

Chapter 1

Persuasive writing – who needs it?

Why Lily is to blame for me writing this book; what I mean by persuasive writing, and why it's a skill that can be useful to just about anyone, both at work and in real life; and finally, a bit about what I write for a living, and why it might be relevant to you.

One day, a couple of years ago, I asked my daughter – who was seven at the time – what she'd been doing at school. If you have children, you'll know how rarely this question receives a satisfactory answer. So imagine my surprise when she replied 'persuasive writing'.

Persuasive writing! When I was that age, as far as I can remember, my school days were spent colouring in, collecting interesting twigs for the nature table and gasping at the incident-packed adventures of Janet and John. It was one of those moments when a parent realises just what a different world his kids are growing up in. But, more to the point, it was the moment when it first really struck me that my painfully acquired professional skills might have a wider usefulness than I had ever previously imagined.

Actually, that isn't quite true. I had, I suppose, always been vaguely aware that the basic principles which govern the kind of writing I do for a living could, and should, be applied to many other types of written communication. But what that brief conversation with Lily brought home to me was the fact that the rest of the world was starting to cotton on; to understand that the ability to argue a case effectively in writing isn't just a handy accomplishment – like being able to change a fuse or fold a napkin into a crown – but a basic life-skill.

Put simply, if seven-year-olds all over Britain are learning to write persuasively, it's time everyone did.

What exactly do I mean by persuasive writing?

Before we go any further, I think we need to be as clear as possible about the subject under discussion, and how it might be relevant to you. So what, specifically, is it that distinguishes persuasive writing from other kinds of writing? My answer – and I hope Lily's teacher would agree – is that:

In persuasive writing, the main purpose is to influence the way a reader thinks, feels or acts.

Let's try to pin it down further by listing 10 examples of persuasive writing, as defined above:

- Your CV
- Any kind of proposal or fund-raising document

- An email to your biggest client, tactfully pointing out that unless your invoice is settled promptly, your company might be compelled to take appropriate measures
- Recruitment materials of any kind
- A letter to your bank, explaining why you need a bigger overdraft
- A memo to your staff, suggesting they might like to give up their Sunday afternoon to take part in a charity event
- Any press release
- Your performance appraisal form, explaining to your boss why you deserve a big pay rise
- The flyer for the PTA promises auction – only two weeks left, and all you have so far is an evening's baby-sitting and one free dental inspection
- Any invitation

Anything there that rings a bell with you? I hope so; but not to worry if there isn't. My aim, at this stage, is just to impress upon you that you don't need to be planning a career in advertising, marketing or PR to benefit from reading this book. The principles and skills that I am going to talk about can, to a greater or lesser extent, be applied to virtually anything you will ever need to write.

An exaggerated claim? I hope not, since good persuasive writers have no truck with hyperbole; but to justify my contention, we may need to broaden our terms of reference a little.

An introduction to 'semi-persuasive' writing

Of course, it's true that the examples I chose above are the types of writing task which most closely resemble the work produced by a professional copywriter. What is your CV, after all, if it isn't an advertisement selling what you have to offer to a potential employer? But let's consider some other types of writing which, at first glance, may seem to have little or nothing to do with persuasion.

Any suggestions? Well, how about an email replying to a colleague who has asked for some information; a contact report on a meeting with a client; oh yes, and a school history essay. Obviously, in none of these three cases is the writer's main purpose to influence how the reader feels, thinks or acts. But equally obviously, whatever prompts a writer to write, the result may well influence the reader – although the effect may be slight or imperceptible in many cases. Will the colleague receiving the email be satisfied with the information supplied? Will the client respond positively to the summary of what took place at the meeting? And will the teacher marking the essay be impressed not just by its content, but by the effort that has gone into it?

Looked at in this light, virtually everything we write has a 'persuasive' aspect to it: the capacity to influence, either positively or negatively, the person (or people) who will be reading it.

But is it Art? (If so, wrong book I'm afraid)

So is there any kind of writing which can't, in this very loose sense, be considered 'persuasive'? Yes, I think there is. For me, true creative writing – Writing as Art, if you like – comes from a completely different place, where completely different rules apply. And the most important of these, I believe, is that genuine artists should be driven by the desire for self-expression.

This doesn't mean, of course, that they don't care about how people respond to their work. But what it does mean is that they can never let this dictate to them. Artists must always give absolute priority to finding the best possible way of giving shape and substance to their own vision, regardless of whether that makes it more or less 'accessible' to the general public; easier or harder to understand. A real creative writer would never change a single comma just to please the reader.

As persuasive writers, on the other hand, we're perfectly happy to tweak our punctuation – and do much more besides – if it makes our reader more likely to respond in the way that we want.

Persuasive writing: the same principles always apply

I hope you won't mind if I close this first chapter by telling you a little more about myself – not because I'm hoping to dazzle you with my professional achievements

Who needs persuasive writing? Just ask your local hereditary peer.

So, it's 1999 and you are a lord. You're minding your own business, happily passing your days oppressing the peasantry or killing things on your grouse moor, when that nasty oikish Blair fellow announces that he's planning to abolish you.

Well, what he actually announces is that almost all hereditary peers are to be booted out of the House of Lords. Only 92 out of a total of over 750 will be permitted to retain their membership of the best gentlemen's club in town. And if you think you ought to be one of those happy few, you should write a 75-word manifesto explaining why. What are you going to write? If you're the late Lord Monckton of Brenchley, you get out your fountain pen, fill it with green ink and scribble:

I support:

The Queen and all the Royal Family.

The United Kingdom and not a Disunited Republic.

Action against cruelty to animals, particularly fishing with rods. All cats to be muzzled outside to stop the agonising torture of mice and small birds.

The police must be supported against the increase in violent crime.

Organic food not GM.

There should be more grammar schools not less.

LEVEL UP not level down. God willing.

And then, having presented such a compelling case to your peers, you wonder why you weren't elected. More proof, if needed, that these days nobody – noble or commoner – can predict when basic persuasive writing skills will come in handy.

or make you gasp with envy at my glamorous lifestyle, but because I want to establish as clearly as I can, from the outset, how the things I write for a living are relevant to the things you may need to write.

I started my career as a trainee copywriter at J Walter Thompson, then the biggest advertising agency in the UK. Arriving quite rapidly at the recognition that I was too good and kind for the ruthless cut and thrust of ad agency life, I fled from London and started working as a freelance.

That, terrifyingly, was nearly 25 years ago – since when I have written virtually everything it's possible to be paid for writing. A slight exaggeration maybe; but, to give you some impression of the diversity of the work I do, let me list, pretty much at random, a few of my fairly recent assignments:

- A website for a big commercial law firm
- A speech about the need for radical change in the design industry
- An annual report for a well-known high street retailer
- A label for a champagne bottle to be presented by a firm of estate agents to their clients on moving day

- A fund-raising newsletter for a young people's charity
- A set of 'brand language' guidelines for a major financial institution

As I said, I'm not trying to impress you. My point is that the one constant in my professional output is the need to persuade. The main purpose of everything I write is to influence the way a reader thinks, feels or acts. Of course, writing a couple of short sentences to appear on a champagne label is different from writing a 10,000-word annual report. But I firmly believe that, in both cases – and in everything I'm paid to write – the basic principles of persuasive communication apply.

And, thanks in part to Lily, I have come to believe that they can be successfully applied much more widely still.

Remember that entertaining TV commercial you saw last night? That website where you booked your last holiday? Even that mailshot you received this morning and chucked straight in the bin? They all have something to teach you about how you could be a better, more persuasive writer.