

FOUR STRATEGIES FOR PERSUASIVE WRITING

Most folk don't enjoy having to write proposals, memos, reports and the dozen other things that seem to get in the way of their “real” work. Nonetheless, if it's your job to do it, you need to be able to do it well.

To do this, we need to look at how to construct a persuasive argument. To write persuasively, you need to answer four key questions before you start:

1. How Are You Perceived by the Person Reading Your Proposal?

If you received a stock-market tip as an unsolicited e-mail message would you take it seriously? Of course not! What, though, if you received a tip from a long-time friend who was a rich and successful investor? Would you take “that” seriously? Almost certainly!

The differences here are “credibility” and “trust”. How likely is your proposal to be successful if it lacks these qualities? So, before you start to write your proposal, you need to know in what regard you're held. Do you have an existing reputation for credibility, or will you need to establish one?

2. How Can You Show that you're Providing What the Client Needs?

You must overcome the natural suspicion that you're proposing something that's in your own best interests. If you're really more interested in getting the grant, increasing your budget, selling a product or lessening your workload, it will be very difficult to establish a persuasive argument to the contrary.

It is thus vitally important that you really “are” submitting a proposal that will solve the reader's problems. It's no use submitting a pie-in-the-sky proposal and hoping that the reader won't notice that you're the main beneficiary. You need to come up with a win-win proposal that makes such good sense that the reader would be a fool not to accept it.

3. Is Your Proposal Presented Well?

There's more to a good presentation than just putting your proposal in a nice binding. Indeed, an overly elaborate binding can backfire. You run the risk that your proposal might be seen as having more form than substance.

Here are some things you need to consider. Will it stand by itself, or will it be accompanied by an audio-visual presentation? Will it be the only one on the client's desk, or will it be one of a dozen? What length is the client expecting? Does it contain a clear summary of the problem and your proposed solution?

4. Who Is The Message Directed At?

It helps to understand a bit about the preferences of the person (or persons) reviewing your proposal. What type of information do they like to receive?

For example, let's suppose you knew that either John or George would read your proposal. John is a real "numbers man" -- he likes to receive pages and pages of technical details and return-on-investment analyses. He likes charts and data. George, on the other hand, is an "ideas man" -- he goes with his gut. He'll carefully read your executive summary and recommendations, flip through the rest of the pages then make his decision.

Would knowing which of these two people was going to review your proposal change the way you wrote it?

Sure it would. Here then are a couple of questions to ask yourself about the person (or persons) who will evaluate your proposal:

- Do they focus on details, or do they prefer the big picture?
- Are they willing to act unilaterally, or are they consensus-oriented?
- Are they willing to take risks, or are they conservative?
- Are they technically adept, financially adept or both?
- Are they the ultimate decision maker, or do they have to bump your proposal up the line?

These may not be the easiest questions to answer, but armed with this sort of extra information, you're in a better position to construct a persuasive argument.

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