Persuasion

The concept of persuasion goes clear back to an old Greek guy by the name of Aristotle, an ancient Greek rhetorician. Rhetoric is a fancy word for persuasion. We still study persuasion today in the same manner that Aristotle did in ancient Greece. In fact, you can go to the University of Iowa and major in rhetoric today. A rhetoric major at the University of Iowa would basically be obtaining a writing major with a particular bent or focus. At most universities, the term rhetoric has been replaced by communication because most traditional rhetoric departments have broadened from writing to all forms of communication. The U of I is pretty traditional and known internationally for its writing program so they are sticking with the “rhetoric” title. Today, we know that the persuasion happens all around us: anyplace there is an advertisement, political campaigns, newspapers, internet, and in every interaction we have with everyone in our lives!

Persuasion Definition

Persuasion is an ongoing process in which verbal and nonverbal messages shape, reinforce, and change people’s responses.

Let’s break the definition down into pieces... “on-going process” means that persuasion is ever changing – it evolves and changes. We learn different persuasive techniques as we age. For those of us with children, we know that as our kids grow and change, their persuasive abilities become more proficient! In fact, they become experts at getting what they want by using a variety of techniques they develop as they age – techniques they didn’t have at birth. Therefore, persuasion is a process that is “on going.”

“Verbal and nonverbal messages” means that a persuasive message doesn’t necessarily have to be delivered verbally – a nonverbal message can be just as powerful. For instance, my mother used to shoot me “the look” and I’d know exactly how much in trouble I’d be in. When you think of “shape” think of the concept of a lump of clay without any true form. If you are going to shape someone’s response, it means they don’t have a thought on the issue to begin with so you can shape their response to your side... just like a parent does with a young child when they learn right from wrong. “Reinforce” means that the person is already on a path and you want them to stay on the path they are on. This is the basis of the DARE campaign that is popular in junior high school. The objective of the DARE campaign is to get to kids before they have had the chance to experiment with drugs or alcohol and DARE them to stay on the same path – the path of not even trying it. “Change” is the hardest of the three persuasive elements to achieve because it means that the other person is already on a particular path or thinks a certain way and you want them to go down the opposite path or thought process.

Motivational Appeals

If we are going to persuade someone, we have to understand how to motivate people to do what we want. This means that we need to understand how to move someone to act or change his or her mind. As humans we are motivated in three ways:
1. **What our bodies tell us to do**: We are naturally motivated by biological or physical needs. We need air, food, and water for survival, and the need for these things makes our body naturally a persuasive creature. If we are denied one or more of these, our body will do some things that ordinarily wouldn’t make a whole lot of sense to us. Think about someone who is drowning in water… if you get near them to try and save them, what are they going to do to you? Push you under, right? They don’t mean to do this as they don’t want to harm the person rescuing them but they can’t help pushing the rescuer under the water to get their own head out of the water so they can breathe. We will eat food that is moldy or from a garbage can if we are hungry enough and we’ll drink unsafe water if we are thirsty enough even though we know it’s not good for us.

2. **What our minds tell us to do**: We are motivated by our psychological needs or our feelings, emotions, and perceptions. If you question this, just think of how many times people do something dumb in the name of love or hatred! Go to any bar on a Friday night and you’ll see a lot of scenarios involving people being motivated by their feelings, emotions and perceptions.

3. **What other people tell us to do**: We are motivated by the social needs in our lives. Social needs involve the roles that people play in our lives and the roles we play in our lives. Our parents, children, and spouses can be pretty persuasive because of how close we are to them and they are more likely to get a response from us than a complete stranger would. Social needs also involve the norms or rules that we live under in society. Some rules are put on us by people with particular persuasive roles like a policeman giving you a speeding ticket motivates you to slow down for a while.

**Aristotle’s Three Tenets**

Aristotle used to watch the Greek Senate. He loved to watch the Senators debate the issues before the government and he closely observed the Senators who were successful at achieving their goals. He said that to be successful at persuading an audience, you need three things:

1. **Logos**: Logos is the Greek term for logic. In a persuasive speech this would be the evidence you use to build your case. It is the quotes, statistics, case studies, reports, experiences, etc. that you use and cite to build your case. Logic is also the reasoning you use to frame your case – the order you put the evidence in or your outline. Two terms that go hand in hand with logic are **deductive and inductive reasoning**. Deductive reasoning is when you start with a general principle and move to a specific case. An example would be that gas prices are too high in the United States and in Iowa we have the opportunity to develop ethanol gasoline factories to battle the higher gas prices. Inductive reasoning is when you start with a specific case and broaden out into a general principle. An example would be the story of an overweight boy from Iowa who died of obesity which broadens out into a general principle that children in the United States are suffering from obesity in record numbers.

2. **Pathos**: Pathos is the Greek term for emotion. In a persuasive speech this would be the way you arouse an audience’s feelings either positively or negatively in relation to a topic. This might be done through the use of a powerful story or the choices of certain words. For instance, the words death, dark, dreary, creepy, and coffin bring about certain thoughts or images to your mind and they would naturally sway an audience if you used them in a speech.
IMPORTANT RULE: Logos and pathos should balance in your speech as if they are two sides of a scale. However, this does not mean that logos and pathos are equal in a one to one sense because pathos will always weigh more than logos. Emotion is always heavier than a single fact because emotion stays with the memory longer. One good emotional story will stick with an audience much longer than a whole lot of statistics.

3. Ethos: Ethos is the Greek word for ethics. In a persuasive speech this would be the credibility of the speaker. There is a popular phrase: Beauty is in the eye of the beholder. This means that whoever is viewing the art is the judge and jury on whether or not the artwork is beautiful. In persuasion, credibility is in the eye of the audience meaning that the audience is the judge and jury on whether or not the speaker is deemed “credible.” There are four aspects of credibility that you can use to boost your credibility as the speech maker:

   A. Competence: This is the audience’s view of how intelligent you sound and how knowledgeable you sound about the subject matter. To make yourself sound more competent, be sure to cite your sources and quote from experts.

   B. Character/Trustworthiness: This is how the audience regards the speaker’s sincerity and how much the audience trusts you. To make yourself sound more trustworthy, don’t lie, cheat or trick an audience. Also, don’t be “above” your audience (i.e., don’t assume they are dumb!). Think about how you feel when you think you are being cheated... like at a used car lot!

   C. Dynamism: This is how the audience regards the speaker’s energy, enthusiasm, and assertiveness. To make yourself sound more dynamic, speak with passion and energy. This does not mean you have to be as wild as those guys on infomercials in the middle of the night but you should have a passion for your subject. Quintilian, another philosopher, said “Effective speech is a good person speaking well.”

   D. Co-Orientation: This is the degree of similarity that an audience perceives they have with the speaker. To make yourself more similar to the audience, find ways to compare your situation with that of the audience (“I used to be a college student too so I understand how hard it is to balance work and school.”). Also, find ways to bond with the audience so that you can show you are one of them (“My fellow Americans” or “As Iowans, we need to be concerned with agriculture.”).

Organizing a Persuasive Speech

1. Should my best argument come first, last or in the middle of my speech? Put your best argument first if the audience is just shaping their idea on the topic or if they are uninvolved with the issue. Put the best argument last when the audience is involved with the issue and familiar with the topic. Generally, your best argument shouldn’t be in the middle because this is where attention wanes the most.
2. **Should I present one side of the issue, or both, or many sides?** Present only one side if the audience is receptive to the topic or experienced with it. Present two or more if the audience is in disagreement with your or hostile toward the issue.

3. **Should I refute counter arguments?** Yes, acknowledge your opposition or the opposite side of your position but then focus the weight of your point on your own thoughts.

4. **Should I use familiar or novel arguments?** Use familiar ones but be sure to heavily focus on the newest arguments or information to sway the audience – the stuff the audience may not have heard before.

**Four Ethical Considerations for Persuasive Speaking**

1. Cite your sources accurately.
2. Respect your sources of information – don’t misquote.
3. Respect your audience – use the Golden Rule (do unto others as you would have others do unto you)
4. Respect your opponent – no name calling or belittling allowed!

**Outlining the Persuasive Speech**

The primary difference between an informative and persuasive speech lies in the conclusion. If you go back to the outline samples we talked about in the informative speech unit, you can use any of those outlines as a persuasive speech if you change the conclusion. The memorable concluding statement or clincher of the informative speech gets changed to a call for action statement at the end. The call for action is when you tell the audience exactly what you want them to do with the information you have provided... you might want them to vote a certain way in an election, buy a certain kind of dog food that is made by a company that doesn’t abuse animals, or to eat only organic vegetables because they don’t have pesticides used on them. Think of the call for action as the last effort you make to get your point across. Besides the call for action, all the other components of the persuasive speech outline are the same as the informative speech outline.

**Please look at the sample persuasive outlines for Cause/Effect and Problem/Solution that are located with your Persuasive Speech assignment materials. Feel free to use any of the informative outlines plus a call for action statement or the cause/effect or the problem/solution outlines to help you organize your persuasive speech!**

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