

# A Passion For Democracy: American Essays

Name \_\_\_\_\_

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## How to Write a Persuasive Essay: The Basics

A persuasive essay is designed to create **change** of some sort. Change in how the reader sees the issue. Change in society's views on the subject. Change in how the subject is taught or discussed. **What the author should NOT be trying to do is change the reader's own opinion. There is an important difference between changing how a reader sees an issue and how they feel about it.** People's minds are not changed, usually, on the basis of one argument or essay, but rather by an accumulation of evidence and ideas. Since most people don't form their opinions or views based on a single source or argument, trying to accomplish that feat with your own persuasive argument is a fool's errand. A successful persuasive essay leaves the reader thinking "Hm, I never thought about it that way before," not "Wow! I've been so foolish up until now. Now I understand the right way to view this issue."

Successful persuasive writers will use the **Defensive Approach** to an argument. Attacking other people's views, especially if that's all the writer does, is going on the Offense. The other views are wrong, and the writer is going to prove it! The problem with the Offense Approach is that if your audience happens to hold that view, your offense has offended and insulted them. **Instead, a persuasive essay should focus on defending the writer's view.** Explain how and why you came to this conclusion. What evidence convinced you? The reader is free to accept or reject the evidence without any challenge or insults.

American society likes its arguments to be dichotomies: two-sided, right/wrong, good/bad, us/them. Unfortunately, most subjects and arguments exist on a **spectrum** of ideas and opinions, shades of gray. It is essential that any writer understand this difference and that other views are not simply dismissed or labeled as "different, and therefore wrong." The defensive writer can still argue against other views, but by explaining why those views don't work for him/her, not why they shouldn't work or make sense to anybody. In a persuasive essay, even though you are arguing what you believe to be true, you are still only presenting ONE possible view, A position, AN understanding, not THE truth, THE one and only valid opinion.

Additionally, for the purposes of most persuasive writing, **arguments should be based on empirical evidence: things that can be shown to be physically true, are repeatable in a controlled environment and/or verified through a reputable source.** What is not usually acceptable is arguments based on articles of faith. Faith, by definition, is believing in things that cannot be empirically proven to be true. One's belief that they are true is thus "faith." In certain circumstances, on certain issues, and for certain audiences, faith based arguments are acceptable. For most professional and academic situations, they are not.

**Evidence** is the key to a successful persuasive essay. The writer can not just state that things are true; there must be some sort of proof. In the Defensive Approach, the writer should include the specific evidence, examples or experiences that have convinced him/her of this view. An essay that simply states "Gun violence is too high" and then goes on to another issue is not successfully arguing its case. The writer needs to give **specific statistics and evidence**, from law enforcement professionals or other reputable sources, that support what the actual level of gun violence is. Then the argument that this level is too high needs to be addressed and supported by some sort of comparison or definition. After all, to some people, ANY gun violence would be too high. The better and more reputable the source, the stronger the argument will be. Statistics taken from an anonymous web page will not carry as much strength as FBI or Police Department statistics.

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