were asked to write an essay on current energy

resources. Since this subject is obviously far too large to cover in an essay, you might decide to narrow it down to a comparison of the economic advantages of three alternatives to fossil fuels. This is your topic. Why isn't it your thesis? Because it doesn't express a point of view. To transform it into a thesis, you would need to *interpret* and *evaluate* the three alternatives. If you did so, you might come up with a thesis like this one: "Although nuclear and solar power can both help to lessen our dependence on fossil fuels, neither is as economical as wind power."

The thesis, then, is a step further along in the writing process than the topic. It is an interpretation and evaluation of the topic. As such, it is crucially important to both the reader and the writer. From the reader's point of view, the value of a controlling thesis lies in its ability to foreshadow the essay's development and limit its scope. For example, the thesis that we formulated in the last paragraph would tell attentive readers that the tone of our essay was going to be fairly serious and that the argument would probably be developed through comparison and contrast. At the same time, the readers would learn that they could set aside other aspects of the subject as a whole—geothermal energy, say, or hydroelectric power—since these weren't going to be considered in the essay.

For a writer, having a clear thesis serves much the same function as it does for a reader. A good working thesis helps you decide exactly what information needs to be included in your essay and allows you to ignore information pertinent to the subject at large but irrelevant to your particular topic. It helps you to organize your material by suggesting which mode of development you should use, and it reminds you of the tone you'll need to maintain in the body of your essay. Given all these advantages, then, it should be clear that formulating a clear working thesis before you begin to write is a crucial step in gaining command of the writing process. Now let's look at how to do this.

Generating a thesis

After reading a well-written essay that has a clearly stated thesis, beginning writers often despair of ever producing anything similar. For something to read so effortlessly, the thesis must surely have come to the writer in a blinding moment of insight. But it probably didn't. Theses rarely appear full-blown in writers' minds, but instead grow and develop as they explore their topics. The exact form that this exploration takes varies from person to person and situation to situation. But we can recommend four steps to follow while you're learning your own particular way of getting from topic to thesis:

1. List a lot of initial observations about the subject.
2. Narrow the subject to a topic that interests you.

3. State your own attitude toward the topic in a single sentence (your tentative thesis).
4. Expand your tentative thesis to include possible objections or opposing points of view.

In order to illustrate the use of these steps, let's suppose you've been asked to write an essay on the subject of propaganda for your composition class. You've been discussing the language of political propaganda in class, but your instructor has asked you to consider other forms of propaganda, choose one form, and explore its impact on contemporary American society. The mode by which you're to develop your essay has been left to your own judgment, and you're not expected to do any library research.

So what should you do first? Well, why not start with what you know? Even though the assignment asks you to explore forms of propaganda other than political ones, those are the ones you've been discussing, so you may as well start with them. Write down the word "politics," and then try listing related ideas: the aims of political propaganda, the means of its dissemination, its effect on American society. Nothing of any use? Then maybe you should turn to the dictionary to see if it mentions other forms of propaganda. It tells you that propaganda is the systematic dissemination of doctrines of belief. No help there either. But you also happen to notice that when the word "propaganda" is spelled with a capital "P," it refers to the agency of the Roman Catholic Church responsible for preaching Christian doctrine in non-Christian countries. So you write down the word "religion." You look at it a while. You write it down again. You look at it. You doodle. You get up and go to the bathroom. You come back and sit down, you look at the word again, and you decide that there's no hope of your writing a paper on religious propaganda, and perhaps no hope of your writing anything. Ever again.

The process we're describing here is agonizingly familiar to all writers. When you experience it, the important thing is to wait out the uncertainty rather than settle on a topic you can't or don't want to handle simply in order to be doing something. For our present purposes, though, let's foreshorten the agony by assuming that you went back to the word "politics," noticed that one of the main ways political propaganda is disseminated is through television commercials, and realized that advertising itself can be thought of as a form of propaganda. Moreover, it's something you're interested in and know a good deal about.

So now you've reached the second stage in the process of developing a thesis: you've reduced your large subject to a potential topic, "advertising as a form of propaganda." But you're not home free, because merely identifying advertising as a form of propaganda doesn't suggest your own attitude. It doesn't *interpret* and *evaluate*, the key functions of a thesis statement. To formulate such a statement, you need yet more material. So it's back once more to the first step, as you begin listing kinds of advertising you consider to be

propagandistic: election ads, army recruitment ads, public service ads, ads promoting the “American way of life.” Maybe you jot down notes on particular ads as well. And maybe upon reflection you decide that ads for products also have an underlying propagandistic purpose, in that they’re trying to encourage us to be active consumers.

At this point in the process of generating a thesis, your own attitude toward your topic can begin to emerge. If you happen to enjoy a number of commercials and think that our economic well-being depends on a certain amount of forced consumption, you might want to write an essay in praise of advertising. But let’s assume that you’re disconcerted by the thought that commercial advertising works in devious ways to encourage us to buy things we don’t really want. With this thought in mind, you formulate the following tentative thesis: “Product advertising is a subtle and dangerous form of propaganda.”

Now you need to step back and assess the usefulness of your thesis as a controlling idea for an essay. In particular you need to ask yourself whether your thesis is sufficiently complex to hold the interest of your audience. One way of doing this is to consider objections to your thesis, even to adopt an opposing point of view for a moment. If you have difficulty in doing this—if there don’t seem to be any feasible objections—then your thesis is probably too simple. Why? Because in order for your essay to persuade someone, there has to be someone for it to persuade. If everyone agrees with your thesis, as you can assume they must if there aren’t any feasible objections to it, then you’re preaching to the already converted.

In the case of our example, though, we saw a counterperspective in our judgment that there was something entertaining and perhaps even economically beneficial about advertising. So a point of view opposed to the tentative thesis does exist. Now that you’ve discovered this viewpoint, what are you to do with it? Most of all, *don’t ignore it*. One of the worst mistakes beginning writers make is trying to bludgeon their readers into agreement by only presenting evidence in favor of their own position. Instead of ignoring the contradictory point of view, you should *incorporate it into your own thesis*. By doing this, you convince your readers that you hold a reasonable, moderate point of view toward your topic, and you create a thesis of sufficient complexity to entice them to read further.

So let’s take our own advice and incorporate the opposing point of view into the tentative thesis we’ve been working with. Here’s what we get: “Although product advertising can be entertaining and beneficial to our economy, basically it’s a subtle and dangerous form of propaganda.” Finally, then, we have a working thesis. It’s complex, interesting, and shows promise of leading to a good essay. But note that we’re still in the prewriting stage of the writing process. Still to come are what the Greeks called “arrangement” and “delivery,” and what we’ll call—in a three-part division—*organizing, writing, and revising*. So it may seem that we’ve taken a long time to come a short way. Really, though, much of the hard work is done. By taking the time to develop a clear working thesis, we’ve put ourselves in a position to perform the remaining steps of the writing process in a purposeful and efficient way. Trying to save time in

the prewriting stage is penny-wise and pound-foolish. Spend some time now, and you'll save a lot more of it later.

Organizing the essay

But you're still not quite ready to write. What you have at present is a working thesis (still subject to revision), a few bits and pieces of information, and some ideas. Before actually beginning to write, you need to increase your store of information and ideas and arrange it coherently in relation to your thesis. There are three specific suggestions we can make to help you with this phase of the process:

1. Analyze the key terms in your thesis.
2. Use the key terms to help you develop additional arguments and examples.
3. Use the thesis as a guide to the organization of the essay.

Following the first of these suggestions should help you come to an intimate awareness of the implications of your thesis. Consider, for example, our working thesis about advertising and propaganda. Here the key terms are "product advertising," "entertaining," "beneficial," "economy," "subtle," "dangerous," and "propaganda." How you should approach each of these depends on what sort of term it is and how it functions in the thesis. As it happens, our key terms consist of three nouns and noun phrases ("product advertising," "economy," and "propaganda") and four adjectives ("entertaining," "beneficial," "subtle," and "dangerous"). Let's look at these two groupings and see what emerges.

Any time you see nouns and noun phrases in your thesis, you should ask if they need to be defined. The first two of ours are clear enough to be understood without definition, though you will probably want to use examples to show your readers exactly what you mean by "product advertising." In the case of "propaganda," though, a definition is needed. Recall that the dictionary said propaganda is a *systematic* attempt to disseminate a doctrine. Since advertising doesn't systematically try to convince us to consume more, you'll need to extend the definition to include indirect, unintentional forms of propaganda. Note too that you should frame your extended definition in your own words. Although it was useful to consult a dictionary when you were first thinking about your topic, it's rarely wise to quote a dictionary definition directly in your essay. Words are just too complex and have too many shades of meaning for a dictionary definition to convey exactly what you have in mind.

Now let's turn to the four adjectives. In a sense, these are the heart of your thesis, since they're what give it its evaluative dimension. The basic need here, then, is to be as clear in your own mind as you possibly can about the implications of the terms you're using. You say that ads are beneficial. Whom do they benefit and in what ways? In what way is advertising subtle? What is dangerous about it? Is it dangerous only to individuals or to society as well? Is it more dangerous to some groups than to others? Clearly, the questioning could continue for some time. But here let's say you happen to remember recent objections to ads for high-sugar cereals on children's television programs. It occurs to you that children are especially susceptible to advertising, so under "dangerous" you write "children," and you note down the example of the high-sugar cereal as well. If you have a little brother who goes out of control a month before Christmas because of TV-generated excitement, you note *him* down too.

As you analyze the key terms, then, you already find yourself developing additional examples and arguments. Continue the process, moving through the terms one by one and using them as headings under which to list what you discover. At the same time, look for interconnections that may lead you to want to modify your thesis. For example, say you've reached the point where you're listing the dangers of advertising. Back when we first framed the thesis, we assumed that forced stimulation of the economy was beneficial. But doesn't forced stimulation lead to inflation? And isn't inflation dangerous? On the other hand, though, could our society survive in its present form if it had a steady-state economy? You're not sure, so you don't modify your thesis. But you do decide to bear in mind that a benefit from one point of view can be a liability from another.

By using the key terms as headings, you've provided yourself with a ready-made organization for the examples and arguments you've been developing. Once you're done accumulating them, you need to turn to organizing the essay itself. What we said at the beginning of this chapter still goes: only you can decide whether to outline your essay before writing it. Some people (but probably only a few) use full formal outlines, complete with Roman numerals, Arabic numerals, and the like. Others make do with a tentative, sketchy outline of the major divisions of the argument. It's your choice.

Whether you use an extensive outline or not, it's helpful to look at the structure of your thesis to see if it implies a structure for the essay as a whole. If we do this with our hypothetical thesis, we notice a sharp contrast between the subordinate "Although . . ." clause and the main clause. This suggests that a contrastive structure might be appropriate for the essay as a whole; it also implies a tone you could use. Perhaps you might start with the positive aspects of advertising, and a light, half-humorous tone. Then you could become more solemn in tone when you shift from the benefits to the dangers. Perhaps, you think, those innocent children watching TV could be the bridge between the two. You imagine the scene, and as you do, you begin to jot down words, phrases, even a sentence or two.