

Jack Wilde's Persuasive Unit

Each spring, Jack Wilde spends four to five weeks teaching his fifth-grade students to write their first persuasive essays. The piece the students write concerns something they would like to change at their school. Not only does the topic put them on familiar ground, but the audience is always the school principal, someone whom they can readily analyze. In this way, Jack limits the students' concerns about content so they can concentrate on what is new to them: developing and organizing an effective persuasive piece.

When the students complete their pieces, the entire class decides which essays are the most persuasive. These pieces are submitted to the principal, who visits the classroom to talk with the students about implementing their suggestions. Often, an idea that originated with a student becomes a reality at the school, underscoring for the children their ability to implement change through their writing.

Instructional Goals

Jack's persuasive unit helps his students to:

- Distinguish between effective oral and written persuasion.
- Understand the differences between narrative and expository prose.
- Recognize the elements of effective persuasive pieces.
- State a position clearly.
- Identify arguments that support the position and appeal to the audience.
- Identify counterarguments and refute them.
- Rank arguments and counterarguments according to their relative strength.
- Generate effective leads and conclusions.
- Provide detailed support for their positions.
- Respond appropriately in peer conferences.
- Understand the power of written persuasion.

Materials

The materials Jack uses during his persuasive unit include the following:

- Numerous examples of persuasive writing, both student and professional
- Evaluating a Newspaper Editorial (homework assignment)
- Comparing Student Persuasive Pieces (homework assignment)
- Parts of a Persuasive Piece
- Evaluation Form for Persuasive Pieces
- Writing Reflection

Description of Unit

At the point that Jack Wilde introduces his persuasive unit, his fifth-graders' writing and much of their reading have been limited to narrative prose. To ease the class into this new way of thinking and writing, Jack's first lesson is to have his students write about a time they changed their parents' minds about something. Then the class comes together to discuss and analyze why their oral persuasion was successful.

At this point, Jack poses a question to his students—which oral techniques also would work in written persuasion? The students readily see that their primary tactic—begging and pleading—is useless in persuasive writing. To help his students see what *is* effective, Jack introduces numerous written models—both fifth-grade and professional examples. As the students examine and discuss the models, they begin to discover for themselves how to structure and develop a persuasive argument for a specific audience. (See “Pets Please!” for an example of a student model.)

When it is time for the class to begin their own pieces, Jack intentionally sets up parameters that keep students focused on the craft of writing. He requires students to write about something they would like to change at their school, with the school principal as their audience. Within these boundaries, the students are free to write about something that interests them. By setting the unit up in this way, Jack limits the students’ concerns about the content of their persuasive pieces. Instead of using inquiry to explore an unfamiliar topic and audience, they use their powers of observation and deduction to identify and understand the elements of effective written persuasion.

During the prewriting stage, Jack not only provides many models for students to analyze and emulate, he also provides opportunities for them to brainstorm—as a class, in partners, and individually—and to share their ideas with one another. The students start by deciding on possible topics. Then they try to come up with ten reasons for their positions. After they work on this list on their own, Jack groups them into pairs and their partner helps them think of more reasons. The entire class sometimes helps an individual student brainstorm as well. The students follow the same procedure to generate lists of possible arguments against their point of view.

This lesson ends with the students ranking the reasons for and against their positions from the strongest to the weakest argument—an ideal way for them to begin to organize their persuasive pieces as well as a demonstration of the importance of brainstorming. The students discover that the first argument they identified is rarely their strongest.

To help them during the drafting process, Jack has his students read and compare two student-generated essays from previous years as homework (see *Comparing Student Persuasive Pieces*). The next day, his students share their opinions about what specific characteristics make one of the essays more effective than the other. Jack lists these characteristics on the board and has the students refer to them as they work on their own persuasive drafts (see *Parts of a Persuasive Piece*). In another homework assignment, Jack has the students pick out an editorial from their local newspaper and evaluate its effectiveness (see *Evaluating a Newspaper Editorial*).

Jack also provides models of effective leads and endings for persuasive pieces and guides the class in a discussion of what makes them effective. In this way, the class generates a list of possible strategies to use when they write their own introductions and conclusions. Students are required to write multiple leads and endings so they can practice more than one strategy and so they can choose the most effective ones to use in their drafts.

Throughout the drafting and revising process, the students work in pairs to help one another develop and improve their writing. Jack works with the students and uses “fishbowl” demonstration techniques to insure that the students are working appropriately and effectively with one another.

At the end of the unit, the students share their completed pieces with the whole class. Using the Evaluation Form for Persuasive Pieces to help them make their decision, the students choose four exemplary pieces to submit to the principal. Then he comes to the class to discuss the feasibility of their representative proposals.

The final activity related to this unit comes at the end of the school year, when students reflect on their writing and have a conference with their parents to share their reflections (see Writing Reflection).