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GUIDELINE 1: RESPECT YOUR AUDIENCE

This guideline may sound idealistic, but it is eminently practical. If you believe the people you are trying to persuade are doltish or intellectually dishonest, you are bound to betray that belief, if not directly then indirectly in your tone or choice of words. Moreover, they will generally sense your disparaging view of them and feel hurt or resentful, hardly the kind of reaction that will make them open to persuasion.

But aren’t some people doltish or intellectually dishonest? Of course. The point is, you have no business thinking them so without clear and convincing evidence. If you have such evidence, don’t write for that audience. If you lack such evidence, as is usually the case, you should give your audience the benefit of the doubt. Ask yourself what might account for their disagreement with your view. Consider all the factors that can influence a person’s perspective, including age, gender, race, ethnicity, family background, religion, income level, political affiliation, degree of education, and personal experience. If one or more of these could account for the difference in viewpoint, you will have good reason for regarding their disagreement as thoughtful and honest.

A caution is in order here: Don’t feel you need to state your respect for your audience. Such statements have a way of sounding insincere. Work on acting respectfully; if you can accomplish that, there will be no need to state it. It will show.

GUIDELINE 2: UNDERSTAND YOUR AUDIENCE’S VIEWPOINT

Many people make the mistake of thinking that knowing their own viewpoint is all that is necessary to be persuasive. “What my readers think about the issue is really irrelevant,” they reason. “All that matters is what I’m going to get them to think.” In addition to being pompous, this attitude ignores two crucial points. First, people’s views matter very much to them, and when others refuse to acknowledge this fact they feel offended. Second, we must know where people stand before we can hope to reach them.

How can you determine what your readers think about the issue you are writing about? The answer depends on the particular circumstances. Here are the most common situations:

Situation 1: You are writing for a single reader who has presented his or her ideas in an article, book, speech, or conversation. Review what your reader said, noting not only the person’s position but also the reasoning that supports it. Determine both the strengths and the weaknesses of the person’s position.

Situation 2: You are writing for a single reader who has not, to your knowledge, expressed a view on the issue in question. Suppose, for example, you are writing a letter to the president of a company objecting to the company’s sponsorship of a controversial television series. You may not be sure the president disagrees with what you plan to say but prudence suggests that you anticipate the worst case scenario—that he or she vigorously supports the sponsorship decision. Use your imagination to produce relevant questions: What might the president think about outsiders criticizing the company? That they have no right to criticize? That the company is answerable only to its stockholders? What might he or she think about the series in question—that is, about the characters, typical plot situations, and themes? (The more closely you have studied the series, the more meaningful your answer will be.) Might the president view outside criticism as a form of censorship? Why or why not?

Situation 3: You are writing not for a specific individual, but for all the people who hold an opposing view on the issue. This is the most commonly encountered situation in persuasive writing. Study what has been expressed by people who hold the opposing view. Look for frequently repeated arguments and themes. The more often a line of thought is expressed and the greater the number of people who express it, the more influential it is likely to have been in shaping people’s views. The most influential errors in thinking represent the greatest challenge to persuasion.

GUIDELINE 3: BEGIN FROM A POSITION YOU HAVE IN COMMON WITH YOUR READERS

Beginning from a position of agreement with your reader is not an arbitrary requirement or a matter of courtesy or good form. It is a simple matter of psychology. If you begin by saying—in effect, if not directly—” Look here, you are wrong, and I’m going to show you,” you push your readers to defensive if not outright hostile reactions. They are likely to read the rest of your paper thinking not of what you are saying but of ways to refute it, concerned with measuring only the weaknesses of your argument. And if they are unreasonable and unbalanced in their reading, the fault will be more yours than theirs.

It is always difficult to find any points of agreement with someone whose views you strongly disagree with. This was the case with the student who wrote his composition supporting the view that students who fail out of his college should be allowed to apply for readmission. His readers were administrators who had expressed the view that the students should not be allowed to do so. He began as follows:

I think students who fail out of this college should be allowed to apply for readmission because every student deserves a second chance. You have said that most readmits lack seriousness of purpose. But…

This student was probably quite sure that he and his readers could agree on nothing. So he began with a head-on collision that wrecked his chances to be persuasive. The readers’ reaction, conscious or unconscious, undoubtedly was “This student sees only his own biased position. He doesn’t understand the complexity of the problem, doesn’t consider the welfare of the total student body, apparently doesn’t appreciate that a college education is not a right at all, but a privilege.” Their reaction could be mistaken. The student might have been fully aware of all these considerations. But he failed to show his readers that he was. How much better an impression he would have made if he had begun like this:

No one benefits—neither teachers nor other students—from the presence on campus of students for whom college means merely fun, or a rest, or a chance to make social contacts. Such students take up precious time and space, and usually serve only to distract more serious students. They fail in most cases to realize that a college education is a privilege that they must continue to earn, not an inviolable right. I agree that this college has its share of such students. The “but” would still appear. The student would still argue his point, but only after he had impressed his readers with the scope of his understanding of the issue and with his desire to be reasonable.

GUIDELINE 4: TAKE A POSITIVE APPROACH

Whenever possible, build your case rather than tearing down the opposing case. To say you should never expose the weaknesses of the opposing side of the issue would be an oversimplification, and a foolish one at that. There are times when examining such weaknesses is the only responsible course of action. Keep in mind, however, that direct criticism of the opposing view will always seem harsher than it is to people who share that view, a brief criticism will seem protracted, and the mere perception that you are being negative will make your readers defensive. The solution is not to be so timid that you don’t say anything meaningful but to be sensitive to your readers’ reactions.

Consider, for example, this situation. Someone writes an article attacking gun control legislation. Two responses are printed in the next issue of the magazine. In summary the article and responsesread as follows:

Responses to Article

Gun control legislation (a) penalizes the law-abiding more than the lawless, (b) denies citizens the most effective means of protecting self and property at a time when assaults on both are commonplace, (c) violates the U.S. Constitution.

1. Gun control legislation does not penalize the law-abiding more than the lawless. It does not deny citizens the most effective means of protection. It does not really violate the U.S. Constitution.

2. Gun control legislation discourages crime by making the mere possession of a gun an offense of some gravity. It stresses the role of the police, rather than the individual, in law enforcement. It follows the spirit, if not the letter, of the U.S. Constitution.

Both responses disagree with the article on each of the three points it raised. But the first merely tears down the article’s position; the second builds another position. In effect, the first says to the writer, “You are wrong, you are wrong, you are wrong”; the second says, “Here is another view.” Whenever you can avoid direct refutation—that is, whenever you can effectively present and support your own views without direct reference to your reader’s opposing views—do so.

GUIDELINE 5: UNDERSTATE YOUR ARGUMENT WHENEVER POSSIBLE

The sharpest points of disagreement between you and your readers should always be approached most carefully. These points represent the greatest obstacle to persuasion. If you overstate your position, you are bound to reinforce your readers’ conviction about their position rather than dispose them to question their conviction. The student who wrote the following passage made this blunder:

Most colleges have a “cut system”—that is, they permit a student a few unexcused absences from class without penalty. This college permits no unexcused absences. Its system is harsh and uncompromising and may well cause students to develop inferiority complexes.

Here the readers, who in this case support the college’s “no-cut system,” are not only reinforced in their position by the “inferiority complex” overstatement but also provided with an excellent opportunity for a damaging rebuttal, such as this:

That this college’s “no-cut system” is demanding, I grant. But the suggestion that it causes students to “develop inferiority complexes” strains credibility. However, even if it were established that it does in fact cause such complexes, would we not be driven to the conclusion that students in such psychologically fragile condition need not fewer but more restrictions to prevent their breakdown?

GUIDELINE 6: CONCEDE WHERE THE OPPOSING SIDE HAS A POINT

The natural tendency of all of us to value our own position too highly makes it difficult for us to admit that opposing views may also have merit. Overcoming this tendency can be accomplished only by remembering that in most controversial issues no one side possesses the total truth. If you can approach controversial issues with this thought, you are likely to grasp more of the total truth and to attract reasonable readers to your position.

Total commitment to the truth obliges us, moreover, to concede not grudgingly, but gladly and without hesitation. This does not mean placing a single short sentence at the beginning of the composition that says, “Everyone is right in some degree; I suppose you are too,” and then launching into your own position. It means a specific and, if space permits, detailed explanation of where, how, and why the opposing viewpoint is correct.

Let’s say, for example, that the issue is whether a comprehensive sex education program from kindergarten through twelfth grade should be initiated in your hometown. Your argument is that it should be. You reason that, since a person’s whole life is affected by the quality of his understanding of sex, it is too important a subject to be learned in the street and that, since many parents neglect their responsibility to teach their children at home, the school must offer such a program. Your readers are opposed to the program because they believe classroom sex instruction does not meet two important requirements: individualized instruction at each child’s level of understanding and a moral-religious context.

Any reasonable person would admit that the readers’ points are well taken. Therefore, you should concede that it is difficult to identify those students whose level of maturity is significantly below the rest of the class and that the presentation of material well beyond their grasp could be disturbing to them. Further, you should concede that, ideally, the home is the best place for the young to learn about sex and the school cannot provide the moral-religious context that many parents consider essential. These concessions will not undermine your position. You will still be able to argue that the program is necessary, although you will probably have to qualify your endorsement, acknowledging that the details of the program must be worked out in light of your concessions and that teachers should be selected with care. The concessions will actually enhance your argument by demonstrating your grasp of the larger dimensions of the question.

Remember that the readers are likely to be no more generous to you than you are to them. Only if you are open and honest in your concessions can you expect them to be so in theirs.

GUIDELINE 7: DON’T IGNORE ANY RELEVANT FACTS

In studying an issue, we sometimes uncover facts that support the opposing position rather than our own. The temptation is strong to ignore them, especially if the other person has apparently not discovered them. Using them, it would seem, could only weaken our position.

However, the purpose of argument is not to defeat others but, through the exchange of views, to discover the truth in all its complexity. When that happens, everyone wins. When any part of the truth is hidden, no one wins, even though it may appear that someone does. By presenting all the facts, even those that force you to modify your position, you impress your readers with your objectivity and honesty and invite them to show theirs.

Consider the following situation. You believe that the present federally directed antipoverty program is more beneficial to the poor than the proposed state-directed program would be. You are researching the subject further, preparing to write an article supporting your position for an audience of those who disagree with you. In researching the question you discover a not widely publicized report documenting serious inefficiency and waste in the present federal program. Moreover, it seems clear that these inefficiencies would be less likely to occur in the proposed program. You realize that your readers probably have not seen this report and that it would be damaging to your original position to mention it in your article. What should you do? If you have good reason to conclude that the report is not really relevant to the issue, it would be foolish to mention it. However, if you are convinced that it is relevant, honesty requires you to mention it, deal with the questions it raises, and modify your position accordingly.

GUIDELINE 8: DON’T OVERWHELM YOUR READERS WITH ARGUMENTS

In controversial matters, no paper under, say, 3,000 words is likely to be definitive. Moreover, no serious writer would attempt to convey the impression that it is. Of necessity it contains selected evidence. On the surface it would seem that this would give more reason to fill the paper to overflowing with evidence for one’s position, to make it as nearly definitive as possible. But on reflection it is clear that the readers’ impression must also be considered. What is the impression of those who read a composition that they know cannot possibly be definitive but is devoted to arguing one side of an issue, piling detail on detail, example on example, without even implying that there is another side to the issue? There is no question that they will regard such a composition as one-sided and unbalanced! The way to avoid such an unfavorable reader reaction is to present only those arguments and that evidence that you feel are most relevant and most persuasive.

There is one other related point. Even when you succeed in avoiding an unbalanced argument, you may get so taken up with your presentation that you push the reader, possibly concluding your paper like this:

I think I have proved in this paper that there is no alternative to the one suggested by Professor Jones.

or

The evidence I have presented seems irrefutable. There can be no question that the proposal is harmful.

or

No reasonable person will hesitate to endorse this view.

You cannot “prove” anything in a short paper. Although evidence may “seem irrefutable” to you and you may see “no question,” remember that it is wiser to permit readers to make their own judgment. And no reader enjoys feeling that agreement with the writer is required in order to be considered a “reasonable person.”

GUIDELINE 9: FOCUS ON THE ARGUMENT BEST CALCULATED TO PERSUADE YOUR AUDIENCE

Different arguments appeal to different readers. Just as it is important to understand your readers’ viewpoints on the issue, it is important to use arguments that will appeal to them. To ignore their frames of reference and choose arguments that you yourself find persuasive is a mistake.

Consider, for example, the issue of whether the United States should become involved in conflicts in other parts of the world. The following chart shows the various frames of reference and the arguments that are often made under each.

Frame of Reference

Arguments for U.S. Involvement

Arguments Against U.S. Involvement

Moral and/or religious

1. It is the moral obligation of the strong to protect the weak.

1. The Judeo-Christian tradition says to return good for evil, love for hate

2. To stand by and do nothing while atrocities are committed is unethical.

2. Modern warfare punishes the victims as well as the perpetrators.

Political and/or practical

1. Because technology has shrunk our planet, no part of the world is outside our country’s interest.

1. Precisely because the world has grown smaller, we need to resist the urge to join other nations’ battles.

2. To refuse to stop tyranny is the same as encouraging it.

2. When we deplete our resources in foreign wars, we increase our own vulnerability.

Philosophic

A free nation has an obligation to stand up for freedom everywhere.

1. War corrupts all who engage in it.

Let’s say you are writing a persuasive paper on this issue and you personally believe that the most telling arguments are moral and/or religious but you know your readers would be more impressed with the political and/or practical or the philosophic arguments. Generally speaking, it would be foolish to follow your personal preference—doing so could defeat your purpose in writing.

GUIDELINE 10: NEVER USE AN ARGUMENT YOU DO NOT BELIEVE IS SOUND OR RELEVANT

This guideline should be understood as a qualification of the previous one. Sincerity and regard for the truth are among the most important characteristics of a writer. Without them there is no real persuasion, only clever presentation. Therefore, if you truly believe that only one argument is worthy of consideration, then by all means use only that argument. This dilemma, however, is not likely to arise very often. In most cases, you will be able to choose among a variety of arguments without compromising your integrity.

GUIDELINE 11: ALLOW TIME FOR YOUR VIEW TO GAIN ACCEPTANCE

It may be tempting to believe that when you present your view, your readers will immediately abandon their own and embrace yours. That expectation is unrealistic. Except in rare cases, the best you should hope for is that they will be moved to reconsider the issue in light of what you said and that your insights eventually will cause them to modify their view. The fact that “eventually” may turn out to be next week or next year rather than five minutes from now is not necessarily a comment on your skill in persuading others. It may merely reflect the reality that the bonds people form with their opinions are not easily broken.

Use the following summary of the guidelines for persuasion as a checklist whenever you wish to present your ideas persuasively:

1. Respect your audience.

2. Understand your audience’s viewpoint.

3. Begin from a position you have in common with your readers.

4. Take a positive approach.

5. Understate your argument whenever possible.

6. Concede where the opposing side has a point.

7. Don’t ignore any relevant facts.

8. Don’t overwhelm your readers with arguments.

9. Focus on the argument best calculated to persuade your audience.

10. Never use an argument you do not believe is sound or relevant.

11. Allow time for your view to gain acceptance.

Next we’ll compare a persuasive composition with an unpersuasive one to see how these guidelines apply.