Persuasive Communication in Today’s Curriculum

The skills of communicating persuasively have been recognised in the National Curriculum as fundamental – in both the written and spoken genres. Persuasive communication places specific demands on a writer or speaker and helping students understand these will assist them in confidently starting their persuasive assignment.

Audience Analysis

Who will be the reading/listening audience? If I don’t understand something about the group I am trying to persuade it makes it very difficult to choose my approach. Often, this audience will be assumed to be their fellow classmates – especially in an oral assignment. This is fine as long as students do not get the message that analysing their audience is not important. We have provided students with a persuasive task – for example, advocating for a new school uniform – and asked how the message might be different if it were targeted at students and at parents.

Audience analysis will allow them to answer these two questions before they start writing:

1. What do they already know about this topic?
2. What is their attitude towards it?

This will allow them to determine their content and their approach. Their understanding of their audience will also help them at the conclusion of their persuasive piece…but more of that later.

Logic and Emotion

Persuading someone to act or think differently requires engagement at two levels:

1. A logical argument or case supported by credible facts
2. An emotional appeal that addresses the benefits at a feeling level

Students tend to need most help in choosing what data to use from the overwhelming amount of information that their research could unearth and in selecting the right words (and, possibly, images) to invoke the emotions.

Modality

The level of language conveys the writer’s (or speaker’s) passion. Encouraging students to ‘raise the temperature’ with stronger language will assist them to be more persuasive. If students have enough freedom to be able to choose topics about which they are already passionate, it will be easier to keep them engaged.

The Call to Action

The conclusion of a persuasive piece includes a call to action. This is where the audience analysis again comes into play in identifying:

1. The audience’s motivators: what is likely to influence or persuade them?
2. What is realistic to expect them to do.

They Already Know It

Years ago, I was asked to address a group of Year 9 students on persuasive skills. I realised that there was little I could teach them about ‘raw’ persuasion skills, so I took a different approach to the lesson. I gave them the hypothetical scenario of them being ‘grounded’ by their parents for two weeks for some serious breach of their rules; and then discovering that there is an event on Saturday that they really want to attend. What do they do and/or say to their parents to be allowed to attend? I listed all their responses and then wrote beside them the formal names of the persuasive techniques they were using. They named examples of every technique on my list.

If most students are like these Year 9’s – and I suspect they are – teaching persuasive communication might be accelerated by helping students to recognise the techniques they already use and showing them how to apply these techniques in a way that meets the curriculum.