Define Persuasion

**Persuasion is the process of changing or reinforcing attitudes, beliefs, values, or behavior.** In a persuasive speech, the speaker explicitly asks the audience to make a choice, rather than just informing them of the options. As a persuasive speaker, you will do more than teach; you will ask your listeners to respond to the information you share. Audience analysis is crucial to achieving your goal. To advocate a particular view or position successfully, you must understand your listeners’ positions before you speak.

Note that when attempting to persuade someone, you may not necessarily try to change someone’s point of view or behavior but, instead, aim to reinforce it. Your listeners may already like, believe, or value something, or sometimes do what you’d like them to do; you are trying to strengthen their current perspective. Suppose, for example, that **your persuasive purpose is to encourage people to use their recycling bins. The audience may already think that recycling is a good thing and may even use their recycling bins at least some of the time. Your speaking goal is to reinforce their behavior so that they use the bins every time.**

**Changing attitudes**

Our attitudes represent our likes and dislikes. Stated more precisely, an attitude is a learned predisposition to respond **favorably or unfavorably toward something**.1 In a persuasive speech, you might try to persuade your listeners to **favor or oppose** a new shopping mall, to like bats because of their ability to eat insects, or to **dislike an increase in the tuition**.

**Changing beliefs**

A persuasive speech could also attempt to change or reinforce a belief. **A belief is something you understand to be true or false**. If you believe in something, you are convinced that it exists or is true. Most beliefs are typically based on evidence, including past experiences. If you believe the sun will rise in the east again tomorrow, you base these beliefs either on what you’ve directly experienced or on the experience of someone you find trustworthy **Beliefs are also changed by evidence**. As a speaker, you might have a difficult time, for example, trying to change an audience’s belief that the world is flat; you would need to show that existing evidence supports a different conclusion. Usually it takes a great deal of evidence to change a belief and alter the way your audience structures reality.

**Changing values**

A persuasive speech could also seek to change or reinforce a value. A value is an **enduring concept of right or wrong, good or bad**. If you value something, you classify it as good or desirable, and you tend to think of its opposite or its absence as bad or wrong. If you do not value something, you are indifferent to it. **Values form the basis of your life goals.** They are also the motivating force behind your behavior. Most of us **acquired our values when we were very young and have held onto them into adulthood**. Our values, therefore, are generally **deeply ingrained.** It is not impossible to change the values of your listeners, but it is much more difficult than trying to change a belief or an attitude. Political and religious points of view, which are usually based on long-held values, are especially difficult to modify.

As Figure 14.1 shows, values are the most deeply ingrained of the three predispositions; they change least frequently. **That’s why values are at the core of the model. Beliefs change, but not as much as attitudes**. Trying to change an audience’s attitudes (likes and dislikes) is easier than attempting to change their values. **Today you may like the way your instructor is teaching your class (you have a favorable attitude of him or her). But after you receive a low grade on a test, you may dislike your instructor (you have an unfavorable attitude).** You may still believe that the teacher is knowledgeable, and you still value the goals of education, but your attitude toward your teacher has changed because of the feedback you received.

**Change behavior**

Persuasion attempts to change or reinforce the following:

• Attitudes: Likes and dislikes

• Beliefs: Perceptions of what is true or false

• Values: What you hold as right and wrong, good or bad

• Behavior: What we do or don’t do