

1

WHAT IS PERSUASIVE WRITING?

What is persuasive writing? What makes writing persuasive? What makes someone a persuasive writer? Although quite similar, these questions lead us to different answers, each of which still only gets at the answer to the question we should be asking: How do I become a persuasive writer?

But to answer that question, we need to know the answers to all those other questions. We need to know what “persuasive writing” is, how to write in a persuasive style, and, perhaps most importantly (especially on larger and more public stages), what an author can or must do to be in a position to persuade others. This chapter aims to provide very general answers to these questions, answers useful to the reader because they are directly related to the lessons we draw from Thomas Jefferson’s life and writings in the rest of this book.



To start with the last of those questions, the most essential feature of “persuasion,” as such, is the audience’s perception of the author. Without the right perception of the author, why would the audience believe or be influenced by the words on the page? Even a well-reasoned, evocative, and otherwise persuasive piece of writing will not gain much traction without a noted author.

Where such a piece does arise, though, it is still not likely to gain traction until the proper authorities have reviewed and “blessed” the material with their own authority.

This characteristic of persuasion is most commonly referred to as “ethos.” Ethos is one of three elements of Rhetoric that have been passed down since Aristotle taught his students rhetoric in the fourth century BC. Ethos very loosely translates (though, I think, best translates) as the character of the author. When trying to persuade others, the thing that matters most is the *perception* of the author’s character—as opposed to the author’s character as she perceives it—so the audience’s familiarity with and feelings toward the author are supremely important.

The other two elements of rhetoric that Aristotle handed down are “pathos” and “logos.” These elements—ethos, pathos, and logos—are still taught as the foundational principles in any writing course. Ethos translates as the character, and thus the credibility, of the author; pathos best translates as the emotion evoked by the subject and actual text of a writing; and logos, essentially, refers to the logic of the argument presented.

Thomas Jefferson was a master of these elements of writing in an age when writing was the medium of celebrity. He wrote to tug at the heart strings; he wrote to tap into passions and fears; he wrote always for his audience. And as he wrote and gained notoriety as a writer, his celebrity grew. His was an intellectual celebrity, that of a statesman of the highest order in domestic affairs, a diplomat versed in international affairs, and, above all, a principal hand in shaping the ideas that gave rise to our fledgling republic. The popular perception of Jefferson, then, gave him immense celebrity in politics, diplomacy, and philosophy. And that credibility made him persuasive on diverse subjects across those fields.

But an author’s credibility is not a static thing. Rather, the perception of that author’s credibility will vary with the times, the political winds, and a great many other factors. As you will read over the following chapters, America’s perception of Thomas Jefferson ebbed and flowed a great deal with the political tides. That he authored the Declaration of Independence scored Jefferson a lot of points with his American audience. But politics is a fickle business, and Jefferson’s celebrity waned for many Americans after the luster of the Revolution wore off. It took Jefferson’s semiretirement to Monticello, and letting his opponent’s attacks subside, for his stock to rise back up,

enabling him to meaningfully reenter public life. That he accomplished so much in such an environment is a tribute to his persuasive power in good times.

One of the most important of the factors playing into an author's credibility is the audience's preconceptions about the author and how well a particular piece of writing fits with those preconceptions—consistency of argument, in short. Basically, does what you say today match what you said yesterday? Or has something changed? If it has changed, is it an important change? This line of questioning goes through every member of every audience's head—albeit generally subconsciously—when evaluating an argument made by someone that audience member knows something about.

Where the audience knows of and approves the author's authority on a given subject, and where the particular piece of writing is about the subject on which the author is an authority, the audience will be open to be persuaded to the author's position. For example, if I read a piece written by Stephen Hawking about the physics errors in *The Big Bang Theory*, I—not a theoretical physicist—will definitely trust the authority of Stephen Hawking—probably the most renowned theoretical physicist—as to any scientific errors that made it into the show.

On the other hand, where the audience knows of and approves the author's authority on a given subject, but the particular piece of writing is about some other subject—something about which the author isn't likely to know—then that audience will be much less likely to be persuaded to the author's position on that other subject. Back to the Stephen Hawking hypo: If I read a piece by Stephen Hawking about Shaggy's new album, I—though still not an expert in the field—will not trust the authority of Mr. Hawking—still a theoretical physicist, not someone we would expect to know much about reggae fusion tunes—about the storytelling aspects of that album.

Jefferson, in this regard, presents an interesting example because he was such a renaissance man, wearing so many hats so very well. In addition to being an attorney, statesman, diplomat, and philosopher, Jefferson was also an architect, a farmer, a philanthropist, and an expert on any number of topics about which he, at any point over his career, needed to know. Therefore, Jefferson would likely have been a credible source on most topics on which he spoke—or, much more likely, wrote.

The consistency of the author's argument will also affect the audience's perception of that author. For example—all too well known to those who ever

watch US news during election cycles—where a political candidate switches his position on a particular subject, that candidate's credibility is greatly hurt as he will likely be labeled as something to the effect of a “flip-flopper.” Whether an author's position on a particular subject *can* evolve without his being labeled a flip-flopper will be a question of the degree of change to his position, how the author handles the perception of the change, and the author's overall credibility with the audience to date.

If the author can justify his change in position as well as the reasons he held the old position, then he may actually come out looking credible with his new position. For example, if new information becomes available that makes your old position untenable or even moot, an audience is likely to consider the new information to have justified your change in position. If the author cannot justify either his change or his old position, or is simply faced with an unrelentingly loud opposition, he may not come out looking credible on any subject at all. That would probably be an unjustifiable change, giving the audience reason to distrust the author, losing him credibility in the long run.

Importantly, the audience's perception of an author and his work will change over time, regardless of action or inaction by the author, himself. Every time the author issues a new work, every time an old work is critiqued and the audience hears that critique, and every time the audience is exposed to new, relevant information or new circumstances, the audience's perception of the author evolves—or devolves, as the case may be. A positive perception can be reinforced over time where the author maintains the thrust of his position on a subject, where a critique of the author's work is not itself persuasive for any number of reasons, or where new information or new circumstances remain in line with and reinforce the author's previous position on a subject. A positive perception can be undermined, however, where the author materially changes his position on a subject, where a critique of the author's previous work seems to prove that some piece of the author's premise or argument is false or weak, or where new information or new circumstances are encountered by the audience and that new information does not seem to jibe with the author's take on a subject.

Thus far, this has largely been a discussion of character, of ethos. That is because the character of an author matters so very much. One's ethos is a sort of ticket to play. Without establishing it before your audience, you can't even get in the game—the audience has no real reason to read what you've written.

Especially in today's world, where blog posts, tweets, and discussion boards overload our senses without our even seeking out information, establishing your credibility first is absolutely essential if you want the audience to give your piece more than a passing glance.



So, having said all that,

HOW DO I BECOME A PERSUASIVE WRITER?



There are some keys drawn from Aristotle's *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos* that are taught not only in writing courses, but also in management courses, in psychology courses, in communications courses, and, to a lesser extent perhaps, in most other courses training people to interact with customers, superiors, subordinates, constituents, the masses, the media, the elite, and so on and so forth. In short, the keys presented in what follows are critical to know and understand for anyone trying to persuade others through the written word.

ETHOS

Developed in the first half of this chapter is a very general discussion of some of the concerns a writer should keep in mind regarding her *ethos*, her perceived character. This first element of rhetoric has been the focus, thus far, not only because it is the ticket to play but also because it is the only element we cannot catch and correct in revising our texts. Therefore, many of the lessons drawn forth from Jefferson's life and writings are simple reminders to "think"—for example, about a choice you are about to make as regards how your audience will perceive you tomorrow. Rather, *ethos* is something we must cultivate over time; it is something we must keep at the forefront of our minds.

We can refine some of the broad concerns presented earlier and find defined terms that each of us can take practical steps to develop to become more persuasive writers.