

## Turning Ripples into Waves: Convincing Kids They Can Make a Difference

I'm up in front of the kids in the middle of a lesson, and I stop talking mid-sentence. I get real quiet, I pull up a chair, lower my head as if in deep thought, and when I raise it my face bears none of the teacher tension I so often hold. For that moment, I am not a teacher. I am a human being, and I say, "Trust me. You *can* make a difference."

And they don't laugh.

They forget the countless times they've fallen for that before. They forget all that hurt and disappointment that fuels their cynicism, and they hear me. When I tell them they can make a difference, that they can change things, they believe me.

Then, of course, I wake up and reality sets in. Getting kids to believe their actions matter is no easy task. The closest I've gotten to this fantasy is a unit on social action writing. The end product of this ten-week unit was a student-produced brochure calling people to act on a particular social issue. Each brochure included the phone number of an actual local organization students and adults could call if they wanted more information. The possibilities with this project are endless. When completed, all the brochures could be compiled into a community resource guide for the school. The resource guide could be circulated to other schools within the city as well. Students could even collaborate with local social service agencies to publish brochures written for kids by kids.

### A Process Reversed

I know other teachers would have students dive right in and immediately pick a social issue to study. I couldn't start the unit like that last year. I had a group of eighth graders so angry at the world that I knew they could easily rattle off countless injustices they saw. Get-

ting them to believe their words could actually do something about those injustices was an entirely different story. I knew I ran the risk of *increasing* their sense of frustration if, in the end, they didn't believe their writing could raise the consciousness of others. My kids had to believe in their capabilities to convince someone else to care. Thus, we began with a study of persuasive writing before selecting social issues for our brochures.

### Step One: The Persuasive Component of Brochure Writing

To learn how to influence others with their words, I asked students to consider first how words influence them. Students began with lists of writing that had persuaded them to think or feel differently or writing that had persuaded them to take action. Their lists consisted primarily of advertisements, literature, poetry, and letters. Surprised by how limited their scope was, I sent them on a hunt for more examples.

#### Assignment:

A portfolio of persuasive writing

#### Components:

- six examples of persuasive writing (two advertisements maximum)
- a note card for each example answering two questions:
  - Why did you choose this example?
  - What makes this example effective persuasive writing?
- a letter to the class defining persuasive writing in the student's own words.

My students loved the challenge. They tried to outdo one another in their searches. They brought in magazine covers, friends'



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essays, coupons, chain letters, flyers, songs, World War I propaganda, reviews, art, and more. I had never seen them so excited. It seemed their new roles as collectors and analyzers freed them from what they had come to expect English class was all about: producing, producing, and more producing. It was in their culminating letters, though, that I was able to see to what extent students had internalized the characteristics of persuasive writing across multiple genres. (See Rachel's letter in Figure 1.)

Rachel realized persuasive writing was relevant to her life and thus wanted to understand it more. I saw evidence of that genuine curiosity with the others as well. To follow up, students got into groups and listed strategies to use when attempting to persuade. I knew students wanted to understand the subtleties of this genre because of the thoughtful lists they created. One group felt persuasive writing . . .

- changes your opinion,
- makes you want to do something,
- makes you think about what you want and need in your own life,
- uses simple and clear messages to get the point across,
- uses reliable sources to get the reader's trust,
- can manipulate your emotions.

Being able to create those lists proved to my students they had learned something, and that learning was meaningful because they did it on their own. When students began asking me if they were going to be writing persuasively soon, I knew it was time for step two.

## Step Two: Waking Up Our Social Conscience

### Guiding question:

Who are you responsible for?

The first time I asked that question, the responses were split down the middle: half felt that people are responsible for themselves and others, while the other half

believed people are responsible for themselves only. I tested their theories with an article written by Martin Gansberg for the *New York Times*, March 27, 1964.

The article reported the murder of a 28-year-old woman just outside her apartment building. Apparently 38 neighbors listened to Kitty Genovese's cries for help and did nothing. Thirty minutes passed before the first phone call was placed to the police. The neighbor that eventually did call in had phoned his friend in the next county for advice first.

After reading the article (stopping every so often to predict the outcome), I asked the question again. Who are you responsible for? This time, three-quarters of the class felt they had a responsibility to others in addition to themselves. The remaining quarter of the class stuck to their original answer, explaining, "You gotta watch out for yourself." Survival instincts told these kids not to get involved. To complicate matters further, I introduced yet another obstacle: prejudice.

To see how prejudice could play out as an obstacle in real life, we read a short story of a Puerto Rican man and his inner conflict over helping a white woman and her three small children on the subway late at night (Colon, no date). Fearing the white woman would immediately distrust his intentions, Jesus Colon did nothing. The story concludes with a moving apology from Jesus.

My students could accept survival instincts as a valid reason for staying out of a conflict, but prejudice was a different matter altogether. They were incensed that Jesus let his fears of prejudice get the best of him. A debate ensued. Had there been time, we would have formalized the debate over Jesus's actions or lack thereof. Instead, the next few class periods were a chance for students to reflect on their own experiences standing up for their beliefs. When student after student recounted a story that included violence, I recognized an opportunity to expose them to alternative ways of taking a stand.

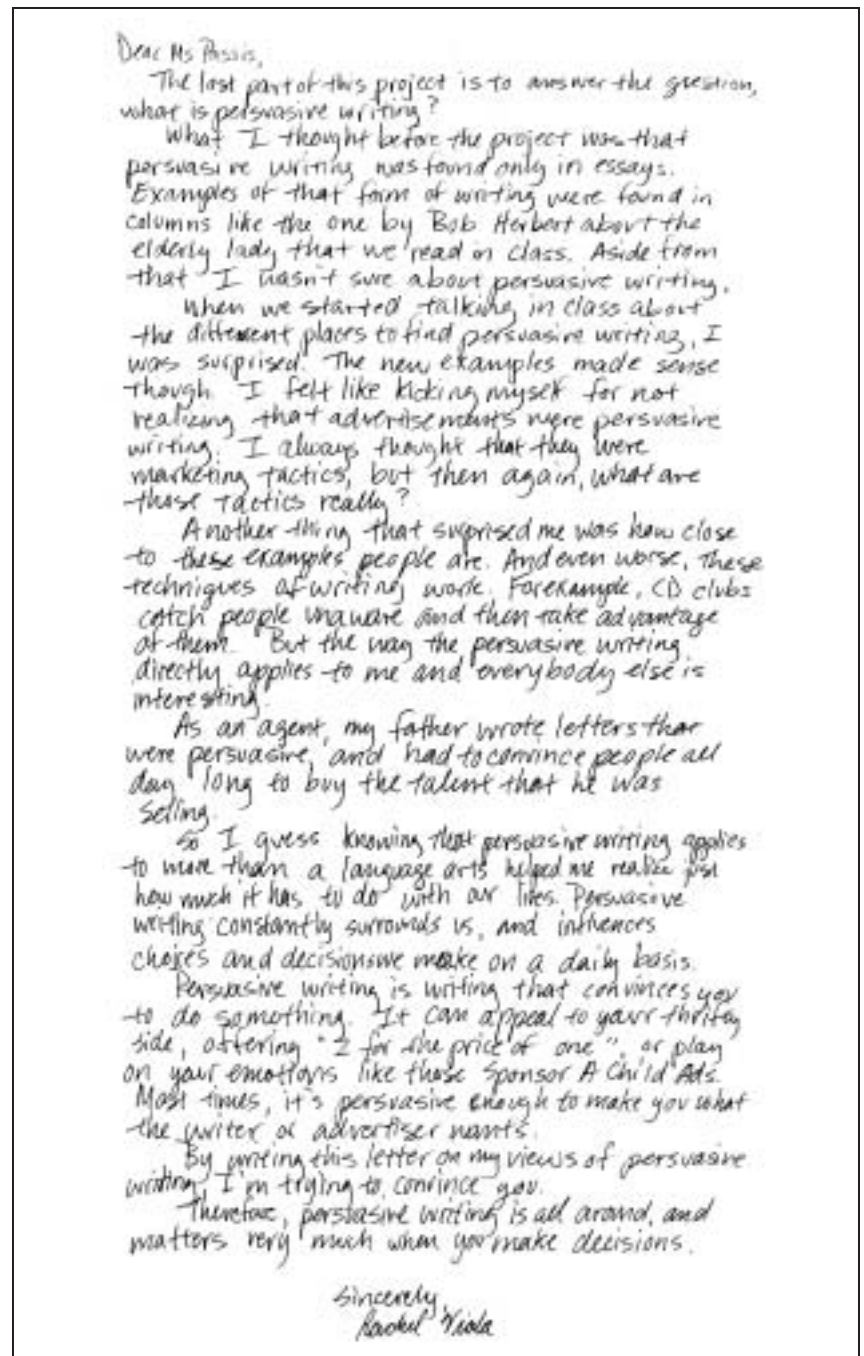
## Step Three: Finding Something to Care About

Because the ultimate success of this project hinged upon a well-chosen topic, I used a number of different strategies to assist students in their selection process. To begin, we spent a day simply brainstorming lists of all the things we felt were unfair in the world. Students worked individually, in pairs, and as a class on their lists. Throughout the entire lesson, students were encouraged to listen for potential injustices they hadn't thought of on their own. By the end of class, students all had long lists of social injustices with a star next to the three they felt were absolutely unacceptable.

In addition to classroom brainstorming sessions, students were required to read a book from a bibliography I provided. The bibliography was divided into five subheadings: Social and Environmental Issues, Immigrant Issues, Holocaust Issues, Human Rights Issues, and Issues of Choices and Transitions. Students were encouraged to choose a book that dealt with one of the three issues they had starred earlier. Both fiction and nonfiction selections were made available to satisfy students' different reading interests. All of the books, however, chronicled ways in which other individuals dealt with a particular social issue.

Students kept track of their reading in their writer's notebooks. I set a minimum number of pages that were required each week and asked students to record not only their reactions as they read, but to also consider: 1) why their social issue was important, 2) if their book dealt with the issue realistically, and 3) what they themselves could do about the issue. Responses were rough drafts in preparation for a final piece documenting their reading. One student wrote in response to Elie Wiesel's book, *Night*:

“ . . . The *night* Elie Wiesel spoke of in his book were the nights spent in a concentration camp. The endless hours of labor, the beatings, the humiliations, all were put upon him by Adolf Hitler. And for what? Because he was Jewish? Because he and so many others were different from what Hitler



Dear Ms Passis,  
The last part of this project is to answer the question, what is persuasive writing?  
What I thought before the project was that persuasive writing was found only in essays. Examples of that form of writing were found in columns like the one by Bob Herbert about the elderly lady that we read in class. Aside from that I wasn't sure about persuasive writing.  
When we started talking in class about the different places to find persuasive writing, I was surprised. The new examples made sense though. I felt like kicking myself for not realizing that advertisements were persuasive writing. I always thought that they were marketing tactics, but then again, what are these tactics really?  
Another thing that surprised me was how close to these examples people are. And even worse, these techniques of writing work. For example, CD clubs catch people unaware and then take advantage of them. But the way the persuasive writing directly applies to me and everybody else is interesting.  
As an agent, my father wrote letters that were persuasive, and had to convince people all day long to buy the talent that he was selling.  
So I guess knowing that persuasive writing applies to more than a language arts helped me realize just how much it has to do with our lives. Persuasive writing constantly surrounds us, and influences choices and decisions we make on a daily basis.  
Persuasive writing is writing that convinces you to do something. It can appeal to your thrifty side, offering "2 for the price of one" or play on your emotions like those Sponsor A Child Ads. Most times, it's persuasive enough to make you what the writer or advertiser wants.  
By writing this letter on my views of persuasive writing, I'm trying to convince you.  
Therefore, persuasive writing is all around, and matters very much when you make decisions.  
Sincerely,  
Rachel Yoda

FIGURE 1.

described as the Aryan Race? With blond hair and blue eyes, I meet the description. But many of the people around me and the people I love don't. Would I be able to stand back and watch them suffer, watch them starve and die and perish like an insect in a concentration camp? That's not something

*In the open-ended discussion that ensued, students recounted details of their books to one another so passionately that a few students were moved to switch their topics.*

that would appeal to me, no. That's not something any sane human being would wish upon the human race.

"Elie was just a boy of fourteen. A year older than myself. At such a young age, how would one be able to endure such pain? At any age, how would one be able to endure something so harsh, so horrible, so . . . insane?"

"I couldn't watch a person die. I couldn't watch and not do anything about it. If I had been alive in the 1940s, I can truthfully and without hesitation say that I would hide a Jewish person in my own home, even a family in my home, so they could live. I know others would argue that if you were discovered it would be one more person dead. But if I was not discovered, I would have saved at least a few lives. Out of the millions that died, at least a few." (Morgan Hansen)

Reading *Night* gave Morgan a chance to put herself in Elie's shoes and imagine the horrors he experienced. Realizing a similar fate could have befallen her loved ones, Morgan discovered an unwillingness to see herself as a passive bystander. She found an issue important enough to require action.

Because several other students also had strong reactions to their books, I set aside a day for us to process. In the open-ended discussion that ensued, students recounted details of their books to one another so passionately that a few students were moved to switch their topics.

The time came to finalize topic selections. Students read over class notes and their three-week-old list of social injustices. The preliminary reading of books and drafting responses indicated to students that a high level of personal investment would be required from that point onward. Students knew they had to care about the topic they chose.

Once the topics were selected, students grouped themselves according to like issues. The issues were general enough that all the students' choices fit under at least one of the following eleven categories:

- Environmental Pollution
- Death Penalty
- Holocaust

- Stereotyping/Prejudice/Discrimination
- Teenage Pregnancy
- Tibetan Rights
- Sexual Harassment
- Depression
- Drug Abuse
- Nuclear Power
- Poverty

Each group had three to four students. Two exceptions were made to allow for those who needed to work independently.

## Step Four: Taking Action

### Assignment:

Group-produced brochure raising consciousness around a particular social issue

### Components:

- each individual is responsible for producing a one-page essay arguing persuasively for why this issue is so important;
- group must locate one local organization that deals with this issue and include the number on the back page of the brochure;
- handwritten, colored, rough draft of brochure;
- final computerized, color brochure.

The final phase of this ten-week unit, seemingly the most complicated, actually ran itself. For weeks, students had studied the elements of persuasive writing, had written extensively about their own roles in society, and had read about people who do/don't take action and the consequences of those decisions. Once students were told the project requirements, they immediately began working. To jump-start the writing portion, they combined bits and pieces of their persuasive essays referred to above. I provided several copies of the yellow pages and a few community service directories to help students find local organizations. My role then narrowed down to three central responsibilities:

### 1. To set lots of mini-deadlines

Even though students were itching to take off on their own, deadlines were essential in keeping students focused. My students had

deadlines for completing their individual essays; picking local organizations; arranging their writing layouts; creating their graphic designs; and producing a colored, handwritten brochure, and a final computerized, color brochure. Deadlines also allowed me to maintain close tabs on how students' brochures progressed.

## 2. To keep motivating students

I continually supplied students with materials that reminded them of the importance of their work. I found several readings in the *Facing History and Ourselves Resource Guide* that helped motivate students to keep working each day. "Harrison Bergeron," by Kurt Vonnegut, sparked controversial discussions on what it means to be equal, why we don't have equality in our society, and who loses out as a result. Another story, "The Hangman," by Maurice Ogden, provoked honest conversations about what it means to stand up for what you believe and the dangers of remaining silent.

## 3. To make sure students were surrounded by piles of real brochures to use as models

Students were asked to bring in as many brochures as they could find. Whether they were for educating people on drug addictions or for renting a car, the brochures gave students a clear idea of what their end product could look like. Students sifted through piles of brochures each day and pulled out ones they found appealing. They would then dissect what had attracted them and try out the various techniques in their own brochures. Students paid close attention to design and concise language. They discovered the tighter their writing, the more information they could include, and the more information they included, the more persuasive their brochures usually became.

The brochures you see in Classroom Connections were not chosen because they were the "best." They were chosen because they reflect a range of what the students actually produced. Some of the brochures were products of extensive research and used facts to persuade people to care. Others came

more from the heart and drew upon students' own experiences.

While all students were required to produce a computer-generated version of their brochure, Classroom Connections includes a handwritten template to show what's possible if computers aren't available. Because of disk errors, viruses, and printers breaking down, brochures this year will be handwritten unless students want to work on them at home.

## Reflections

Several changes will be made to the unit when I teach it this spring. This time, I'll require students to actually interview several organizations before slapping a phone number on their brochure. Their decision about which organizations to recommend should be an informed one. I'll collaborate with the social studies teacher so students work on their brochures while studying the Holocaust and the Civil Rights Movement. I want to bring in guest speakers who have real-life experience in social action. I'd like to see students keep a log for 10 days documenting daily acts of kindness. I'll also find more real life stories of ordinary people making differences in small ways to further convince students they have the power to do something about the injustices they witness.

## Conclusion

I know there are people who don't care about making this world we share a better place. I'm idealistic, not stupid. I do think teachers care, though. In fact, I think that's why many of us became teachers in the first place. We know making a difference isn't limited to politics and nonprofit work. It's about reaching out to other people, even if it's only one student at a time. Teaching kids to care about the world they live in shouldn't be a fantasy. "*Each time a man stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope.*" [Kennedy] If I expect students to leave my classroom wanting to create those "tiny ripples of hope," I had better convince them they can. And I do it through writing.

***Teachers . . . know making a difference isn't limited to politics and nonprofit work. It's about reaching out to other people, even if it's only one student at a time.***

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## References

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This brochure on "Discrimination" is laid out on 8 1/2" x 11" paper and tri-folded. It was pasted up by hand. Panels should be read as numbered.

**Benefits of Not Discriminating** against people:

- you can make more friends when you are open to everyone regardless of their race or sex.
- you can learn more about people's different cultures if you take the time to talk to them
- if you treat people respectfully, you can rest assured that the respect will be directed back to you

**Benefits of Discrimination:**

?

(we didn't think there would be any)

**Where Can You Get Help or Information about DISCRIMINATION?**

National Association for the Advancement of Colored People  
Roy Wilkins Center  
270 West 96 Street  
N.Y., N.Y. 10025  
or call: 212-749-2323

National Jewish Outreach Program  
485 5th Avenue, suite 701  
N.Y., N.Y. 10017  
or call: 212-986-7450


National Organization for Women  
105 East 22 Street  
N.Y., N.Y. 10010  
or call: 212-260-4422

The people at these above organizations are there to answer your questions, and help you if you have a problem.

Do You  
JUDGE  
People  
Based  
on their  
RACE or  
SEX?

Then this  
pamphlet  
is for  
you!

→



**RELIGIOUS DISCRIMINATION**  
by Rachel

I grew up in a very Italian, very Catholic neighborhood. Everyone was religious. I was no joke when I first started school and I saw the emphasis that everyone placed on religion, because I didn't practice any one in particular.

My mother was born into a conservative Jewish family, and my father was raised in a typical Catholic Italian family in Rhode Island. Neither of my parents had ever enjoyed the organized religion that their parents had forced them into, so they were kind with my sister and I.

But I really wanted some form of religion to practice, so I'd be included. That's Wednesday afternoon in grade school, because most of my class would have early to go to religious instruction.

So I asked my mother if I could go to Hebrew school. The first time I went, I realized what Jewish children through the ages have complained about. But that made me like it even more, the fact that now I had some kind of after school activity to complain about.

None of the kids in my class took any notice of the fact that I had gotten religion until I started third grade. Then the unexpected happened.

I got teased for being Jewish. That teasing had a lasting impact on me. I no longer practice Judaism, and I did not return to have a bar-mitzvah.

I wish the kids in my class had left me alone about Judaism, it was egg headed anyway, not theirs. If people would just accept the beliefs of others, they'd be much better off. Maybe I wouldn't have continued to believe in the Jewish faith, but I would have had time to make that discovery of believing or not on my own.

**Questions and Answers**  
by Shana Ungerson

(How to deal with situations involving discrimination)

Q: If you feel that you are being discriminated against because you are a woman, what should you do?

a) contact your local chapter of the National Organization for Women  
b) call your lawyer  
c) tell someone who can help you

Q: If you saw someone being harassed because of their race or sex, you should:

a) intervene and stick up for the person being harassed  
b) walk away  
c) get an authority figure like a police officer to help with the situation

**RACE DISCRIMINATION**  
by Delores

I remember when I was sitting on the bus once, and this Caucasian lady came up and said, "Aren't you going to get up?"

I said, "For what? You're not elderly or disabled."

Then she called me a nigger. I was so upset, I felt like I didn't want to be black anymore.

**What would you do in stop racism and discrimination?**

I would stop it all around, because if one person stops being racist, and influences someone else to do the same, maybe the other person would stop being racist too. Then this racism and discrimination could stop.

**SEX DISCRIMINATION**  
by Anelia

Although sexism isn't as big an issue as it was years ago, discrimination still exists. For instance, here in school.

In class boys are mostly kind, and get more attention than girls from teachers. Or in gym class, boys have always gotten more chances to play play sports and girls are assumed to be bad at sports just because they're girls.

Out of school sports have discrimination also, there are not as many women's sports compared to men's. Sports such as boxing, wrestling or football do not have professional women's leagues. Stupid as it may sound to some people, I'm sure there are women who would like to play these sports but can't, because of the limited opportunities.

I believe this kind of discrimination cannot be totally blamed on teachers and coaches. Parents have to encourage their daughters, this new generation of women, that they can do anything a man can do, if not more.

♀

For more information on the Holocaust contact the Center for Holocaust Studies at 1609 Avenue J Brooklyn, NY 11230 or visit the Museum of Jewish Heritage, at 1 Battery Park Plaza NY, NY 10004 you also can contact the museum by calling them at (212) 988-1800



*The first to perish were the children . . . From these . . . our new dawn might have risen*

-Yitzhak Katzenelson poet, playwright, and educator (1896-1944)

In memory of the three generations who disappeared from Europe 1939-1945

-Miriam Chakin

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1

# ARBEIT MACHT FREI

Millions of people saw this sign as they were forced into Auschwitz, one of the two worst concentration camps opened by Adolf Hitler, the dictator of Germany. This sign means "Work makes a person free". But despite what the sign said, it was not true. The only thing that could make a person free was the end of World War II and the only thing that could keep you alive was you were strong enough chosen for hard labor. As long as you were able to work you would not be killed, but once you showed any signs of sickness, you would be killed.



Forced Labor

Holocaust and thing that keep you working. If you were strong for hard labor. As long as you were able to work you would not be killed, but once you showed any signs of sickness, you would be killed.

The other of the two worst concentration camps was Birkenau, only two miles from Auschwitz. Auschwitz and Birkenau were the two largest killing centers in the history of the Holocaust. Out of the millions of people who went into these two camps at least one million were killed.

Auschwitz and Birkenau together had the ability to kill 2,000 people at a time with the gas chambers alone. Another 5,000 people were burned alive in a 24 hour period when all the ovens were in use.



Gas Ovens at Auschwitz

All over Europe, concentration camps similar to these were set up for the destruction of Jewish people. When the Holocaust was over, 6,000,000 Jews were murdered.

Adolf Hitler was the person responsible for those 6,000,000 deaths. He started the Holocaust in 1934 after he came to power in 1933 as dictator of Germany.

His extreme hatred towards Jewish people made him responsible for more suffering than anyone else in modern history. When World War

II broke out in 1939, after Hitler invaded Poland, it was just the beginning of the destruction of Jews.

During the depression, people were desperate and thought that her was their savior for their country. Soon Hitler had millions of followers throughout the world. He promised to take violent measures and help Germany out of the Depression.

His dictatorship ended April 30, 1945 when he committed suicide.

It is hard to believe that with all the progress and technological advances we have made, discrimination still goes on in our lives. There are still Neo-Nazi groups who praise Hitler and terrorize Jews. They draw swastikas on public places and destroy synagogues.

It is the responsibility of our generation to prevent the occurrence another Holocaust. This appalling tragedy has happened once and that is already one time too many. Don't let it happen again.

By Berina Sax, Daniel Benjamin and Gena Szegla

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This brochure on the Holocaust was prepared on computer and printed on a color printer. Since the brochure was a tri-folded 8 1/2" x 11" sheet of paper, the panels would be read as numbered.