



Persuasive Writing and Presidential Politics

Overview:

Letter to the Editor Activity: Students learn about persuasive writing and citizen involvement in national presidential elections with an authentic letter to the editor assignment. This is an introductory lesson.

Standards:

RI.11-12.2. Determine two or more central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to provide a complex analysis; provide an objective summary of the text.

RI.11-12.3. Analyze a complex set of ideas or sequence of events and explain how specific individuals, ideas, or events interact and develop over the course of the text.

RI.11-12.4. Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative, connotative, and technical meanings; analyze how an author uses and refines the meaning of a key term or terms over the course of a text (e.g., how Madison defines *faction* in *Federalist* No. 10).

RI.11-12.5. Analyze and evaluate the effectiveness of the structure an author uses in his or her exposition or argument, including whether the structure makes points clear, convincing, and engaging.

RI.11-12.8. Delineate and evaluate the reasoning in seminal U.S. texts, including the application of constitutional principles and use of legal reasoning (e.g., in U.S. Supreme Court majority opinions and dissents) and the premises, purposes, and arguments in works of public advocacy (e.g., *The Federalist*, presidential addresses).

W.11-12.1. Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

W.11-12.2. Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

W.11-12.4-6. Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience; develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach, focusing on addressing what is most significant for a specific purpose and audience; use technology, including the Internet, to produce, publish, and update individual or shared writing products in response to ongoing feedback, including new arguments or information.

Objectives:

The students will:

1. Identify the parts of an argument
2. Identify the Aristotelian Appeals
3. Analyze the language and diction of arguments in speeches and advertising
4. Identify schemes and tropes used in speech and debate



5. Analyze and evaluate the effectiveness of the structure an author uses in his or her exposition or argument, including whether the structure makes points clear, convincing, and engaging.
6. Delineate and evaluate the reasoning in seminal U.S. texts, including the application of constitutional principles and use of legal reasoning

Persuasive Writing in an Election Year

Persuasion is indeed a hallmark of democracy. What would America have become had the founders not been schooled in persuasive writing? The ideals of the fledgling nation were penned by the likes of Thomas Paine, Thomas Jefferson, [Benjamin Franklin](#), James Madison and Alexander Hamilton who used elements of Aristotelian rhetoric in order to determine a new course for the [fledgling American colonies](#).

Students need to be taught how, through the presentation of well-crafted arguments; they can become actively involved in the democratic process today.

- *Content Areas:* civics, persuasive writing, current events, computer research, typing skills
- *Materials:* multiple examples of letters to the editor, a list of presidential candidates for each student, computer lab

Rhetorical Rhombus

Explain to students that all writing occurs within the context of what is known as the "rhetorical rhombus." To illustrate, draw a large rhombus on the board and label each point of the design with the following:

- Author
- Audience
- Topic
- Purpose

Persuasive Appeals

Define the three types of persuasive appeals used in persuasive writing:

- **Ethos:** Based on ethics or morality, the writer appeals to the reader's sense of right and wrong in order to persuade.
- **Pathos:** The writer uses emotions like humor, fear, pity, or pride to change a reader's opinion.
- **Logos:** Facts, statistics and examples along with inductive or deductive reasoning cause readers to draw logical conclusions.



Modeled Writing

Before students are asked to write, they should be presented with models of various quality. Because writing is a metacognitive skill, evaluating writing samples will help students to make their own writing choices.

1. Break students into small groups. Present each group with example letters to the editor from local and national newspapers.
2. Ask students to work within their groups to determine the author, audience, topic and purpose for each letter.
3. Now ask student groups to rate the writing samples by effectiveness. As a class, discuss the strengths and weaknesses of each piece, and determine why one piece is better than another at achieving its purpose.
4. Ask students to come up with a list of attributes that they would find in a successful letter to the editor.

Researching Presidential Candidates

Now discuss how students can use the power of persuasive writing to make a difference in presidential politics by writing letters of support to local newspapers. Provide students with a complete list of candidates from various parties (Republican, Democrat, Libertarian, Green, Reform, Unity, etc.). Provide class time for online research of the various candidates. Once students have had time for research, assign a letter to the editor.

Letter to the Editor Writing Assignment:

Choose a local or state newspaper for which to write a letter to the editor. Following that newspaper's guidelines for word count, write a letter in which you use at least one ethical, one emotional and one logical argument in support of any one presidential candidate from any political party. Students who truly have no preference should take this time to educate themselves on a candidate they know nothing about. The writing should show a good understanding of the relationship between the author, audience, topic and purpose.

Grading the Writing:

Encourage process writing by allowing students to peer-edit and to work through several drafts of their letter.