

Persuasive Writing Unit

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Description of Context

Our middle school is a relatively new school in Gwinnett County, Georgia. Earning its accreditation in 1997, the school was named after and dedicated to a former superintendent of Gwinnett County Public Schools. Deriving from his high standards for education, the middle school represented quality education from its beginning. Even after eight years, the school continues to provide superior levels of teaching and learning. According to the Georgia Department of Education's website, the middle school met the Accountability Profile (AYP) for the 2004-2005 school year and was deemed an "adequate school," which means that the school made adequate yearly progress for two consecutive years. Furthermore, 97.99% of the school's teachers are considered "highly qualified teachers;" only one teacher, a foreign language instructor, did not qualify as a "highly qualified teacher."

Comparing our middle school with other middle schools around Gwinnett County and throughout Georgia, the school could be described as more affluent and less racially/ethnically diverse than most other schools. The Department of Education's statistics for the school show that only about 10% of the school's (estimated) 1,334 students were considered "economically disadvantaged" during the 2003-2004 school year. This measure of "economic disadvantage" corresponds to the number of students that are eligible for the free or reduced meal program. However, the percentage of students labeled "economically disadvantaged" state-wide is around 46%, which is a tremendous increase from our school's 10%. In other words, the community that surrounds the school definitely consists of middle- and high-income families. Furthermore, the racial and ethnic make-up of the school is significantly different than some of the other middle schools around the county and state. Based on data from the 2003-2004 school year, 10% of the student population were Asian, 10% were African American, 5% were Hispanic, 2% were considered multi-racial, and 74% were Caucasian (Native Americans made up 0% of the student population). When these percentages are compared to the percentages of each racial/ethnic category in the whole state of Georgia, the middle school seems to have a higher percentage of Asians, a significantly lower percentage of African Americans, similar percentages of Hispanics and multi-racial students, and a considerably higher percentage of Caucasian students than the average percentages from the state. In general, Caucasian students comprise almost three-fourths of the entire school population. However, while the middle school seems to be less racially and ethnically diverse than many surrounding schools, the community and the school continues to get more and more diverse each year.

Our middle school also works hard to maintain an impressive student body. The school enjoys a notable attendance rate, as 65.5% of the students missed five or less days of school during the 2003-2004 school year. In addition, only 6 students were retained during the same year, which is most likely a result of the school's high attendance. The school's dropout rate was approximately .6%, which is lower than Georgia's 3.5%. Also, according to our mentor teacher, the middle school ranks very highly on national and state test scores, and the school is often honored for various scholastic achievements.

Georgia Performance Standards

We will be using the Georgia Performance Standards to determine our goals for the unit.

- ELA7W1: The student produces writing that establishes an appropriate organizational structure, sets a context and engages the reader, maintains a coherent focus throughout, and provides a satisfying closure.
 - o Selects a focus, an organizational structure, and a point of view based on purpose, genre expectations, audience, length, and format requirements
 - o Supports statements and claims with anecdotes, descriptions, facts and statistics, and specific examples
- ELA7W2: The student produces a multi-paragraph letter in the form of a persuasive essay.
 - o States a clear position in support of a proposition
 - o Describes the points in support of the proposition, employing well-articulated, relevant evidence
 - o Creates an organizing structure appropriate to a specific purpose, audience, and context
 - o Anticipates and addresses readers' concerns and counter-arguments
 - o Provides a sense of closure to the writing
- ELA7W4: The student consistently uses the writing process to develop, revise, and evaluate writing.
 - o Revises manuscripts to improve the organization and consistency of ideas within and between paragraphs
 - o Edits writing to improve word choice after checking the precision of the vocabulary
- ELA7C1: The student demonstrates understanding and control of the rules of the English language, realizing that usage involves the appropriate application of conventions and grammar in both written and spoken formats.
- ELA7LSV1: The student participates in student-to-teacher, student-to-student, and group verbal interactions.
 - o Asks relevant questions
 - o Responds to questions with appropriate information
 - o Offers own opinion forcefully without domineering
 - o Gives reasons in support of opinions expressed

Persuasive Writing Rationale

Educational experts require that all seventh graders learn about persuasive writing. Perhaps this is because persuasive writing can be such an effective tool for expressing oneself, for taking and representing a stand, and a vehicle for social responsibility. Whatever the reason, persuasive writing pieces are staples for students everywhere.

This middle school persuasive writing assignment focuses less on the final product and more on the pre-writing instruction that will allow students to practice and develop the thinking and communicating skills that they will need to effectively persuade a given audience. Though traditional writing emphasizes grammar, usage, and form, developing students' thinking skills better suggests and even fosters long-term success. In *Designing and Sequencing Prewriting Activities*, author Johannessen emphasizes the importance of such activity-based instruction. He says,

If writing were simply a matter of correct usage and mechanics, our jobs might be easier – but much less interesting. Implicit in the process of writing to communicate ideas to an audience is the process of thinking. Therefore, for prewriting instruction to be complete it must teach thinking strategies essential to effective written communication. (1)

That means that teachers have the responsibility of teaching students how to think and communicate the persuasive concepts necessary for a solid persuasive piece.

To do this effectively, we decided that the most important concepts to teach students about are the following: choosing a position (not wavering somewhere in the middle), assessing the needs of the audience and accounting for those, using

appropriate claims and supporting evidence, and developing solid paragraphs. The activities in this unit break down the steps of these central concepts into more manageable pieces for middle school students. By teaching this step-by-step conceptual approach, teachers will help students practice taking a position, forming an argument with sound claims and evidence for an appropriate audience. Developing the skills of these central concepts will enable students to better communicate through strong persuasive writing.

First, the students should complete the “State Your Position” handout. This activity should have topics on it that the students are familiar with. The students will state their opinion or position over the statements or questions listed. The idea of this activity is not to debate topics, necessarily; but this activity will introduce the persuasive aspect of taking a definitive side on a particular point. Students cannot waver in the middle, but they must make a choice. In addition, this exercise will require that the students identify their reasoning behind at least one of the decisions that they made. Through the class discussion and the written response at the bottom of the page, students can begin thinking about certain claims that they are making. Even though these answers are likely simplistic, the thinking process is the same for more complicated topics. Finally, as part of this introductory activity, the students will have a chance to discuss the difficulties of choosing a side and how a particular stance was more effective after they explained their position.

Next, the students will complete the “Persuasive Graphic Organizer” handout. This portion of the instructional design will require that students work in pairs to further develop their knowledge of persuasive writing. One student will describe a piece of

candy (or something equally familiar) to his or her partner and try to entice them to eat it. They will make three claims or statements about the candy (their reasoning directed at the specific audience) and then write the evidence along with each claim. The students will use the graphic organizer to record their information and see the relationships between the audience, claims, and evidence. In Kyleene Beers's *When Kids Can't Read – What Teachers Can Do*, she says, "Graphic organizers help dependent readers organize information and see relationships that they otherwise might not see" (194). Students understand the concepts and key relationships better with graphic organizers than without them. For this persuasive piece, the graphic organizer serves two purposes: first, it allows students to put their thoughts onto paper to see the relationship between the information they already have a schema for; and second, it prepares students for their culminating writing piece because it is in the same kind of information that they will need to come up with later.

After reflecting on the process that each student used to convince their partner to eat some piece of candy, the students will use the information in a graphic organizer to construct an outline. Teachers should first lead a student discussion concerning how to construct an outline for a persuasive argument – discussing claims, evidence, and where each piece goes. The students will get into groups for this activity so that the students can teach each other and learn from discussions about the information. Each group will convert one group member's claims and corresponding evidence into an outline (each student should fill out their own outline worksheet). This worksheet will allow students to organize their claims and evidence into the more structured form they will use later. Teachers should also use this activity to talk about opening and

concluding statements, their function and form. Though the format will be new, the information in the outline should not. By using information already established, the groups will be able to focus on the form and structure of the outline and how the pieces fit together in that form rather than coming up with new claims or new pieces of evidence. Again, the graphic organizer (the outline) will help students think about the relationship between the topics, claims, and supporting evidence of their thoughts.

To develop strong paragraphs, this next activity begins with the teacher modeling how to form a paragraph from an outline. Then, the students will write individual paragraphs based on the outline they created with the group (from the previous activity). Once the students have written their individual paragraphs, they should get back together with the group that they created the outline with to compare paragraphs. After the students have read each group member's paragraph, they should discuss how the paragraphs are similar and different and how each person chose to structure their individual paragraphs, including the strengths and weaknesses of each group member. By combining individual and group work on this activity, each student can develop the skill while still receiving support and input from fellow students.

The culminating persuasive piece is not a persuasive paper. This deviation from the norm is intentional because it will allow students to demonstrate their knowledge in a more creative, meaningful, and in a less "high stakes" environment. Michael W. Smith reports in his book *Reducing Writing Apprehension* that

high apprehensives make fewer statements and use fewer words in general, besides using fewer -ly words, fewer commas, and less delimiting punctuation than do low apprehensives...low apprehensives

write shorter sentences and use three times as many words and twice as many paragraphs as do high apprehensives... (2)

Furthermore, in the chapter entitled “Thinking Like an Assessor,” the author manifests this same ideology by saying that “Sometimes, sophisticated *understandings* lurk beneath weakly executed *performances*” (80). Both authors mean writing that encourages (or simply does not discourage) high apprehension can mask students’ skills. To account for this, teachers should consider ways to have students complete the same type of assignment without the same high stakes. For this unit, the students will be writing a letter to their parents convincing them that they deserve something or that deserve to do something. By writing letters to parents about real life requests, the students will be able to demonstrate their learning without having to write a persuasive paper that is stressful because of its “high stakes” mentality. To increase ownership of the topics that students choose, this culminating assessment allows students to choose their topic. This helps students feel more comfortable with the topic and it encourages deeper motivation. As part of that process, teachers should have the students construct a new outline with their new claims and evidence before the students draft the letter. We have also included peer revisions of the drafts to make sure that students are given enough feedback on their writing so that they can really improve and develop their skills. That way, the entire piece is a *process*, not simply a final *product*.

Works Cited

Beers, Kylene. *When Kids Can't Read – What Teachers Can Do*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2003.

Johannessen, L., Kahn, E., & Walter, C. C. *Designing and Sequencing Prewriting Activities*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1982.

Smith, M. W. *Reducing Writing Apprehension*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1984.

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Account of Assumptions

Throughout the course of the year, the students have been writing something everyday, anything from a short journal entry to a five-paragraph expository essay. Journal entries are typically not graded but looked at for effort and completion of assignment. Their journals best reflect where they are in their writing. Since the journals consist of personal opinions and experiences, they do not put forth an extra effort to write correctly or creatively, because they are more concerned about content than correctness. Therefore, the journal entries run ragged with spelling mistakes and grammar problems. They have fabulous content, but getting to the meat of their writing is often difficult because of the sloppy grammar and poor spelling.

They are familiar, but not comfortable, with writing an essay, mostly due to the fact they have only written one essay. Based on their first five-paragraph essay they completed in the previous unit, they do not understand the concept of staying on topic throughout the entire piece of work. The students understand and know the importance and placement of a topic sentence for each paragraph. Their sentence variety, syntax, spelling, and vocabulary are gradually improving. Grammar lessons are an essential part of every day. They have learned about each part of speech, capitalization, punctuation, the structure of sentences, and the spelling of commonly confused homonyms. The only audience for whom they have written has been the teacher and each other. Writing in the first person point of view is all that they have learned and done.

We are going to teach the students how to write a persuasive essay, which includes presenting an argument, backing up that argument, and anticipating a counter-argument. For this assignment, they will be writing a persuasive letter to their parents, their new audience. We will strive to continue their attempt to improve their writing skills. Their audience, objective, and format of writing will be different from the previous essay. Their grammar will be looked at more closely than before. For this assignment, they will be required to use a variety of sentences and vocabulary words. Spelling must be pristine. We will give them time to work on this assignment in class, so plenty of resources will be available to help them perfect their spelling, including, but not limited to, the dictionary, spell check on a word processor, and the teachers.

Task Analysis

To produce an effective piece of persuasive writing, students must first know how to take a particular “side” (or stand) and be able to explain their decision for choosing one “side” over another. In order to develop any sort of persuasive argument, students must be able to choose a topic that is both arguable and defensible. They also need to be able to identify specific claims, or reasons, that justify their stand on a topic, and be able to provide sound evidence for these claims. Using their claims and corresponding evidence, students should also be able to create a structured outline that organizes their information into an orderly paragraph and/or essay format. Furthermore, students should know how to form appropriate persuasive paragraphs; these paragraphs should, at the very least, include a topic sentence, one claim, two pieces of corresponding evidence, and a concluding sentence. In addition, students must be familiar with how to construct persuasive writing that is formatted similar to a traditional essay. They need to be able to produce a piece of writing with at least four paragraphs, including an introduction, two (or more) body paragraphs, and a conclusion.

Order of Activities

1. Unit Hook- State Your Position Activity - The students will state their opinion or position over a number of statements or questions. Then they will explain their opinion. The questions or statements are topics that should be familiar to the students. This activity will introduce the persuasive aspect of taking sides and explaining a position. The students will share their answers in a class discussion. They will discuss the difficulties of choosing a side and how their answer was more effective after they explained their position.
2. Persuasive Graphic Organizer - The students will get into partners to further develop their knowledge of persuasive writing. One student will describe a piece of candy to his or her partner and try to entice them to eat it. They will make three claims or statements about the candy and then write the evidence along with each claim. The students will use a graphic organizer to record their information. This activity is more challenging than the introductory activity and requires more critical thinking to continue to develop persuasive skills. They will also start learning the importance of organizing their claims and evidence for persuasive paper.
3. Persuasive Outline - The teacher will lead a student discussion about how to construct an outline for a persuasive argument. The students will get into groups of three or four to create a general outline based on one person's Persuasive Graphic Organizer. Each group will convert one group member's claims and corresponding evidence into an outline (each student should fill out their own outline worksheet). This worksheet will allow students to organize their claims and evidence into a more structured form. Although they should develop an opening statement and concluding statement, the information in the outline should not be any new information; the claims and evidence should come from the group member's graphic organizer.
4. Persuasive Paragraph - The teacher will model how to form a paragraph from an outline. Then, the students will write individual paragraphs based on the outline they created with the group. Once the students have written their individual paragraphs, they should get back together with the group that they created the outline with to compare paragraphs. After the students have read each group member's paragraph, they should discuss how the paragraphs are similar and different and how each person chose to structure their individual paragraphs.
5. Persuasive Letter – For the final product, the students will be asked to produce a persuasive letter to their parent(s). This letter should be formatted similar to a persuasive essay (with an introduction, body paragraphs, and a

conclusion), and it should follow the same organization as the persuasive outlines and persuasive paragraphs that the students have been practicing. The students will be allowed to choose their own topic; however, they should choose a topic that is persuasive in nature and involves them persuading their parent(s) to let them do something or get something. So that the students construct their persuasive letters using the same method as before, the students will be required to complete a persuasive outline and a persuasive paragraph before completing their persuasive letter.

- a) First, the students need to choose a topic for their individual persuasive letter. They should make sure that they have a sufficient line of argumentation (with at least two claims and corresponding evidence) for this particular topic.
- b) If necessary, the students can use the Persuasive Graphic Organizer worksheet to organize the persuasive claims and corresponding evidence for their topic.
- c) Next, the students should use the Persuasive Outline worksheet to arrange and organize their specific claims and evidence for their persuasive letter. The students should fill out all parts of the outline that are applicable to their particular topic, claims, and evidence.
- d) The students should then use the Persuasive Paragraph worksheet to create a paragraph based on their outline. This paragraph should reflect the standard format, with a topic sentence, a claim, at least two pieces of evidence, and a concluding sentence, and should be used as part of the students' final product.
- e) Using the one paragraph they already completed, the students will write their entire persuasive letter, adding an introduction paragraph, at least one more body paragraph, and a conclusion paragraph.
- f) The students should have time in class to edit each other's persuasive letters. They should get at least two other students to read the first draft of their letter, editing it for effective persuasive argumentation, reasonable claims and sufficient evidence, proper format, and grammar.
- g) Finally, the students should look over their own letter, correct any errors, and then write the final draft of their persuasive letter.

State Your Position

Directions: For each statement, choose one extreme position or the other. Write three sentences about why you chose that position. **YOU HAVE TO CHOOSE ONE!**

1. Vanilla OR Chocolate?
2. Burger King OR McDonald's?
3. Pop Music OR Country Music?
4. Jessica Simpson OR Britney Spears?
5. Football OR Basketball?
6. Pen OR Pencil?
7. Read aloud OR Silently?
8. Cold weather OR Warm weather?
9. Man President OR Woman President?
10. Rent movies OR Movie Theater?
11. Bottled water OR Water from the faucet?

Persuasive Graphic Organizer

Directions: You and your partner will be given two types of candy. Your goal is to persuade your partner that your piece of candy is the best and to eat your piece of candy. Make three claims or statements about the candy to persuade your partner and state evidence to support those claims by using the graphic organizer.

Candy: _____

Audience: _____

CLAIMS	EVIDENCE
1.	1.
2.	2.
3.	3.

Persuasive Outline

Directions: As a group, organize one group member's Persuasive Graphic Organizer into an outline format. Create an introductory statement that explains the line of argumentation - why someone should choose your particular candy. This statement should introduce the three main claims. Next, arrange the three main claims and the corresponding evidence into a logical order. Finally, the group should come up with a concluding statement that relates back to the introductory statement and sums up the main claims and evidence.

Candy: _____

Audience: _____

I. Introductory statement _____

A. Claim #1 _____

a. Evidence _____

B. Claim #2 _____

b. Evidence _____

C. Claim #3 _____

c. Evidence _____

II. Concluding statement _____

Persuasive Paragraph

Directions: Use the information from your Persuasive Outline worksheet to write a paragraph. In particular, use the outline format of the worksheet to help you develop an effective and logical persuasive paragraph. Make sure that you remember to add a topic sentence at the beginning of the paragraph to introduce the topic and a concluding sentence at the end of the paragraph to summarize the paragraph.

Topic Sentence
Claim #1
Evidence #1
Claim #2
Evidence #2
Claim #3
Evidence #3
Concluding Sentence

Persuasive Outline: Persuasive Letter Assignment

Directions: Use this outline to format and structure your ideas for your Persuasive Letter assignment. This outline should help you form your letter's body paragraphs that should argue your point with claims and evidence. You should have at least one claim and one piece of evidence for each body paragraph; however, to make your letter more effective, it may be necessary to have more than one piece of evidence for each claim. Because each claim and its corresponding evidence equals one body paragraph, your Persuasive Letter should have at least two body paragraphs.

Topic: _____

Audience: _____

I. Introductory statement _____

A. Claim #1 _____

a. Evidence #1 _____

a. Evidence #2 _____

B. Claim #2 _____

b. Evidence #1 _____

b. Evidence #2 _____

II. Concluding Statement _____

Persuasive Paragraph: Persuasive Letter Assignment

Directions: Use this worksheet to write one (or both) of the body paragraphs for your Persuasive Letter assignment. Remember, each body paragraph should include one claim and two pieces of corresponding evidence, as well as a topic sentence and concluding sentence.

Topic Sentence
Claim #1
Evidence #1
Evidence #2
Concluding Sentence

Topic Sentence
Claim #2
Evidence #1
Evidence #2
Concluding Sentence

Persuasive Letter Rubric

	NOVICE	APPRENTICE	PROFICIENT	DISTINGUISHED	
Audience	It is not clear that the audience is writing letter to a parent or guardian. (20-22 points)	Demonstrates some understanding of the potential reader and uses arguments appropriate for that audience. (23-24 points)	Demonstrates a general understanding of the potential reader and uses vocabulary and arguments appropriate for that audience. (25-27 points)	Demonstrates a clear understanding of the reader and uses appropriate vocabulary and arguments to respond to potential questions and concerns. (28-30 points)	<hr/> 30
Organization	Many of the support details or arguments are not in an expected or logical order, distracting the reader and making the essay seem very confusing. (20-22 points)	A few of the support details or arguments are not in an expected or logical order that is both confusing and distracting for the reader. (23-24 points)	Arguments and support are presented in a fairly logical order that is reasonably easy to follow. (25-27 points)	Arguments and support are presented in a logical order that is easy and interesting to follow. (28-30 points)	<hr/> 30
Details and Support	Evidence and examples are NOT relevant and/or are not explained. (20-22 points)	At least one of the pieces of evidence and examples is relevant and has an explanation that shows how that piece of evidence supports the author's position. (23-24 points)	Most of the evidence and examples are specific, relevant and explanations are given that show how each piece of evidence supports the author's position. (25-27 points)	All of the evidence and examples are specific and relevant. Explanations that show how each piece of evidence supports the author's position are given. (28-30 points)	<hr/> 30
Grammar Usage Mechanics Spelling	9 or more errors (3-4 points)	6-8 errors (5-6 points)	3-5 errors (7-8 points)	0-2 errors (9-10 points)	<hr/> 10