

Persuasive Writing

The goal of writing is communication. As writers, however, sometimes we say a whole lot of nothing. We use too many words or “empty” words that sound impressive but don’t tell the readers much. We also tend to overuse words. For example, if I am telling you about a product or describing a person and I use the word “special,” what does that really mean to you as a person who may not be familiar with that product or that person? The word “special” has been used so much that it really doesn’t always mean a lot to the reader (unless you’re telling a friend or relative that they are special, then that can mean a lot!). You have to tell us what is extraordinary about your product, person or belief rather than say they are special or extraordinary.

Example: Mike is an extraordinary cyclist! Buy his book today to read about his wonderful adventures. (This is weak and empty writing.) Mike amazed the cycling community when he completed the 2,007-mile bike route in three months. Buy his book to read about his trek along the Underground Railroad Bicycle Route. (This is specific and communicates details.)

Always think of your objective to decide if you are communicating effectively. Why are you writing this? Do you want to sell something? Are you explaining a belief or a thought that you want people to agree with? Do you want people to take a class or answer a survey? Are you writing something to entertain people or teach people? Do your words match your objective?

This challenge requires you to consider two writing styles to communicate to your audience: persuasive and descriptive. Persuasive writing encourages the reader to do something (support an organization, donate money, buy a product, vote for a candidate, etc.). The language persuades someone to take action. Descriptive writing, however, uses words to paint a picture or relay a thought or feeling to someone. In descriptive writing, you may choose to use more adjectives or more emotions to tell your story.

Examples of persuasive writing:

Vote for John Smith!

Buy today while prices are reduced!

Donate online today or send your check to_____.

Examples of descriptive writing:

“...the aged, ivory piano keys and the brass harp from underneath the worn structure cried out the gentle notes that her every finger touched within the seconds, her small foot pressing lightly on the dampening peddle, making the notes she played even more desperate ...” (from a recent student short story).

“...a sweet and perky yet diva-like personality...” (from one a student assignment).

Option 1 for all students:

As a writer, you can't just tell me that something or someone is special or extraordinary or unique. You have to choose descriptive words and active verbs to convey the same meaning. If you are in marketing (writing ads and website material), you have a limited amount of space to do this. Look at ads this week to see how effective ones use five to 50 words to capture your attention and sell an idea or a product.

Find one ad (in a paper or magazine or on a website) that caught your attention and seems to use effective communication to get an idea across. The more you read “good” writing, the more you strengthen your own skills.

Now to the next assignment:

This assignment has two parts. First, think of your favorite homemade meal. This can be a dish you make or one that another family member cooks for you. (Take a few minutes to jot down notes on what you like best about this particular dish or meal.)

Part one: Now you have to market this meal or dish. In 60 words or less, tell me about your product and try to convince me to buy this dish as if you had it for sale in my local market or restaurant. This assignment will be persuasive writing.

Part two: Now you have to write about this dish as if you are including it as part of a short story or novel. In 100 words or less, describe this meal as if a character in your book is cooking it or eating it. Make the reader picture a scene with the food in the kitchen or just coming out of the oven, or write as if the food is already on the table with a character tasting, smelling and enjoying this food. This part of the assignment will be descriptive writing. (I don't have to know anything about the character or your "book," but I want to have the food scene.)

Notice how your objective will be different for each part of the assignment. In the first part, you are trying to market or sell your product. You want someone to take action. In the second part, you are entertaining your reader and drawing your reader into a story with specific details of a meal. Your word choices will be different in each part.

How does this help a writer at all? Each assignment helps you strengthen your writing skills overall by just getting you to write. As with any skill, the more you practice, the better you become. Also, this assignment helps you identify your objectives for writing. At times in life, you will need to use persuasive writing to convince someone to hire you or consider you for a scholarship. You might be trying to influence someone to publish your book or hire your band. At other times, you are going to be writing to convey an idea or entertain a reader.

This assignment also forces you to choose strong, active, specific words to convey your idea in a limited amount of space. If you write a newspaper or magazine ad, you aren't allowed to use many words. Same thing goes for a resume or a job application—you don't get much room to tell someone about yourself.

Example of persuasive writing from a university website:

“It's never too late. Increase your earning potential. Each year hundreds of adults complete their degree program at the University of _____ leading to increased salaries, better jobs and greater satisfaction with their lives. We're here to help you succeed. Let us show you how to reapply, help you decide what courses to take and, together, we'll map out a plan for you to graduate. For additional information about the Back on Track program, please contact”

Example of persuasive writing from another university website:

“_____ University offers an intellectually challenging academic program with a commitment to continual spiritual formation while engaging the world. For more information...”

Both are very descriptive, with neither using “empty” words such as *great*, *special* or *extraordinary*. They give details that will capture the reader’s attention.

Designer’s note selling a kitchen design to a future homeowner or someone remodeling a home:

“Dark walnut cabinetry builds a modern foundation for this kitchen. Materials such as stainless steel, custom glass backsplashes and granite further the modern aesthetic while remaining elegant. Butter yellow hand-tipped leather stools add the perfect accent to a very monochromatic color palette. This kitchen is anything but cold.”

We have worked on descriptive language—text that paints a picture of a product or object. Now we are going to work on communication that relates more to underlying messages or feelings.

In business, this comes through what is known as the tagline or slogan. With taglines, an image is put into words. These words shape how people feel about a product, a company or a service.

Example: **Hallmark: When you care enough to send the very best.** These few words convey a lot to an audience. Who doesn't want to care enough to send the best? Why not make sure you buy the best? This is a special time or a sad time in life—someone needs a card—I need to make sure it is the best.

Why doesn't Hallmark say, "You're on a budget, so buy an affordable card," instead of using their slogan? That is not consistent with who Hallmark is. They aren't Dollar Tree offering cheaper cards. Their cards and gifts cost a little more. So you have to justify to someone why they should come spend a little more.

This goes hand in hand with what we talked about earlier: using a few memorable words to say a lot. A tagline or branding slogan is a phrase that sums up the feelings about a company, product or service. Sounds easy coming up with one, but it can be really hard work.

For a product, you need a phrase that is easy to remember and sets your product apart from other similar products. You have to convey feelings that help a consumer desire or need your product over another. Your words have to be credible—you can't imply you have family-friendly prices if you know your product costs more than others. People will lose trust in you.

Effective business slogans (some of these are older slogans):

Allstate: You're in good hands (implies that they may not be the cheapest, but they care about you and are going to take care of you--they are dependable)

Coca-Cola: It's the real thing.

Disney: The happiest place on earth.

FedEx: When it absolutely has to be there on time.

Ford: Built for the road ahead.

Kodak: Share moments. Share life.

Nike: Just do it.

Raid: Kills bugs dead.

Skittles: Taste the rainbow.

Dell Computer: Get more out of now.

General Mills: The company of champions.

Wheaties: The breakfast of champions.

Target: Expect more. Pay less.

Staples: That was easy.

Nestle: Good food. Good life.

Home Depot: More saving. More doing.

Dunkin' Donuts: America runs on Dunkin'.

If you are writing or producing a movie, you won't necessarily have a slogan or tagline. You will, however, want one really good memorable line to represent your film. People remember **“just when you thought it was safe to go back in the water” from Jaws 2** or **“to boldly go where no man has gone before” from Star Trek**. I'm sure you can think of a memorable line from your favorite movie that was used for advertising.

With books, authors want short quotes from readers and reviewers on the back cover. Turn over a paperback book you have at home and see if you can find examples of short quotes from people (other than the author) used to sum up the feeling and purpose of the book. Teen and adult books have this more than children's books. Here are a few examples I found here at home:

“...abounds with tales of motherly wit and wisdom...”

“... she has not only packed a lot of useful information in this book, but she's also an entertaining writer...”

“...spirited and humorous...”

“...real kids in real places...”

“...a thrilling story of disaster and incredible heroism...”

“...her fans won't be disappointed...”

Books also have longer plot summaries and reviews on the cover or inside pages, but they know that readers often just take a quick glance in a store before deciding to read more, buy a book or walk on.

Do at least two of the following options. If you have time, feel free to try all of them:

Assignment 1:

Take two of the company taglines above and tell me in 200 words or less why you think these are effective and what they would mean to you as a customer. I gave you a short hint of how to do this with the Allstate slogan. Why did the writer choose the words they did? How do the words make you feel about the product or company?

Assignment 2:

Think of the meal you wrote about in an earlier assignment. Give me three possible slogans you could use for the meal if you packaged it to sell (or you could create taglines for a restaurant that would sell your type of meal).

Assignment 3:

Let's sell homeschooling! You can think of the umbrella school you are registered under or homeschooling in general. Let's think of slogans that we can put on an ad in a magazine that covers traditional schools and education in general. (Go to a few school websites if you want to see their slogans. My college alma mater uses: Dreamers. Thinkers. Doers.) Write at least two taglines that would go with a picture of students who homeschool or pictures of homeschool books (or any other picture that represented homeschooling).

Assignment 4:

Create an original quote that could be put on the back of your favorite book you are currently reading (or have just finished). Do this for three of your favorite books. Look at the examples above to see that these have to be short, but still say a lot. These entice the reader to find out more.

What's the point of this assignment? To help students see how specific word choices bring about specific feelings with people. Every word matters when you write. If I say something is "cheap," some people will immediately put it down because it implies to some people that it is lower quality or not up to their standards. Restaurants are trying to get consumers to stop thinking of "fast" as unhealthy. In the past, if you told me you were going to pick up fast food on the way home, I wouldn't picture anything healthy. So if your audience reads health-food ads, you would never want to imply that your product was "fast food." Words make people feel a certain way. The trick is to put together the right combination of words to make your audience understand what you are trying to tell them.