

# PROLOGUE

*“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.—That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed,—That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government . . . .”*

...

*“And for the support of this declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes, & our sacred Honor.”*

Who was Thomas Jefferson? A Founding Father, a President, a slave owner, and even an inventor? These, of course, are all accurate descriptions of this extremely complex man. But do these descriptions capture the true nature of Thomas Jefferson? Maybe a more meaningful question would ask, What is Jefferson’s most lasting contribution? As students today think of Julius Caesar crossing the Rhine, in a thousand years, what will students think when asked, “What did Thomas Jefferson do?”

The answer to this question, with little dispute, is that he authored the Declaration of Independence.<sup>1</sup> We will see in Chapter 7 that this document not only founded a nation, but also is seen as one of the most influential documents in world history, keeping company with the Magna Carta, Martin Luther’s 95 Theses, and the US Constitution. Indeed, it is Jefferson the writer

that we remember most. Specifically, it was his abilities as a persuasive writer that secured his place in not only the pages of history, but in American lore.

Like all humans, Jefferson had his faults. He was unable to overcome some: he disliked slavery, yet could not free his own; he wrote about wise financial stewardship, but was plagued by financial issues for much of his life. Other problems, though, he overcame: he resolved his problems with public speaking, for example, by dedicating himself to perfecting his persuasive writing skills. Dedication to his craft gave him the confidence to speak with authority on issues he had more than thoroughly thought through by writing and rewriting.

To understand Thomas Jefferson's greatest achievements, perhaps we should begin at the end. On June 24, 1826, Jefferson drafted his last writing. It was a letter responding to an invitation from Roger C. Weightman to attend the 50th anniversary of the writing of the Declaration of Independence. Ill and unable to travel the 116 miles from Monticello, Jefferson was forced to decline, writing,

I should, indeed, with peculiar delight, have met and exchanged there congratulations personally with the small band, the remnant of that host of worthies who joined with us on that day, in the bold and doubtful election we were to make for our country, between submission or the sword; and have enjoyed with them the consolatory fact, that our fellow citizens, after half a century of experience and prosperity, continue to approve the choice we made.

In the same letter, Jefferson wrote of the Declaration of Independence itself, stating that it would be “the signal of arousing men to burst the chains under which monkish ignorance and superstition had persuaded them to bind themselves, and to assume the blessings and security of self-government.” In that tribute to freedom, the Declaration, Jefferson found the words to express ideas that could inspire people all over the world to rise up and restore “the free right to the unbounded exercise of reason and freedom of opinion.” “All eyes are opened,” he wrote, “or opening, to the rights of man.” Indeed, the world's eyes were opening. In just ten short years, France went from an absolute monarchy to a republic, using, in 1789, Jefferson's Declaration of Independence as a guide in drafting their own *Declaration of Rights of*

*Man and of the Citizen.*<sup>2</sup> Many scholars believe that Jefferson, who served as the US Ambassador to France during its drafting, also helped to write this document.

Just 10 days after drafting his letter to Weightman, Jefferson died. He died on July 4, 1826, the 50th anniversary of the signing of his masterpiece. Coincidentally, John Adams—Jefferson’s sometime archrival, sometime friend, and a co-signer of the Declaration of Independence—died only a few hours later on that July 4th. Adams’s last words, in fact, were “Thomas Jefferson still lives.”<sup>3</sup>

Jefferson’s last letter does not mention that he was the drafter of the Declaration, “the preamble to which had established the concept of human rights, for the first time in history, as a basis for a republic.”<sup>4</sup> Rather, his letter reiterated his belief in the idea of the United States: that the United States was a nation of principles and ideals, that the Declaration was the blueprint for those ideals, and that those ideals would be exported to the world.<sup>5</sup>

Abraham Lincoln, who was only 17 years old when Jefferson died, recognized Jefferson’s contributions to this nation. He said of Jefferson and his Declaration,

All honor to Jefferson - to the man who, in the concrete pressure of a struggle for national independence by a single people, had the coolness, forecast, and capacity to introduce into a merely revolutionary document, an abstract truth, applicable to all men and all times, and so to embalm it there, that to-day, and in all coming days, it shall be a rebuke and a stumbling-block to the very harbingers of re-appearing tyranny and oppression.

Lincoln recognized, as we will explore throughout this book, that Jefferson helped breathe life into this nation, and that he did so with his pen.



Many books have been written about Jefferson: most about his time in the presidency, many about the Declaration of Independence, some concerning his contradictory roles as advocate of freedom and slave owner. This book does not attempt to replace any of those that laud his tremendous

achievements or explore his personal paradoxes. Rather, this book is dedicated to writers of all stripes and its focus is to learn from Jefferson the persuasive writer. We endeavor to analyze and extract some of the lessons his life and his works offer so that we might be able to improve in our own careers. By examining Jefferson's successes and failures, we will highlight the characteristics that made him such a successful persuader and those failures that detract from that success.

Most people would agree that Jefferson was one of the world's greatest persuasive writers. It was in his years as a lawyer that he acquired and honed these skills. Yet Jefferson's years as a lawyer are often overlooked. As one Jeffersonian scholar wrote, the "glamor of his political career and his prodigious versatility in any fields of intellectual endeavor overshadow his achievements in the prosaic realm of law."<sup>6</sup>

Above all, Jefferson's mark on the world was made because of his ability to inspire an audience through the written word. All attorneys and persuasive speakers today—including sales people, those in politics, teachers, and all those who want to learn how to convince others on paper—can learn something from Jefferson. The lessons we draw from Jefferson's life and writings are found throughout the chapters in bold.

The idea for this book started with my first book, *Lincoln's Counsel: Lessons Learned from America's Most Persuasive Speaker*.<sup>7</sup> The Lincoln book started as an obsession with the Gettysburg Address. As I was trained to be a lawyer, I realized that Lincoln's Address was actually one of the greatest closing arguments of all time. I was struck by how many rules of "how to deliver a persuasive closing" Lincoln's Address tracked.

Alas, one cannot close without first opening. An opening lays out the theme for the trial about to commence. When Lincoln spoke of "[f]our score and seven years ago" in 1863, he was not talking about the writing of the Constitution (a "score" is 20 years); he was instead speaking of the signing of the Declaration of Independence in 1776. Thus, as the Gettysburg Address was the inspiration for a book drawing lessons from Lincoln's life and speeches on how to be a better persuasive speaker, it seems fitting that the Declaration of Independence—being Lincoln's opening—should inspire me to write a book drawing lessons from Jefferson's life and works on how to be a better persuasive writer.



Chapter 1 begins the book by providing a brief introduction to what this book is trying to capture: What is persuasiveness? More specifically, What is persuasive writing? We will define this concept in easily digestible bites that will be used to pull out the lessons of Jefferson's life and works identified throughout the book.

Chapter 2 introduces the reader to Thomas Jefferson, attorney-at-law. Really, this chapter describes the education that made Jefferson such a good writer, so good that he was selected to write the document meant to persuade Britain to let America go, to persuade Americans to support independence, and to persuade the world to support a new American state. We look at Jefferson's formative years through his legal training and practice to identify those traits of character, skill, and hard work that made him such a powerfully persuasive writer.

In Chapter 3, we explore Jefferson's political life. We explore how Thomas Jefferson got from the courtroom to the House of Burgesses, up to his time as Vice President under John Adams. This chapter details some of the more practical elements of persuasion, those used in the halls of politics, both domestic and abroad.

Chapter 4, then, discusses Jefferson's time as President. This chapter examines some of the successes and failures of Jefferson's time in office, detailing where the particular persuasive techniques used were effective and where he miss-stepped and could have used a lesson himself.

Chapter 5 outlines three aspects of Jefferson's character that hugely impacted his ability to persuade. First, this chapter looks at Jefferson's pure, innate skill as a writer—he was simply gifted with a pen. Second, this chapter looks at the passion with which Jefferson wrote, injecting meaning and feeling into every syllable he put onto paper. Finally, this chapter discusses what is probably the most useful trait for anyone who wishes to persuade—vision. Jefferson had a vision for this country and that vision drove him in every aspect of his life.

Chapter 6 gets into some of the mistakes Jefferson made over the years and explores some of their potential causes. A persuasive writer should definitely know what *not* to do before he begins the long process of drafting the

perfect word, then phrase, then sentence, then paragraph and section, so she doesn't need to revise every word, phrase, sentence, paragraph, and section on day two.

Chapter 7 examines Jefferson's most famous piece and the document that made his name famous the world over. This chapter looks in detail at the Declaration of Independence, highlighting aspects of that document that make it especially persuasive to readers still today.

Chapter 8 looks at several other of Jefferson's masterpieces to further explore just what techniques, what style, and what tone Jefferson used that made him such an effective persuasive writer. Each of these masterpieces is written toward a different end, so the chapter seeks to address the varied nature of persuasion by looking at different texts Jefferson wrote for different purposes and to different audiences.