

writing to persuade

WHAT IS IT?

Persuasion is an attempt to alter the way a person thinks to your own way of thinking. Persuasion and argument are very similar – they are styles of writing or speaking that seek to influence. Persuasion tends to be more single-minded in its goal whereas argument works by recognising but countering other equally reasonable and valid points of view. Compared with argument, persuasion is more one-sided, personal and emotional. It is a well-argued plea for change that often succeeds by an appeal to emotion that is backed by reason; argument, at its clearest and best, is far less emotional and relies more obviously on appeals to logic and reason.

WHAT DO YOU HAVE TO DO?

The writing to persuade question is in the part of your exam that also asks you to analyse and discuss non-fiction and media texts. In the WJEC exam, it is in Paper 2; in AQA it is in Paper 1 of the English GCSE exam. You will be asked to write in a particular form and genre such as a letter, speech, newspaper or magazine article and you will often be asked to attempt to direct your persuasion at a specific kind of reader or listener:

- your writing will need to show an effective and persuasive structure through a clear use of single point topic paragraphs;
- you will need to adhere to the typical requirements of the form and genre in which you are writing;
- you will need to show that you have a clear sense of your audience and a knowledge of persuasive or rhetorical techniques.
- You will need to write 1½ - 2 sides of A4.

HOW CAN YOU DO WELL?

1. Show the examiner you have thought about the needs of your intended AUDIENCE

- ▶ Think how difficult it is to persuade a stranger! So... always 'get to know' your reader by working out what brought them to think the way they do. Showing a close awareness of your audience is a key aspect of the mark scheme for this particular question in the exam. Follow these tips...

Be lively and interesting... especially as you open and close your writing aim for maximum interest!

Be personal... Persuasion works best when you know your audience well so consider your reader, think about what their current views are and what has brought them to think that way.

Be reasonable... To change a person's mind, you need to recognise that they feel they hold a reasonable view already. You must use reason in return and show how much more reasonable your own position is.

Be diplomatic... Shouting is never a good idea; and harsh persuasive methods are rather like shouting. People rarely change their minds easily so, whilst you obviously cannot agree with what they currently believe or do, you need to work out the best way to show them that your way is even better.

Be trustworthy... Would you listen to someone you couldn't trust? No. So find ways of convincing your readers that you are a sound individual with their feet firmly on the ground. Sound sincere and authentic. Let your audience know that you are worth listening to, that you know what you are talking about and that you have a good reason for holding the beliefs that you do.

Be convincing... The most important persuasive technique is to have a confident tone: sound like you are sincere and believable. Try things like rhetorical questions and emotive language. For more on these see below.

Be... yourself! In an exam, what you write will be purely made up: you are being tested on your writing skills, not on your ability to speak the truth and nothing but the truth. Your supporting evidence will need to be fictitious, but make sure it is realistic and sensible; and, unless the exam question specifies differently, write as the sixteen-year-old school student that you are, not as some imaginary adult. Remember that sincerity and conviction are very convincing traits in a person; pretending you are someone else makes it very difficult to sound sincere.

2. Show the examiner throughout that you know WHY you are writing - your PURPOSE

- ▶ Read your question with care until you are absolutely absorbed into its “world”: become the person that really believes in what it says and then, only then, you will sound authentic and authoritative.

Remain realistic: your purpose is to change minds and often a compromise is a sensible next step in this process. Minds rarely change quickly and easily: take this into account when working out your objectives - maybe suggest a meeting to discuss the issue?

3. Show the examiner you understand FORM or GENRE

Be sure you know the conventions required for various forms/genres of writing

- You need to know the conventions that apply to a variety of forms: formal and informal letters, articles, essays, etc.
 - for example, a speech needs a conversational tone with no speech marks; a letter needs to be set out correctly and neatly; an article needs a headline and short purposeful paragraphs, and so on.
- Whichever form you use, you must capture and hold on to your reader’s attention - but be subtle and consider exactly what would appeal to that kind of reader with that kind of mind-set.
- The examiner wants to see a ‘consciously shaped’ piece of writing from you – writing that you have thought about, set out and structured effectively for your form/genre, audience and purpose.
 - Planning carefully before you put pen to paper is more likely to give what you write a progressively effective structure – one that is interesting and clear.
 - Build each paragraph around a single key topic that you introduce with an opening topic sentence; aim to link each paragraph smoothly to the next with a final and subtle hook sentence.

4. Use persuasive METHODS and STRUCTURE

Writing that is coherent and fluent and which flows naturally, smoothly and has a clear sense of unity (i.e. a singleness of purpose); writing that seeks to help its reader trust and believe in the writer’s cause, that shows a sensitive understanding of the reader’s current beliefs, that seeks to forge common ground, that is consciously shaped and crafted... all show that you are using a sophisticated and subtle level of persuasive skill. It is such points as these that will allow the examiner to give you the high grade you want.

Switch roles – become your reader!
Which points and style would change your mind?

HOW CAN YOU BE EVEN
MORE
SUCCESSFUL

1. PLAN WELL

- Planning: Put simply, you will lose marks if you fail to plan before you write; and a briefly sketched written plan is best. Each year examiner’s report that students lose many marks because of poor planning. The exam’s marking schedule states that your work needs to be ‘consciously shaped’ and this means your writing needs an effective structure. A plan is essential for this.
- Decide on a suitable style one that will appeal to, interest and convince your reader. But keep it LIVELY!
- Brainstorm to create a list of points in favour of your idea. Choose four or five of the most convincing. Check that each point is truly separate and not a part of a larger, more general point; if it is, use the larger point.
- Make sure each point is truly convincing - switch roles: would it persuade you? If not, drop it.
- Organise your points into a progressively persuasive order.
- What does the opposition believe? Take care not to make them feel foolish for believing it; but do tactfully counteract their most important beliefs by showing, with evidence (realistic bit made up!) that your way of thinking is better.
- Add interest – catch your reader’s attention and hold on to it. Always avoid stating the boringly obvious.
- Add authenticity – if you seem truly to believe in what you say you do, you’ll be more authoritative and persuasive. Make your writing sound sincere, certain and positive.
- Add authority - add solid evidence to support your views.

2. WRITE EFFECTIVELY

You must write at the very least 1½ sides of normal sized handwriting in your answer, and 2 full sides are ideal:

- ▶ Opening paragraph →
- ▶ Maybe 4-5 substantial body paragraphs →
- ▶ Concluding paragraph.

IN YOUR OPENING PARAGRAPH

- Catch your reader's attention straight away - involve and interest them at the outset.
- State why you are writing – but make it sound friendly and interesting!
- Involve your reader – make what you say seem entirely sound relevant to them.
- Show that you have the authority to write on this topic and that you are reasonable and trustworthy.
- Forge common ground between you and your reader – think up an outcome both of you would want.
- Use a rhetorical question – get them thinking your way!
- Choose your words with precision and care – keep the reader in mind at all times!

IN YOUR 4/5 BODY (CENTRAL) PARAGRAPHS

- Introduce each paragraph with a clear and interesting topic sentence that makes a good point.
- Think of using one further rhetorical question – but make it subtle.
- Discuss just one main point only per paragraph.
- In one paragraph, use an anecdote – a short little story from life that emotionally demonstrates your point well.
- Link your points and develop them fully – use connectives such as 'therefore...', 'and so...', 'so you see...'.
• Acknowledge the main opposing view but with care, subtlety and tact counter it to show how much more likely your view is to produce the desired outcome (i.e. the common ground you mentioned earlier).
- Be personal - use an interesting (maybe, carefully amusing or emotional) anecdote, e.g. 'People think that living on the streets is a matter of choice, but let me tell you about Alex. He was twelve when he left home...'.
• Add authority - quote an acknowledged expert in the field (made up, of course!), a survey or any similar appropriate and sensible support for your point of view.
- Use vivid description - create a powerful image that will allow your reader to see the importance of accepting your view.
- Add power to your writing by using a few 'rhetorical devices'.

'RHETORICAL DEVICES'

These are powerful and effective ways to make your writing more persuasive.
Rhetorical questions, similes, metaphors, emotive language (used with care), irony (but never sarcasm), 'lists of three', repetition, parallel structures, hyperbole (i.e. exaggeration for effect), humour (care: backfires very easily!)

- Add variety by using interesting vocabulary and sentences. Remember that shorter sentences are snappier and often clearer and that an occasional ultra-short sentence can be very powerful.

→ Be fluent and be coherent: link your ideas smoothly and effectively.

Use 'linking words' such as these: 'However...'; 'although...'; 'if so...'; 'and so...'; 'but...'; 'clearly...'; 'on the other hand...'; 'therefore...'; 'supposing that...'; 'furthermore...'; 'looked at another way...'; 'in contrast...'; 'on the contrary...'; etc.

IN YOUR CONCLUDING PARAGRAPH

Aim to finish as strongly, positively and as interestingly as you possibly can:

- Re-emphasise the common ground and why your view is worthy of consideration.
- Make sure your reader knows precisely what you would like to happen next – it could be a discussion, a compromise... you decide: changing minds isn't easy and may take more than just one go, one letter, etc.
- Only if appropriate to your audience and for your purpose, end with an emotional plea.