

LEARNING OBJECTIVES FOR THIS CHAPTER

- ▶ Appreciate the role of persuasion in technical communication
- ▶ Identify a specific persuasive goal for your document
- ▶ Anticipate how audiences may react to your argument
- ▶ Respect any limitations such as company rules or legal constraints
- ▶ Support your argument using evidence and reason
- ▶ Understand that cultural differences may influence audience reactions
- ▶ Prepare a convincing argument

Why persuasion is difficult



Chapter overview

(Go to Student Resources > Chapter 3)

Persuasion means trying to influence someone's actions, opinions, or decisions (Figure 3.1). In the workplace, we rely on persuasion daily: to win coworker support, to attract clients and customers, to request funding. But changing someone's mind is never easy, and sometimes impossible. Your success will depend on what you are requesting, whom you are trying to persuade, and how entrenched those people are in their own views.

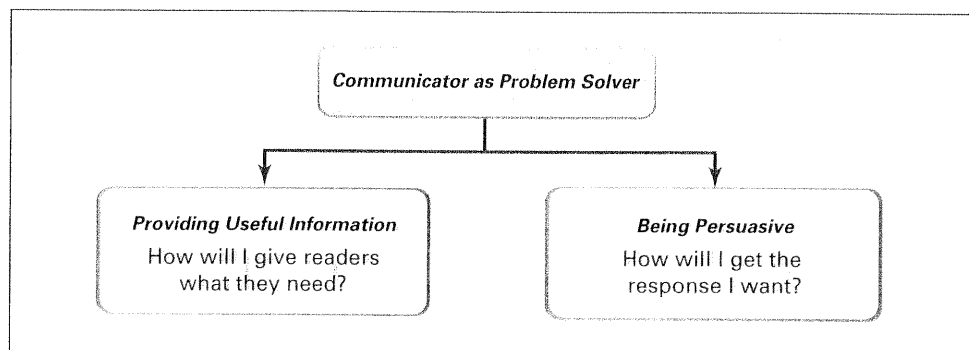


FIGURE 3.1 Informing and Persuading Require Audience Awareness

Implicit versus explicit persuasion

Almost all workplace documents, to some extent, have an *implicitly* persuasive goal: namely, to assure readers that the information is accurate, the facts are correct, and the writer is fluent, competent, and knowledgeable. But the types of documents featured in this chapter have an *explicitly* persuasive goal: namely, to win readers over to a particular point of view about an issue that is in some way controversial.

Explicit persuasion is required whenever you tackle an issue about which people disagree. Assume, for example, that you are Manager of Employee Relations at Softbyte, a software developer whose recent sales have plunged. To avoid layoffs, the company is trying to persuade employees to accept a temporary cut in salary.

As you plan various memos and presentations on this volatile issue, you must first identify your major *claims*. (A claim is a statement of the point you are trying to prove.) For instance, in the Softbyte situation, you might first want employees to recognize and acknowledge facts they've ignored:

| Because of the global recession, our software sales in two recent quarters have fallen nearly 30 percent, and earnings should remain flat all year.

A claim about what the facts are

Even when a fact is obvious, people often disagree about what it means or what should be done about it. And so you might want to influence their interpretation of the facts:

| Reduced earnings mean temporary layoffs for roughly 25 percent of our staff. But we could avoid layoffs entirely if each of us at Softbyte would accept a 10-percent salary cut until the market improves.

A claim about what the facts mean

And eventually you might want to ask for direct action:

| Our labor contract stipulates that such an across-the-board salary cut would require a two-thirds majority vote. Once you've had time to examine the facts, we hope you'll vote "yes" on next Tuesday's secret ballot.

A claim about what should be done

As you present your case, you will offer support for your claims before you finally ask readers to take the action you favor. Whenever people disagree about what the facts are or what the facts mean or what should be done, you need to make the best case for your own view.

On the job, your memos, letters, reports, and proposals advance claims like these (Gilsdorf, "Executives' and Academics' Perception" 59–62):

- | We can't possibly meet this production deadline without sacrificing quality.
- | We're doing all we can to correct your software problem.
- | Our equipment is exactly what you need.
- | I deserve a raise.

Claims require support

Such claims, of course, are likely to be rejected—unless they are backed up by a convincing argument.

NOTE "Argument," in this context, means "a process of careful reasoning in support of a particular claim"—it does not mean "a quarrel or dispute." People who "argue skillfully" are able to connect with others in a rational, sensible way, without causing animosity. But people who are merely "argumentative," on the other hand, simply make others defensive.

IDENTIFY YOUR SPECIFIC PERSUASIVE GOAL

What do you want people to be doing or thinking? Arguments differ considerably in the level of involvement they ask from people.

Types of
persuasive goals

- **Arguing to influence people's opinions.** Some arguments ask for minimal audience involvement. Maybe you want people to agree that the benefits of bioengineered foods outweigh the risks, or that your company's monitoring of employee email is hurting morale. The goal here is merely to move readers to change their thinking, to say "I agree."
- **Arguing to enlist people's support.** Some arguments ask people to take a definite stand. Maybe you want readers to support a referendum that would restrict cloning experiments, or to lobby for a daycare center where you work. The goal is to get people actively involved, to get them to ask "How can I help?"
- **Submitting a proposal.** Proposals offer plans for solving problems. The proposals we examine in Chapter 24 typically ask audiences to take—or to approve—some form of direct action (say, a plan for improving your firm's computer security or a Web-based orientation program for new employees). Your proposal goal is achieved when people say "Okay, let's do this project."
- **Arguing to change people's behavior.** Getting people to change their behavior is a huge challenge. Maybe you want a coworker to stop dominating your staff meetings, or to be more open about sharing information that you need to do your job. People naturally take such arguments personally. And the more personal the issue, the greater people's resistance. After all, you're trying to get them to admit, "I was wrong. From now on, I'll do it differently."

The above goals can and often do overlap, depending on the situation. But never launch an argument without a clear view of exactly what you want to see happen.

TRY TO PREDICT AUDIENCE REACTION

Any document can evoke different reactions depending on a reader's temperament, interests, fears, biases, ambitions, or assumptions. Whenever peoples' views are challenged, they react with defensive questions such as these:

Audience
questions about
your attempts to
persuade

- Says who?
- So what?
- Why should I?
- What's in this for me?
- What will it cost?
- What are the risks?
- What are you up to?
- What's in it for you?
- Will it mean more work for me?
- Will it make me look bad?

Reactions to
persuasive
messages can
differ greatly

People read between the lines. Some might be impressed and pleased by your suggestions for increasing productivity or cutting expenses; some might feel offended or threatened. Some might suspect you of trying to undermine your boss. Such are the "political realities" in any organization (Hays 19).

No one wants bad news; some people prefer to ignore it. If you know something is wrong, that a product or project is unsafe, inefficient, or worthless, you

have to decide whether “to try to change company plans, to keep silent, to ‘blow the whistle,’ or to quit” (19). Does your organization encourage outspokenness and constructive criticism? Is bad news allowed to travel upward, from subordinates to superiors (say, senior management), and if so, is the news likely to be accepted or suppressed? Find out—preferably before you take the job. For more on conveying bad-news messages, see pages 346, 386.

EXPECT AUDIENCE RESISTANCE

People who haven’t made up their minds about what to do or think are more likely to be receptive to persuasive influence.

We need others’ arguments and evidence. We’re busy. We can’t and don’t want to discover and reason out everything for ourselves. We look for help, for short cuts, in making up our minds. (Gilsdorf, “Write Me” 12)

People rely on persuasion to make up their minds

People who *have* decided what to think, however, naturally assume they’re right, and they often refuse to budge. Whenever you question people’s stance on an issue or try to change their behavior, expect resistance:

By its nature, informing “works” more often than persuading does. While most people do not mind taking in some new facts, many people do resist efforts to change their opinions, attitudes, or behaviors. (Gilsdorf, “Executives” 61)

Once their minds are made up, people tend to hold stubbornly to their views

Getting people to admit you might be right means getting them to admit they might be wrong. The more strongly they identify with their position, the more resistance you can expect.

When people do yield to persuasion, they may respond grudgingly, willingly, or enthusiastically (Figure 3.2). Researchers categorize these responses as compliance, identification, or internalization (Kelman 51–60):

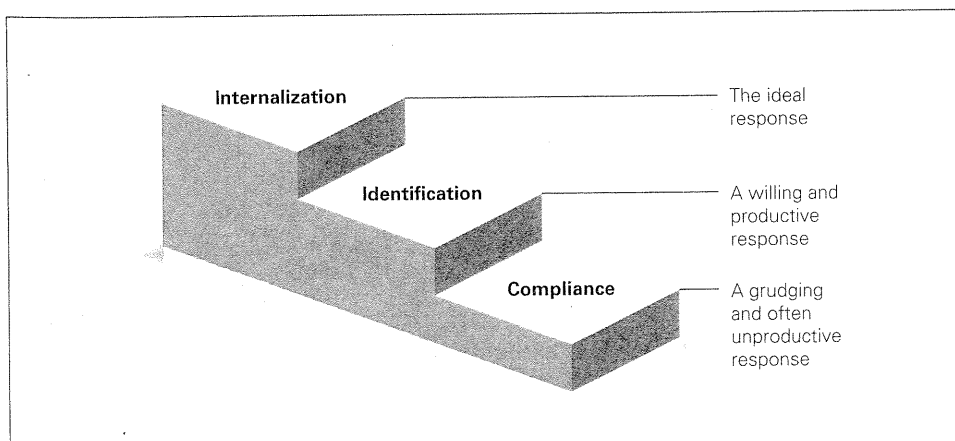


FIGURE 3.2 The Levels of Response to Persuasion

Some ways of yielding to persuasion are more productive than others

- **Compliance:** “I’m yielding to your demand in order to get a reward or to avoid punishment. I really don’t accept it, but I feel pressured, and so I’ll go along to get along.”
- **Identification:** “I’m going along with your appeal because I like and believe you, I want you to like me, and I feel we have something in common.”
- **Internalization:** “I’m yielding because what you’re suggesting makes good sense and it fits my goals and values.”

Although achieving compliance is sometimes necessary (as in military orders or workplace safety regulations), nobody likes to be coerced. If readers merely comply because they feel they have no choice, you probably have lost their loyalty and goodwill—and as soon as the threat or reward disappears, you will lose their compliance as well.

KNOW HOW TO CONNECT WITH THE AUDIENCE

Choosing the best connections

Persuasive people know when to simply declare what they want, when to reach out and create a relationship, when to appeal to reason and common sense, or when to employ some combination of these strategies (Kipnis and Schmidt 40–46). These three strategies, respectively, can be labeled the *power connection*, the *relationship connection*, and the *rational connection* (Figure 3.3). To get a better understanding of these three different strategies, picture the scenario on page 41.

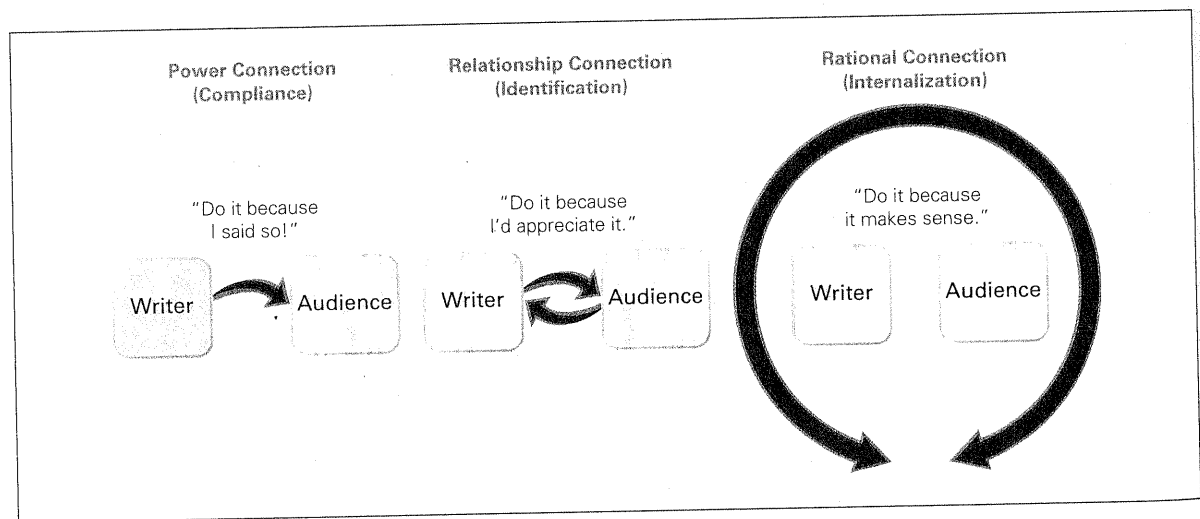


FIGURE 3.3 Three Strategies for Connecting with an Audience Instead of intimidating your audience, try to appeal to the relationship or—better yet—appeal to people’s intelligence as well.

CASE Connecting with the Audience

Your Company, XYZ Engineering, has just developed a fitness program, based on findings that healthy employees work better, take fewer sick days, and cost less to insure. This program offers clinics for smoking, stress reduction, and weight loss, along with group exercise. In your second month on the job you read this notice in your email:

TO: Employees at XYZ.com
 FROM: GMaximus@XYZ.com
 DATE: June 6, 20xx
 SUBJECT: *Physical Fitness*

On Monday, June 10, all employees will report to the company gymnasium at 8:00 A.M. for the purpose of choosing a walking or jogging group. Each group will meet for 30 minutes three times weekly during lunch time.

Power connection:
 Orders readers to
 show up

How would you react to the previous notice? Despite the reference to "choosing," the recipients of the memo are given no real choice. They are simply ordered to show up at the gym. Typically used by bosses and other authority figures, this type of *power connection* does get people to comply but it almost always alienates them as well!

Suppose, instead, that you receive this next version of the memo. How would you react in this instance?

TO: Employees at XYZ.com
 FROM: GMaximus@XYZ.com
 DATE: June 6, 20xx
 SUBJECT: *An Invitation to Physical Fitness*

I realize most of you spend lunch hour playing cards, reading, or just enjoying a bit of well-earned relaxation in the middle of a hectic day. But I'd like to invite you to join our lunchtime walking/jogging club.

We're starting this club in hopes that it will be a great way for us all to feel more healthy. Why not give it a try?

Relationship
 connection: Invites
 readers to
 participate

Leaves choice to
 readers

This second version conveys the sense that "we're all in this together." Instead of being commanded, readers are invited to participate. Someone who seems likable and considerate is offering readers a real choice.

Often the biggest variable in a persuasive message is the reader's perception of the writer. Readers are more open to people they like and trust. The *relationship connection* often works for this reason and it is especially vital in cross-cultural communication, as long as it does not sound too "chummy" and informal to carry any real authority. (For more on tone, see pages 235–41.)

Of course, you would be unethical in appealing to—or faking—the relationship merely to hide the fact that you have no evidence to support your claim (R. Ross 28). People need to find the claim believable (“Exercise will help me feel more healthy”) and relevant (“I personally need this kind of exercise”).

Here is a third version of the memo. As you read, think about the ways in which its approach differs from those of the first two examples.

Rational
connection:
Presents
authoritative
evidence

Offers alternatives

Offers a
compromise

Leaves choice to
readers

Offers incentives

TO: Employees at XYZ.com
FROM: GMaximus@XYZ.com
DATE: June 6, 20xx
SUBJECT: *Invitation to Join One of Our Jogging or Walking Groups*

I want to share a recent study from the *New England Journal of Medicine*, which reports that adults who walk two miles a day could increase their life expectancy by three years.

Other research shows that 30 minutes of moderate aerobic exercise, at least three times weekly, has a significant and long-term effect in reducing stress, lowering blood pressure, and improving job performance.

As a first step in our exercise program, XYZ Engineering is offering a variety of daily jogging groups: The One-Milers, Three-Milers, and Five-Milers. All groups will meet at designated times on our brand new, quarter-mile, rubberized clay track.

For beginners or skeptics, we’re offering daily two-mile walking groups. For the truly resistant, we offer the option of a Monday–Wednesday–Friday two-mile walk.

Coffee and lunch breaks can be rearranged to accommodate whichever group you select.

Why not take advantage of our hot new track? As small incentives, XYZ will reimburse anyone who signs up as much as \$100 for running or walking shoes, and will even throw in an extra fifteen minutes for lunch breaks. And with a consistent turnout of 90 percent or better, our company insurer may be able to eliminate everyone’s \$200 yearly deductible in medical costs.

This version conveys respect for the reader’s intelligence and for the relationship. With any reasonable audience, the rational connection stands the best chance of success.

NOTE *Keep in mind that no cookbook formula exists, and in many situations, even the best persuasive attempts may be rejected.*

ALLOW FOR GIVE-AND-TAKE

Reasonable people expect a balanced argument, with both sides of the issue considered evenly and fairly. Persuasion requires flexibility on your part. Instead of merely pushing your own case forward, consider other viewpoints. In advocating your position, for example, you need to do these things (Senge 8):

- explain the reasoning and evidence behind your stance
- invite people to find weak spots in your case, and to improve on it
- invite people to challenge your ideas (say, with alternative reasoning or data)

How to promote
your view

When others offer an opposing view, you need to do these things:

- try to see the issue their way, instead of insisting on your way
- rephrase an opposing position in your own words, to be sure you understand it accurately
- try reaching agreement on what to do next, to resolve any insurmountable differences
- explore possible compromises others might accept

How to respond to
opposing views

Perhaps some XYZ employees (see the previous case), for example, have better ideas for making the exercise program work for everyone.

ASK FOR A SPECIFIC RESPONSE

Unless you are giving an order, diplomacy is essential in persuasion. But don't be afraid to ask for what you want:

The moment of decision is made easier for people when we show them what the desired action is, rather than leaving it up to them. . . . No one likes to make decisions: there is always a risk involved. But if the writer asks for the action, and makes it look easy and urgent, the decision itself looks less risky. (Cross 3)

Spell out what you
want

Let people know what you want them to do or think.

NOTE *Overly direct communication can offend audiences from other cultures. Don't mistake bluntness for clarity.*

NEVER ASK FOR TOO MUCH

People never accept anything they consider unreasonable. And the definition of "reasonable" varies with the individual. Employees at XYZ Engineering (see page 41 case), for example, differ as to which walking/jogging option they might accept. To the runner writing the memo, a daily five-mile jog might seem perfectly reasonable, but to most people this would seem outrageous. XYZ's program, therefore,

Stick with what is achievable

has to offer something most of its audience (except, say, couch potatoes and those in poor health) accept as reasonable.

Any request that exceeds its audience's "latitude of acceptance" (Sherif 39–59) is doomed.

RECOGNIZE ALL CONSTRAINTS

Constraints are limits or restrictions imposed by the situation:

Communication constraints in persuasive situations

- What can I say around here, to whom, and how?
- Should I say it in person, by phone, in print, online?
- Could I be creating any ethical or legal problems?
- Is this the best time to say it?
- What is my relationship with the audience?
- Who are the personalities involved?
- Is there any peer pressure to overcome?
- How big an issue is this?

Organizational Constraints

Constraints based on company rules

Organizations announce their own official constraints: deadlines; budgets; guidelines for organizing, formatting, and distributing documents; and so on. But communicators also face *unofficial* constraints:

Decide carefully when to say what to whom

Most organizations have clear rules for interpreting and acting on statements made by colleagues. Even if the rules are unstated, we know who can initiate interaction, who can be approached, who can propose a delay, what topics can or cannot be discussed, who can interrupt or be interrupted, who can order or be ordered, who can terminate interaction, and how long interaction should last. (Littlejohn and Jabusch 143)

The exact rules vary among organizations, but anyone who ignores those rules (say, by going over a supervisor's head with a complaint or suggestion) invites disaster.

Airing even a legitimate gripe in the wrong way through the wrong medium to the wrong person can be fatal to your work relationships. The following email, for instance, is likely to be interpreted by the executive officer as petty and whining behavior, and by the maintenance director as a public attack.

TO: CEO@XYZ.com
 CC: MaintenanceDirector@XYZ.com
 FROM: Middle Manager@XYZ.com
 DATE: May 13, 20xx
 RE: *Trash Problem*

Please ask the Maintenance Director to get his people to do their job for a change. I realize we're all understaffed, but I've gotten dozens of complaints this week about the filthy restrooms and overflowing wastebaskets in my department. If he wants us to empty our own wastebaskets, why doesn't he let us know?

Wrong way to the wrong person

Instead, why not address the message directly to the key person—or better yet, phone the person?

TO: MaintenanceDirector@XYZ.com
FROM: MiddleManager@XYZ.com
DATE: May 13, 20xx
RE: *Staffing Shortage*

I wonder if we could meet to exchange some ideas about how our departments might be able to help one another during these staff shortages.

A better way to the right person

Can you identify the unspoken rules in companies where you have worked? What happens when such rules are ignored?

Legal Constraints

What you are allowed to say may be limited by contract or by laws protecting confidentiality or customers' rights or laws affecting product liability:

Constraints based on the law

- In a collection letter for nonpayment, you can threaten to take legal action, but you cannot threaten to publicize the refusal to pay, nor pretend to be an attorney (Varner and Varner 31–40).
- If someone requests information on one of your employees, you can “respond only to specific requests that have been approved by the employee. Further, your comments should relate only to job performance which is documented” (Harcourt 64).
- When writing sales literature or manuals, you and your company are liable for faulty information that leads to injury or damage.

Major legal constraints on communication

Whenever you prepare a document, be aware of possible legal problems. For instance, suppose an employee of XYZ Engineering (case on page 41) is injured or dies during the new exercise program you've marketed so persuasively. Could you and your company be liable? Should you require physical exams and stress tests (at company expense) for participants? When in doubt, always consult an attorney.

Public relations and legal liabilities

Ethical Constraints

While legal constraints are defined by federal and state law, ethical constraints are defined by honesty and fair play. For example, it may be perfectly legal to promote a new pesticide by emphasizing its effectiveness, while downplaying its carcinogenic

Constraints based on honesty and fair play

effects; whether such action is *ethical*, however, is another issue entirely. To earn people's trust, you will find that "saying the right thing" involves more than legal considerations. (See Chapter 4 for more on ethics.)

NOTE *Persuasive skills carry tremendous potential for abuse. "Presenting your best case" does not mean deceiving others—even if the dishonest answer is the one people want to hear.*

Time Constraints

Constraints based
on the right timing

Persuasion often depends on good timing. Should you wait for an opening, release the message immediately, or what? Let's assume that you're trying to "bring out the vote" among members of your professional society on some hotly debated issue, say, whether to refuse to work on any project related to biological warfare. You might prefer to wait until you have all the information you need or until you've analyzed the situation and planned a strategy. But if you delay, rumors or paranoia could cause people to harden their positions—and their resistance.

Social and Psychological Constraints

Constraints based
on audience

Too often, what we say can be misunderstood or misinterpreted because of constraints such as these:

"What is our
relationship?"

- **Relationship with the audience:** Is your reader a superior, a subordinate, a peer? (Try not to dictate to subordinates nor to shield superiors from bad news.) How well do you know each other? Can you joke around or should you be serious? Do you get along or have a history of conflict or mistrust? What you say and how you say it—and how it is interpreted—will be influenced by the relationship.

"How receptive is
this audience?"

- **Audience's personality:** Willingness to be persuaded depends largely on personality (Stonecipher 188–89). Does this person tend to be more open- or closed-minded, more skeptical or trusting, more bold or cautious, more of a conformist or a rugged individual? The less persuadable your audience, the harder you have to work. For a totally resistant audience, you may want to back off or give up altogether.

"How unified is
this audience?"

- **Audience's sense of identity and affiliation as a group:** Does the group have a strong sense of identity (union members, conservationists, engineers)? Will group loyalty or pressure to conform prevent certain appeals from working? Address the group's collective concerns.

"Where are most
people coming
from on this
issue?"

- **Perceived size and urgency of the issue:** Does the audience see this as a cause for fear or for hope? Is trouble looming or has a great opportunity emerged? Has the issue been understated or overstated? Big problems often cause people to exaggerate their fears, loyalties, and resistance to change—or to seek quick solutions. Assess the problem realistically. Don't downplay a serious problem, but don't cause panic, either.



CONSIDER THIS: People Often React Emotionally to Persuasive Appeals

We've all been on the receiving end of attempts to influence our thinking:

- ▶ *You need this product!*
- ▶ *This candidate is the one to vote for!*
- ▶ *Try doing things this way!*

How do we decide which appeals to accept or reject? One way is by evaluating the argument itself, by asking *Does it make good sense? Is it balanced and fair?* But arguments rarely succeed or fail merely on their own merits. Emotions play a major role.

Why We Say No

Management expert Edgar Schein outlines various fears that prevent people from trying or learning something new (34–39):

- ▶ **Fear of the unknown:** *Why rock the boat?* (Change can be scary, and so we cling to old, familiar ways of doing things, even when those ways aren't working.)
- ▶ **Fear of disruption:** *Who needs these headaches?* (We resist change if it seems too complicated or troublesome.)
- ▶ **Fear of failure:** *Suppose I screw up?* (We worry about the shame or punishment that might result from making errors.)

To overcome these basic fears, Schein explains, people need to feel “psychologically safe”:

They have to see a manageable path forward, a direction that will not be catastrophic. They have to feel that a change will not jeopardize their current sense of identity and wholeness. They must feel that . . . they can . . . try out new things without fear of punishment. (59)

Why We Say Yes

Social psychologist Robert Cialdini pinpoints six subjective criteria that move people to accept a persuasive appeal (76–81):

- ▶ **Reciprocation:** *Do I owe this person a favor?* (We feel obligated—and we look for the chance—to reciprocate, or return, a good deed.)
- ▶ **Consistency:** *Have I made an earlier commitment along these lines?* (We like to perceive ourselves as behaving consistently. People who have declared even minor support for a particular position [say by signing a petition], will tend to accept requests for major support of that position [say, a financial contribution].)
- ▶ **Social validation:** *Are other people agreeing or disagreeing?* (We often feel reassured by going along with our peers.)
- ▶ **Liking:** *Do I like the person making the argument?* (We are far more receptive to people we like—and often more willing to accept a bad argument from a likable person than a good one from an unlikable person!)
- ▶ **Authority:** *How knowledgeable does this person seem about the issue?* (We place confidence in experts and authorities.)
- ▶ **Scarcity:** *Does this person know (or have) something that others don't?* (The scarcer something seems, the more we value it [say, a hot tip about the stock market].)

A typical sales pitch, for example, might include a “free sample of our most popular brand, which is nearly sold out” offered by a chummy salesperson full of “expert” details about the item itself.

Cross-Cultural Differences

Different cultures can weigh these criteria differently: Cialdini cites a survey of Citibank employees in four countries by researchers Morris, Podolny, and Ariel. When asked by a coworker for help with a task, U.S. bank employees felt obligated to



CONSIDER THIS (continued)

comply, or reciprocate, if they owed that person a favor. Chinese employees were influenced mostly by the requester's status, or authority, while Spanish employees based their decision mainly on liking and friendship, regardless of the requester's status. German employees were motivated mainly by a sense of consistency in following the bank's official rules: If the rules stipulated they should help coworkers, they felt compelled to do so (81).

SUPPORT YOUR CLAIMS CONVINCINGLY

Persuasive claims are backed up by reasons that have meaning for the audience

The most persuasive argument will be the one that presents the strongest case—from the audience's perspective:

When we seek a project extension, argue for a raise, interview for a job . . . we are involved in acts that require good reasons. Good reasons allow our audience and ourselves to find a shared basis for cooperating. . . . [Y]ou can use marvelous language, tell great stories, provide exciting metaphors, speak in enthralling tones, and even use your reputation to advantage, but what it comes down to is that you must speak to your audience with reasons they understand. (Hauser 71)



Persuasion project

(Go to *Student Resources>Chapter 3>Projects and Case Studies>Learn Logic*)

Imagine yourself in the following situation: As documentation manager for Bemis Lawn and Garden Equipment, a rapidly growing company, you supervise preparation and production of all user manuals. The present system for producing manuals is inefficient because three respective departments are involved in (1) assembling the material, (2) word processing and designing, and (3) publishing the manuals in hard copy, PDF, and hyperlinked versions. Much time and energy are wasted as a manual goes back and forth among engineering and product-testing specialists, communication specialists, and the art and printing department. After studying the problem and calling in a consultant, you decide that greater efficiency would result if content management software were installed on the company server. This way, all employees involved could contribute to all three phases of the process. To sell this plan to supervisors and coworkers you will need good reasons, in the form of *evidence* and *appeals to readers' needs and values* (Rottenberg 104–06).

Offer Convincing Evidence

Evidence (factual support from an outside source) is a powerful persuader—as long as it measures up to readers' standards. Discerning readers evaluate evidence by using these criteria (Perloff 157–58):

- **The evidence has quality.** Instead of sheer quantity, people expect evidence that is strong, specific, new, different, and verifiable (provable).

Criteria for worthwhile evidence

- **The sources are credible.** People want to know where the evidence comes from, how it was collected, and who collected it.
- **The evidence is considered reasonable.** It falls within the audience's "latitude of acceptance" (discussed on page 44).

Common types of evidence include factual statements, statistics, examples, and expert testimony.

Factual Statements. A *fact* is something that can be demonstrated by observation, experience, research, or measurement—and that your audience is willing to recognize.

I Most of our competitors already have content management systems in place.

Offer the facts

Be selective. Decide which facts best support your case.

Statistics. Numbers can be highly convincing. Many readers focus on the "bottom line": costs, savings, losses, profits.

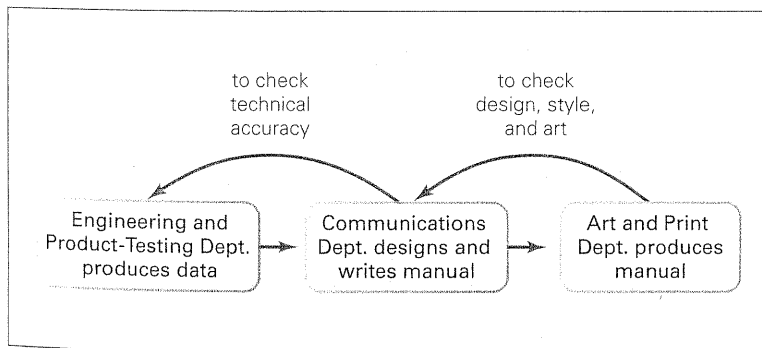
After a cost/benefit analysis, our accounting office estimates that an integrated content management network will save Bemis 30 percent in production costs and 25 percent in production time—savings that will enable the system to pay for itself within one year.

Cite the numbers

But numbers can mislead. Your statistics must be accurate, trustworthy, and easy to understand and verify (see pages 162–66). Always cite your source.

Examples. Examples help people visualize and remember the point. For example, the best way to explain what you mean by "inefficiency" in your company is to show "inefficiency" occurring:

The figure illustrates the inefficiency of Bemis's present system for producing manuals:



Show what you mean

A manual typically goes back and forth through this cycle three or four times, wasting time and effort in all three departments.

Always explain how each example fits the point it is designed to illustrate.

Expert Testimony. Expert opinion—if it is unbiased and if people recognize the expert—lends authority and credibility to any claim.

Cite the experts

Ron Catabia, nationally recognized networking consultant, has studied our needs and strongly recommends we move ahead with a content management system.

NOTE *Finding evidence to support a claim often requires that we go beyond our own experience by doing some type of research. (See Part 2, “The Research Process”)*

Appeal to Common Goals and Values

Evidence alone may not be enough to change a person’s mind. At Bemis, for example, the bottom line might be very persuasive for company executives, but managers and employees will be asking: Does this threaten my authority? Will I have to work harder? Will I fall behind? Is my job in danger? These readers will have to perceive some benefit beyond company profit.

“What makes these people tick?”

If you hope to create any kind of consensus, you have to identify at least one goal you and your audience have in common: “What do we all want most?” Bemis employees, like most people, share these goals: job security and control over their jobs and destinies. Any persuasive recommendation will have to take these goals into account:

Appeal to shared goals

I’d like to show how content management skills, instead of threatening anyone’s job, would only increase career mobility for all of us.

People’s goals are shaped by their values (qualities they believe in, ideals they stand for): friendship, loyalty, honesty, equality, fairness, and so on (Rokeach 57–58).

At Bemis, you might appeal to the commitment to quality and achievement shared by the company and individual employees:

Appeal to shared values

None of us needs reminding of the fierce competition in our industry. The improved collaboration among departments will result in better manuals, keeping us on the front line of quality and achievement.

Give your audience reasons that have real meaning for *them* personally. For example, in a recent study of teenage attitudes about the hazards of smoking,

respondents listed these reasons for not smoking: bad breath, difficulty concentrating, loss of friends, and trouble with adults. No respondents listed dying of cancer—presumably because this last reason carries little meaning for young people personally (Baumann et al. 510–30).

NOTE *We are often tempted to emphasize anything that advances our case and to ignore anything that impedes it. But any message that prevents readers from making their best decision is unethical, as discussed in Chapter 4.*

CONSIDER THE CULTURAL CONTEXT

Reaction to persuasive appeals can be influenced by a culture's customs and values¹: Cultures might differ in their willingness to debate, criticize, or express disagreement or emotion. They might differ in their definitions of “convincing support,” or they might observe special formalities in communicating. Expressions of feelings and concern for one's family might be valued more than logic, fact, statistics, research findings, or expert testimony. Some cultures consider the *source* of message as important as its content, or they trust oral more than written communication. Establishing rapport and building a relationship might weigh more heavily than proof and might be an essential prelude to getting down to business. Some cultures take indirect, roundabout approaches to an issue, viewing it from all angles before declaring a position.

Cultures differ in their attitudes toward big business, technology, competition, and women in the workplace. They might value delayed gratification more than immediate reward, stability more than progress, time more than profit, politeness more than candor, age more than youth. Cultures respond differently to different motivational pressures, such as feeling obliged to return favors or following the lead of their peers. (See Consider This, page 47.)

One key value in all cultures is the primacy of *face saving*: “the act of preserving one's prestige or outward dignity” (Victor 159–61). People lose face in situations such as the following:

- **When they are offended or embarrassed by blatant criticism:** A U.S. businessperson in China decides to “tell it like it is,” and proceeds to criticize the Tiananmen Square massacre and China's illegal contributions to American political parties (Stepanek 4).

How cultural differences govern a persuasive situation

Face saving is every person's priority

How people lose face

¹Adapted from Beamer 293–95; Gesteland 24; Hulbert, “Overcoming” 42; Jameson 9–11; Kohl et al. 65; Martin and Chaney 271–77; Nydell 61; Thatcher 193–94; Thrush 276–77; Victor 159–66.

- **When their customs are ignored:** An American female arrives to negotiate with older, Japanese males; Silicon Valley businesspeople show up in T-shirts and baseball caps to meet with hosts wearing suits.
- **When their values are trivialized:** An American in Paris greets his French host as “Pierre,” slaps him on the back, and jokes that the “rich French food” on the flight had him “throwing up all the way over” (Isaacs 43).

Whenever people feel insulted, meaningful interaction is over

Roughly 60 percent of business ventures between the United States and other countries fail (Isaacs 43), often, arguably, because of cultural differences.

Show respect for a culture’s heritage by learning all you can about its history, landmarks, famous people, and especially its customs and values (Isaacs 43). The following questions can get you started.

Questions for analyzing cultural differences

What is accepted behavior?

- Preferred form for greetings or introductions (first or family names, titles)
- Casual versus formal interaction
- Directness and plain talk versus indirectness and ambiguity
- Rapid decision making versus extensive analysis and discussion
- Willingness to request clarification
- Willingness to argue, criticize, or disagree
- Willingness to be contradicted
- Willingness to express emotion

What are the values and attitudes?

- Big business, competition, and U.S. culture
- Youth versus age
- Rugged individualism versus group loyalty
- Status of women in the workplace
- Feelings versus logic
- Candor versus face saving
- Progress and risk taking versus stability
- Importance of trust and relationship building
- Importance of time (“Time is money!” or “Never rush!”)
- Preference for oral versus written communication

Take the time to know your audience, to appreciate their frame of reference and to establish common ground. (For more on cultural considerations, see Chapter 5.)

NOTE *Violating a person’s cultural frame of reference is offensive, but so is reducing individual complexity to a laundry list of cultural stereotypes. Any generalization about a group presents a limited picture and in no way accurately characterizes even one much less all members of the group.*



GUIDELINES for Persuasion

Later chapters offer specific guidelines for various persuasive documents such as sales letters and proposals. But beyond attending to the unique requirements of a particular document, remember this principle:

No matter how brilliant, any argument rejected by its audience is a failed argument.

If readers find cause to dislike you or conclude that your argument has no meaning for them personally, they usually reject *anything* you say. Connecting with an audience means being able to see things from their perspective. The following guidelines can help you make that connection.

Analyze the Situation

► **Assess the political climate.** Who will be affected by your document? How will they react? How will they interpret your motives? Can you be outspoken? Could the argument cause legal problems? The better you assess readers' political feelings, the less likely your document will backfire. Do what you can to earn confidence and goodwill:

- Be aware of your status in the organization; don't overstep.
- Do not expect anyone to be perfect—including yourself.
- Never overstate your certainty or make promises you cannot keep.
- Be diplomatic; don't make anyone look bad or lose face.
- Ask directly for support: "Is this idea worthy of your commitment?"
- Ask your intended readers to review early drafts.

When reporting company negligence, dishonesty, incompetence, or anything else that others do not want to hear, expect fallout. Decide beforehand whether you want to keep your job (or status) or your dignity (more in Chapter 4).

- **Learn the unspoken rules.** Know the constraints on what you can say, to whom you can say it, and how and when you can say it. Consider the cultural context.
- **Decide on a connection (or combination of connections).** Does the situation call for you to merely declare your position, appeal to the relationship, or appeal to common sense and reason?
- **Anticipate your audience's reaction.** Will people be surprised, annoyed, angry? Try to address their biggest objections beforehand. Express your judgments ("We could do better") without making people defensive ("It's all your fault").

Develop a Clear and Credible Plan

- **Define your precise goal.** Develop the clearest possible view of what you want to see happen.



GUIDELINES *continued*

- ▶ **Do your homework.** Be sure your facts are straight, your figures are accurate, and that the evidence supports your claim.
- ▶ **Think your idea through.** Are there holes in this argument? Will it stand up under scrutiny?
- ▶ **Never make a claim or ask for something that people will reject outright.** Consider how much is *achievable* in this situation by asking what people are thinking. Invite them to share in decision making. Offer real choices.
- ▶ **Consider the cultural context.** Will some audience members feel that your message ignores their customs? Will they be offended by a direct approach or by too many facts and figures without a relationship connection? Remember that, beyond racial and ethnic distinctions, cultural groups also consist of people who share religious or spiritual views, sexual orientations, political affiliations, and so on.

Prepare Your Argument

- ▶ **Be clear about what you want.** Diplomacy is always important, but people won't like having to guess about your purpose.
- ▶ **Avoid an extreme persona.** Persona is the image or impression of the writer's personality suggested by the document's tone. Resist the urge to "sound off" no matter how strongly you feel, because audiences tune out aggressive people no matter how sensible the argument. Admit the imperfections in your case. Invite people to respond. A little humility never hurts. Don't hesitate to offer praise when it's deserved.
- ▶ **Find points of agreement with your audience.** "What do we *all* want?" Focus early on a shared value, goal, or experience. Emphasize your similarities.
- ▶ **Never distort the opponent's position.** A sure way to alienate people is to cast the opponent in a more negative light than the facts warrant.
- ▶ **Try to concede something to the opponent.** Reasonable people respect an argument that is fair and balanced. Admit the merits of the opposing case before arguing for your own. Show empathy and willingness to compromise. Encourage people to air their own views.
- ▶ **Do not merely criticize.** If you're arguing that something is wrong, be sure you can offer realistic suggestions for making it right.
- ▶ **Stick to claims you can support.** Show people what's in it for them—but never distort the facts just to please the audience. Be honest about the risks.
- ▶ **Stick to your best material.** Not all points are equal. Decide which material—from your audience's view—best advances your case.



Present Your Argument

- ▶ **Before releasing the document, seek a second opinion.** Ask someone you trust and who has no stake in the issue at hand. If possible, have your company's legal department review the document.
- ▶ **Get the timing right.** When will your case most likely fly—or crash and burn? What else is going on that could influence people's reactions? Look for a good opening in the situation.
- ▶ **Decide on the proper format.** Does this audience and topic call for a letter, a memo, or some type of report? Your decision will affect how positively your message is received. Can visuals and page layout (charts, graphs, drawings, headings, lists) make the material more accessible?
- ▶ **Decide on the appropriate medium.** Given the specific issue and audience, should you communicate in person, in print, by phone, email, fax, newsletter, bulletin board? (See also page 366.) Should all recipients receive your message via the same medium? If your document is likely to surprise readers, try to warn them.
- ▶ **Be sure everyone involved receives a copy.** People hate being left out of the loop—especially when any change that affects them is being discussed.
- ▶ **Invite responses.** After people have had a chance to consider your argument, gauge their reactions by asking them directly.
- ▶ **Do not be defensive about negative reactions.** Admit mistakes, invite people to improve on your ideas, and try to build support.
- ▶ **Know when to back off.** If you seem to be “hitting the wall,” don't push. Try again later or drop the whole effort. People who feel they have been bullied or deceived will likely become your enemies.

SHAPING YOUR ARGUMENT

To understand how our guidelines are employed in an actual persuasive situation, see Figure 3.4. The letter is from a company that distributes systems for generating electrical power from recycled steam (cogeneration). President Tom Ewing writes a persuasive answer to a potential customer's question: “Why should I invest in the system you are proposing for my plant?” As you read the letter, notice the kinds of evidence and appeals that support the opening claim. Notice also how the writer focuses on reasons important to the reader.

The writer used the audience and use profile, Figure 3.5, to help think through his approach to his letter.



July 20, 20XX

Mr. Richard White, President
Southern Wood Products
Box 84
Memphis, TN 37162

Dear Mr. White:

The writer states his claim clearly and directly, but in a polite tone	•→	In our meeting last week, you asked me to explain why we have such confidence in the project we are proposing. Let me outline what I think are excellent reasons.
Offers first reason	•→	First, you and Don Smith have given us a clear idea of your needs, and our recent discussions confirm that we fully understand these needs. For
Gives examples	•→	instance, our proposal specifies an air-cooled condenser rather than a water-cooled condenser for your project because water in Memphis is expensive. And besides saving money, an air-cooled condenser will be easier to operate and maintain.
Offers second reason	•→	Second, we have confidence in our component suppliers and they have confidence in this project. We don't manufacture the equipment; instead,
Appeals to shared value (quality)	•→	we integrate and package cogeneration systems by selecting for each application the best components from leading manufacturers. For example,
Gives example	•→	Alias Engineering, the turbine manufacturer, is the world's leading producer of single-stage turbines, having built more than 40,000 turbines in 70 years.
Further examples	•→	Likewise, each component manufacturer leads the field and has a proven track record. We have reviewed your project with each major component
Appeals to reader's goal (security)	•→	supplier, and each guarantees the equipment. This guarantee is of course transferable to you and is supplemented by our own performance guarantee.

Phone: (413)555-1767 Fax: (413)555-8791 Email: eps@valcom.com

FIGURE 3.4 Supporting a Claim with Good Reasons Give your audience a clear and logical path.

Source: Used with permission of Turbosteam Corporation, Turners Falls, MA.



Richard White, July 20, 20XX, page 2

Third, we have confidence in the system design. We developed the CX Series specifically for applications like yours, in which there is a need for both a condensing and a backpressure turbine. In our last meeting, I pointed out the cost, maintenance, and performance benefits of the CX Series. And although the CX Series is an innovative design, all components are fully proven in many other applications, and our suppliers fully endorse this design.

Finally, and perhaps most important, you should have confidence in this project because we will stand behind it. As you know, we are eager to establish ourselves in Memphis-area industries. If we plan to succeed, this project must succeed. We have a tremendous amount at stake in keeping you happy.

If I can answer any questions, please phone me. We look forward to working with you.

Sincerely,

Thomas S. Ewing
President
EWING POWER SYSTEMS, INC.

← Offers third reason

← Cites experts

← Closes with best reason

← Appeals to shared value (trust) and shared goal (success)

FIGURE 3.4 (Continued)

Audience and Purpose

Primary audience: Richard White, President of Southern Wood Products

Secondary audience(s): Don Smith, Plant Engineer; several plant managers

Relationship with audience: A possible customer for our cogeneration system

Purpose of document: To help in making a major sale of our product

Audience and purpose statement: To pave the way for a potential customer to purchase our system by presenting a solid argument to back our claim of "confidence" in this project

Intended use of document: To provide information/rationale for a purchasing decision

Technical background: From high to moderate (for entire audience)

Prior knowledge about this topic: Has compared various power-generation systems

Information needs: Seems to doubt the reliability of our system

Cultural considerations: None in particular

Probable questions: How much money will your proposed system really save?
How reliable is the equipment?
Can we depend on the innovative design you are proposing?
What quality of service can we expect?

Audience's Probable Attitude and Personality

Attitude toward topic: Highly interested but somewhat skeptical

Probable objections: This technology is too recent to have a solid track record

Probable attitude toward this writer: Receptive but cautious

Organizational climate: Open and flexible; lots of collaboration

Persons most affected by this document: White and other decision makers

Temperament: White takes a conservative approach to untested innovations

Probable reaction to document: Readers should feel somewhat reassured

Audience Expectations about the Document

Material important to this audience: Evidence that the system will deliver as promised

Potential problems: Readers may have further questions that I haven't anticipated

Length and detail: A concise argument that gets right to the point

Format and medium: A formal letter delivered via overnight mail

Tone: Encouraging, friendly, and confident

Due date and timing: ASAP—to illustrate our responsiveness to customer concerns

FIGURE 3.5 Audience and Use Profile Sheet Notice how this profile sheet expands on the one shown in Figure 2.7 (page 31), to account for specific considerations in preparing an explicitly persuasive document.

NOTE *People rarely change their minds quickly or without good reason. A truly resistant audience will dismiss even the best arguments and may end up feeling threatened and resentful. Even with a receptive audience, attempts at persuasion can fail. Often, the best you can do is avoid disaster and allow people to ponder the merits of the argument.*



CHECKLIST: Persuasion

(Numbers in parentheses refer to the first page of discussion.)

Planning and Preparing Your Document

- ☐ Have I identified my precise goal in this situation? (37)
- ☐ Am I accounting for the political realities involved? (38)
- ☐ Can I elicit more than mere audience compliance in this situation? (39)
- ☐ Have I chosen the approach most likely to connect with this audience? (40)
- ☐ Am I constructing a balanced and reasonable argument? (43)
- ☐ Have I spelled out what I want this audience to do or think? (43)
- ☐ Am I seeking an outcome that is achievable in this situation? (43)
- ☐ Have I considered the various constraints in this situation? (44)
- ☐ Do I provide convincing evidence to support my claims? (48)
- ☐ Will my appeals have personal meaning for this audience? (50)
- ☐ Overall, do I argue skillfully without being "argumentative"? (37)
- ☐ Have I anticipated my audience's reaction? (38)

Cultural Considerations*

- ☐ Is the document sensitive to the culture's customs and values? (51)
- ☐ Have I avoided stereotyping of different cultures and groups of people? (52)
- ☐ Does the document conform to the country's safety and regulatory standards? (74)
- ☐ Does the document provide the expected level of detail? (25)
- ☐ Does the document avoid possible misinterpretation? (25)
- ☐ Does the document enable everyone to save face? (51)
- ☐ Is the document organized in a way that readers will consider appropriate? (209)
- ☐ Does the document observe accepted interpersonal conventions? (98)
- ☐ Does the tone reflect the appropriate level of formality or casualness? (52)
- ☐ Is the document's style appropriately direct or indirect? (5)
- ☐ Is the document's format consistent with the culture's expectations? (316)
- ☐ Does the document embody universal standards for ethical communication? (69)
- ☐ Should the document be supplemented by a more personal medium? (52)

*Source: Adapted from Caswell-Coward 265; Weymouth 144; Beamer 293-95; Martin and Chaney 271-77; Thatcher 193-94; Victor 159-61.



**Chapter
quiz, Exer-
cises, Web links, and
Flashcards**
(Go to *Student
Resources*>Chapter 3)