

Persuasive letters: Straight from the heart

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Background:

I am a Year 4 teacher in Barking and Dagenham. I recently took part in the research project *What is it 'Writing For Pleasure' teachers do that makes the difference?* (Young 2019)

Principle(s) in focus:

[Pursue purposeful and authentic writing projects](#)

Aims:

We decided to pursue this project because we wanted to try out a different genre but also because we wanted to try writing with an authentic audience in mind and with a purpose which was both meaningful and socially useful. I wanted to see if the children would be more committed to seeing their writing 'do well' if they had more [agency](#) (I have a say!) over their ideas.

I knew that giving children choice over writing topics can help them enjoy writing because it stimulates their very natural desire to express themselves and their identities (Graves 1983). Further reading also told me that children dislike assigned writing tasks as they often require minimal thought, are boring and lack meaning (Miller & Meece 1999). Therefore, I expected this project to attend to [motivation](#) (I know why I am writing.) because the children would be writing from the heart and the head.

Description:

How To Write A Persuasive Letter, Magazine Article or Essay

Why write persuasively? To get someone to see your point of view about an issue, and persuade them to take some action about something you want to happen.

There are different ways of writing a persuasive text. It could be a letter to someone who could get something done for you, or an article in a newspaper or magazine which lots of people will read. You can also write an essay for teachers and peers to read. This can be helpful if you're taking part in a debate. You will need to understand that you may not get what you want as a result of your letter, but it is always worth writing.

(Field) What your text is going to be about

- Choose to write about something you feel very strongly about or want very much.
- Who are you trying to influence? A grown-up, such as your teacher, Head Teacher or someone outside school who might think about taking some action? Write them a letter.
- Make sure you point out clearly the benefits to other people if this action is taken. It should not be just about you.

(Tenor) Your role as the writer

- If you are writing a letter or an article, first tell your reader what your issue is. This is your 'hook'.
- Your task is then to present good reasons why the reader should see your point of view. Appeal to the reader's emotions.
- In all kinds of persuasive texts you can address your reader directly as 'you'. This makes the reader feel included and involved.
- Name other people, experts, charities or celebrities who will support your idea.
- At the end of a letter, thank your reader for their kind attention.

(Mode) What it looks like

If you are writing a letter, you will need to put your address and the date in the top right hand corner. Once you have stated the issue, use several paragraphs to explain the reasons which support your point of view.

Last half-term, we were writing persuasive letters. What is their social function? Well - to get someone to see your point of view about an issue, and persuade them to take some action about something you want to happen. So far, so good. But, what were we going to write about?

We started by using an idea generation technique called *Changes we'd like to see in the world* (Young & Ferguson 2020). Using this, we managed to identify a few themes about pollution, smoking, wanting a pet - amongst others.

However, I was conscious of the need for us to dig deeper and develop these themes. We scoured them for more personal, specific passions. I have found that children are seldom used to being taught how to mine their own lives for ideas for writing, so this part of the writing process needed to be taught explicitly. Most children were able to make a connection with one of the ideas as our discussion progressed. Once I had validated a few of their ideas, the rest of the class found it much easier to generate an idea of their own.

The sheer variety was fascinating and taught me a great deal about the children's lives and things that they found important. We had a letter from one girl to persuade her father, who was spending time at HMP Brixton, to stop being naughty. Another was to a little sister asking her to stop disturbing her older sister's sleep. And from one boy a letter to West Ham FC asking the first team to come and watch him train.

To make the purpose a central part of the project, I explained that all of these letters would be going to their intended recipients and all would be travelling by post. I would provide the envelopes and the stamps and the children would provide their published letters. I set them the challenge of going away and finding out the correct addresses for their letters.

'I was writing to the government and that was the thing I was most excited about because I've never done that before.' S, Year 4

'My letter worked because now my little sister doesn't climb into bed with me anymore!' M, Year 4



Because of this writing project, I wanted to encourage children to write further letters in their [personal journals](#). I happened to notice a stray post-box in the staff room which only comes out at Christmas and was about to be packed away. Being a hunter-gatherer, I borrowed it and positioned it in my classroom as a supportive visual reminder. Its use has now been established as an important routine in our class. Every Friday we choose a 'postal worker' to fill the sack with the week's letters and get them delivered to their intended recipients. Of course, we play the Postman Pat theme tune while the postie is filling their sack and the children sing and dance along.

Impact:

This project has led to more children choosing to write letters during their [personal project time](#). We have had a letter to Barking and Dagenham Council complaining about the parking situation after a residents' permit zone was introduced outside our school, and several letters to a local shed company asking them to donate a shed to be converted into a book hut.



I interviewed a few 'touchstone' children, who I use to monitor how affecting and effective our writing projects are and about the general idea of having more agency over topics:

- *'If you (Mr Hayden) chose the same idea for all of us, we wouldn't be able to send the letters because all 34 would go to the same person.'* M, Year 4
- *'You (Mr Hayden) might choose something that I don't like, for example, pigeons... I'm scared of pigeons.'* S, Year 4
- *'If you choose something boring we've written before, we won't be interested.'* M, Year 4

It is clear from these children's comments that giving them agency over writing topics does lead to an increased motivation to write. They are also clearly aware of the logic of real writing and can see it having an impact in the real world.

Reflection:

I want to make sure I continue to use purposeful and authentic ideas for our writing projects. The responses we received had a noticeable impact on the children's understanding that writing for a real audience and from the heart, can make a contribution to the world around us, no matter how small. I also realised the subtle but important role teachers have in giving children agency whilst also ensuring they understand their right not to choose topics they are not comfortable in sharing.

The next principle I would like to explore more is the way in which children use their personal project books. I would also like to examine what impact [goal setting](#) has on writing quality.

References:

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- Graves, D., (1983) Break the welfare cycle: let writers choose their topics *FForum: essays on theory and practice in the teaching of writing* Montclair, NJ: Boynton Cook
- Young, R., (2019) *What is it 'Writing For Pleasure' teachers do that makes the difference?* The University Of Sussex: The Goldsmiths' Company [Available Online: www.writing4pleasure.com]
- Young, R., Ferguson, F., (2020) *Genre-Booklets* [Available Online: <https://literacyforpleasure.wordpress.com/genre-booklets/>]

