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## WRITING FOR ACADEMIC AND PROFESSIONAL CONTEXTS: AN INTRODUCTION

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# *Chapter 6: Bias in Writing and Research*

## READING AND WRITING CRITICALLY

### STYLE AND TONE OF LANGUAGE

Just as with any essay, the way you write and the **tone** that you use is very important to consider. If you are talking with a person who uses aggressive and inflammatory words, are you more or less likely to listen to the whole argument and ultimately be convinced? If someone is waving his hands and swearing or yelling, the gestures and raised voice may actually distract you from what is being said. Also, when people are extremely animated in their discussions, their audience may become defensive if they do not agree with the ideas presented. In such a case, the audience may then respond in the same way, and no one ends up really hearing other points of view and will definitely not be convinced.

In short, remember to choose your words carefully. While you will need to use assertive language to support your ideas, you need to choose objective words. How you make your argument more convincing is by: Using strong, peer-reviewed, and reliable evidence to back up your ideas; presenting and rebutting at least one opposing idea

### ACKNOWLEDGING OPPOSING IDEAS AND LIMITS TO YOUR ARGUMENT

Because an argument implies differing points of view on the subject, you must be sure to acknowledge those opposing ideas. Avoiding ideas that conflict with your own gives the reader the impression that you may be uncertain, fearful, or unaware of opposing ideas. Thus, it is essential that you not only address counterarguments but also do so respectfully.

Try to address opposing arguments earlier rather than later in your essay. Rhetorically speaking, ordering your positive arguments last allows you to better address ideas that conflict with your own, so you can spend the rest of the essay countering those arguments. This way, you leave your reader thinking about your argument rather than someone else's. You have the last word.

Acknowledging different points of view also fosters more **credibility** between you and the audience. They know from the outset that you are aware of opposing ideas and that you are not afraid to give them space.

It is also helpful to establish the limits of your argument and what you are trying to accomplish. In effect, you are conceding early on that your argument is not the ultimate authority on a given topic. Such humility can go a long way toward earning credibility and trust with an audience. Your readers will know from the beginning that you are a reasonable writer, and they will trust your argument as a result. For example, in the following concessionary statement, the writer advocates for stricter gun control laws, but admits it will not solve all of our problems with crime:

Although tougher gun control laws are a powerful first step in decreasing violence in our streets, such legislation alone cannot end these problems since guns are not the only problem we face.

Such a concession will be welcome by those who might disagree with this writer's argument in the first place. To effectively persuade their readers, writers need to be modest in their goals and humble in their approach to get readers to listen to the ideas.

**Phrases of Concession** are those such as:

- although
- granted that
- of course
- still
- though
- yet

## BIAS IN WRITING

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Everyone has various **biases** on any number of topics. For example, you might have a bias toward wearing black instead of brightly coloured clothes, or wearing jeans rather than formal wear. You might have a bias toward working at night rather than in the morning, or working by deadlines rather than getting tasks done in advance. These examples identify minor biases, of course, but they still indicate preferences and opinions.

Bias and angles can easily appear even through the smallest words you choose to use in your writing. Choosing each word carefully is even more significant in a persuasive paper because, as already mentioned, you want your reader to view your presentation of ideas as logical and not just a tirade. Using ob-

jective and neutral language and evidence and acknowledging you have a possible bias will help you present a well-rounded and developed argument.

Handling bias in writing and in daily life can be a useful skill. It will allow you to articulate your own points of view while also defending yourself against unreasonable points of view.

The ideal in persuasive writing is to let your reader know your bias, but do not let that bias blind you to the primary components of good argumentation: sound, thoughtful evidence and a respectful and reasonable address of opposing sides.

- **The strength of a personal bias** is that it can motivate you to construct a strong argument. If you are invested in the topic, you are more likely to care about the piece of writing. Similarly, the more you care, the more time and effort you are apt to put forth and the better the final product will be.
- **The weakness of personal bias** is that it can take over the essay—when, for example, you neglect opposing ideas, exaggerate your points, or repeatedly insert yourself ahead of the subject by using *I* too often. Being aware of all three of these pitfalls will help you avoid them.

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### Identifying Bias



Video source: <https://youtu.be/ccK9TTA6xiw>

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**Hidden agendas** are goals that are not immediately obvious but influence how an author presents the facts. For instance, an article about the role of beef in a healthy diet would be questionable if it were written by a representative of the beef industry—or by the president of an animal rights organization. In both cases, the author would likely have a hidden agenda.

## FACT VERSUS OPINION

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**Facts** are statements that can be definitely proven using objective data. The statement that is a fact is absolutely valid. In other words, the statement can be pronounced as true or false. For example,  $2 + 2 = 4$ . This expression identifies a true statement, or a fact, because it can be proved **objectively**.

**Opinions** are **subjective** and include personal views, or judgments. An opinion is what an individual believes about a particular subject. However, an opinion in argumentation must have legitimate backing; adequate evidence and credibility should support the opinion.

Consider the credibility of expert opinions, as experts in a given field have the knowledge and credentials to make their opinion meaningful to a larger audience.

For example, you seek the opinion of your dentist when it comes to the health of your gums, and you seek the opinion of your mechanic when it comes to the maintenance of your car. Both have knowledge and credentials in those respective fields, which is why their opinions matter to you. But the authority of your dentist may be greatly diminished should he or she offer an opinion about your car, and vice versa.

In your writing, you want to strike a balance between credible facts and authoritative opinions. Relying on one or the other will likely lose more of your audience than it gains.

## THE USE OF THE FIRST PERSON (“I”) IN WRITING

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The use of *I* in writing is often a topic of debate, and the acceptance of its usage varies from instructor to instructor. It is difficult to predict the preferences for all your present and future instructors, but consider the effects it can potentially have on your writing.

Be mindful of the use of *I* in your writing because it can make your argument sound overly biased, for two primary reasons:

Excessive repetition of any word will eventually catch the reader’s attention—and usually not in a good way. The use of *I* is no different.

The insertion of *I* into a sentence alters not only the way a sentence might sound but also the composition of the sentence itself. *I* is often the subject of a sentence. If the subject of the essay is supposed to be, say, smoking, then by inserting yourself into the sentence, you are effectively displacing the subject of the essay into a secondary position. In the following example, the subject of the sentence is bolded and underlined:

**Smoking** is bad. vs. I think **smoking** is bad.

In the first sentence, the rightful subject, *smoking*, is in the subject position in the sentence. In the second sentence, the insertion of *I* and *think* replaces *smoking* as the subject, which draws attention to *I* and away from the topic that is supposed to be discussed. Remember to keep the message (the subject) and the messenger (the writer) separate.

You can use the following checklist for good arguments as you work on your persuasive essay:

## Developing Sound Arguments

- Does my essay contain the following elements?
- An engaging introduction
- A reasonable, specific thesis that is able to be supported by evidence
- A varied range of evidence from credible sources
- Respectful acknowledgment and explanation of opposing ideas
- A style and tone of language that is appropriate for the subject and audience
- Acknowledgment of the argument's limits
- A conclusion that will adequately summarize the essay and reinforce the thesis

**PRO TIP:** The word *prove* is frequently used in the discussion of persuasive writing. Writers may claim that one piece of evidence or another proves the argument, but proving an argument is often not possible. **No evidence proves a debatable topic one way or the other**; that is why the topic is debatable. Facts can be proved, but opinions can only be supported, explained, and persuaded.

## USING VISUAL ELEMENTS TO STRENGTHEN ARGUMENTS

Adding visual elements to a persuasive argument can often strengthen its persuasive effect. However, remember you want to use them to make a bigger impact for your reader, so you need to make sure they are:

- **Relevant and essential.** They should help your reader visualize your point.
- **Easy to follow.** The reader should not have to work too hard to understand.
- **Appropriate to audience, tone, and purpose.** Always keep the audience in mind.
- **Appropriately cited and referenced.** If you borrow from a source, be sure to include proper citations.
- **NOT disrespectful.** You want your writing to be seen as fair and non-biased.
- **NOT used too often.** They will become more of a distraction than a focal point if they are used too often

There are two main types of visual elements: **quantitative** visuals and **qualitative** visuals.

- **Quantitative** visuals present data graphically. They allow the audience to see statistics spatially. The purpose of using quantitative visuals is to make logical appeals to the audience. For example, sometimes it is easier to understand the disparity in certain statistics if it is displayed graphically. Bar graphs, pie charts, Venn diagrams, histograms, and line graphs are all ways of presenting quantitative data in spatial dimensions.
- **Qualitative** visuals present images that appeal to the audience's emotions. Photographs and pictorial images are examples of qualitative visuals. Such images often try to convey a story, and seeing an actual example can carry more power than hearing or reading about the example. For example, one image of a child suffering from malnutrition will likely have more of an emotional impact than pages dedicated to describing that same condition in writing.

### Writing at Work

When making a business presentation, you typically have limited time to get your idea across. Providing visual elements for your audience can be an effective timesaving tool. Quantitative visuals

in business presentations serve the same purpose as they do in persuasive writing. They should make logical appeals by showing numerical data in a spatial design. Quantitative visuals should be pictures that might appeal to your audience's emotions. You will find that many of the rhetorical devices used in writing are the same ones used in the workplace.

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