

Editorials that Elicit Effective Essays

By Jay Steinitz

Overview

The goal of this unit is for the students to be able to write persuasive essays and informative essays for the media and to be able to transfer this skill into other writing genres. The method that I plan to use is to first have the students read the "Letters to the Editor" in the *Post-Gazette*, the *Pittsburgh Courier*, and/or the *Oliver Bear Facts* for content, style, and persuasiveness and to then write persuasive essays themselves in the form of letters to the editor, using the skills that they have learned. I also hope that through the examination of current events, the students will become more interested and more conversant in world affairs.

This unit will be divided into three different, interconnected areas of study: The first area of study will be to use local newspaper editorials and "Letters to the Editor" of high interest to the students as examples or models of either good or poor persuasive essay writing. The students will see how newspapers make use of editorials and "Letters to the Editor." The second area of study will be to examine the conventions of persuasive writing, using editorials as paradigms to make up a rubric that the students can use in their own writing. The third area of study will be the actual writing of a letter to the editor or an editorial and the transfer of this skill to persuasive essay writing.

I hope to have the students develop a rubric to help them rate these essays. Some of the domains that will be included in the rubric or the criteria will be: Focus, does the writer stay on the subject? Organization, does the essay flow from one point to another in a logical progression? Content, does the essay address an important, arguable issue? Style, can the reader see the argument from the writer's point of view? Conventions, is the understanding of the essay hampered in any way by the writer's language usage?

The theory is if the students are versed enough in judging other essays, they can use these skills in their own writing. When writing, the students will have the class-created rubric and a checklist in front of them to facilitate the creation of their essay. They of course will also have the many models from their folders, which will hopefully have notations from class discussion to use to facilitate their writing.

Rationale

I am test-driving this unit at the same time that I am developing it so that I will have some idea of how my ideas work. The class that I am using as my laboratory is a general English III class, which has a lot of repeaters. These students are generally low achievers who have stated that they would rather receive a D than an A because getting a grade higher than a D takes too much work. All the students want to do is pass, and pass with as little effort as possible. Although the students generally don't misbehave in class, they are not averse to expressing their discontent either to the teacher or to each other. The class's main problem is attendance and apathy. The majority of the students will start an assignment, and most of them will complete it in some fashion. It is typical for a student, once he or she has finish an assignment, to get rid of it by passing it in to the teacher like it was some kind of poison and not to want to have to look at it again. When I suggest proofreading, editing, or rewriting, many of the students act as if they have been assaulted. They feel that just getting something in, anything, is completing the assignment. Having the students rewrite, edit, and achieve a publishable standard in their writing is another story. The persuasive essay is very important in the eleventh grade; they are assessed in persuasive essay writing in the PSSA test, often in the form of a letter to the editor, and they are expected to have this skill when they write a term research paper in their senior year. I also feel that this is a writing skill that they will be glad that they have when attending a college. So I think that devoting time to this skill in their junior year is justified.

Much of the initial energy of this unit will be used to combat apathy and otiosity. I think that if the students have several positive experiences with examining topical, thought provoking essays in the form of letters and editorials, they will be more inclined to take some ownership of their own education. The class can discuss the merits of a "Letter to the Editor," not only on the letter's subject matter but also on how it measures up to the rubric.

Objectives

This unit will not only address several of the Pittsburgh Public School's high school literacy performance standards in reading and writing, but will also, because of its reliance on opinions of public affairs, address citizenship standards.

1a. All students will read twenty-five books or book equivalents each year, the material of which may include newspapers. Since the students are reading a large amount of the same type non-fiction literature from the newspaper, I believe that these readings would amount to the equivalent of one book.

1c. All students read and comprehend information to develop understanding and expertise and produce oral or written work that extends the ideas of what was read, makes connection to related topics of information, and relate new ideas to prior knowledge and experience. The student will be reading editorials and "Letters to the Editor" not only for the ideas that the author is trying to communicate but how well or poorly the author communicates those ideas.

2b. All students will produce a response to literature that is interpretative, analytic, evaluative, and/or reflective, that supports a judgment through references to the text, and demonstrates an

understanding of the literary work through presentation of an interpretation. The student will be presenting the editorial or "Letter to the Editor" to the class for understanding and analysis of the author's method.

2e. All students will produce a persuasive essay that engages the reader, develops a controlling idea, has an organized structure, includes appropriate information, but also excludes irrelevant information, anticipates and addresses the reader's concerns, supports the argument with detailed evidence, uses a range of strategies to elaborate and persuade, and provides a sense of closure to the writing. The students will be working toward producing an editorial or a letter to the editor that will be published or at least publishable in a local newspaper. In order for the student to achieve this goal he or she will have to meet these standards.

3b. All students will participate in group meetings in which he or she displays appropriate turn-taking behavior, actively solicits another person's comments, respond appropriately to comments and questions, and give reasons in support of opinions expressed. The students will find an editorial or letter to the editor that he or she thinks would be of interest, is an example of good persuasive writing, or is an example of poor persuasive writing, will offer it to the class, and discuss its merits or liabilities with the class.

4a. All students will demonstrate an understanding of the rules of English language in a piece of writing that demonstrates his or her ability to manage conventions, grammar, and usage so that they aid rather than interfere with reading and understanding. The letter that the student writes to the editorial department of a newspaper will, of course, have to be free of all grammatical errors.

4b. All students will analyze and revise work to make it clearer or to make it more effective in communicating the intended message or thought by adding, deleting, clarifying, rearranging, etc. Since the student will be preparing his or her persuasive essay in the form of an editorial or a letter to the editor for publication, the essay should be gone over several times for publication perfection.

5a. All students will respond to literature using interpretive, critical, and evaluative processes such as: evaluating the impact of author's decisions regarding word choice, style, and content; making inferences and drawing conclusions; interpreting the effects of literary devices and rhetoric; and evaluating the stance of the writer; interpreting ambiguities, subtleties, contradictions, ironies, and nuances. This the students will do individually and as a class when responding to editorials and letters to the editors.

6a. All students will critique public documents and be able to identify and understand the strategies common in public discourse such as: effective use of argument, use of power of anecdote, anticipation of counter-claims, appeal to audiences both hostile and friendly to the position presented, use of emotionally laden words and imagery, and citing of appropriate references. The students will not only read the editorials and letters to the editor for their ideas but also to critique them for the above mentioned qualities.

6b. All students will produce a public document that exhibits an awareness of the importance of precise word choice; utilizes and recognizes the power of logical arguments based on appealing

to the readers emotions, and arguments based upon the writer's persona; uses arguments that are appropriate in term of the knowledge, values, and degree of understanding of the intended audience; and uses a range of strategies to appeal to readers. The student has to always keep in mind the purpose of his or her persuasive essay and to utilize different rhetorical methods to achieve that goal.

C1. All students demonstrate an understanding of major events, cultures, groups and individuals in the historical development of Pennsylvania, the United States, and other nations, and describe themes and patterns of historical development. In the course of finding and critiquing an editorial or letter to the editor, the students have to learn and understand the issues that they are reading and reporting.

C4. All students examine and evaluate problems facing citizens in their communities, state, nation, and world by incorporating concepts and methods of inquiry of various social sciences. Not only do the students have to find editorials, but they also have to evaluate them when they present them to the class.

C5. All students develop and defend a position on current issues confronting the United States and other nations, conducting research, analyzing alternatives, organizing evidence and arguments, and making oral presentations. This is, in fact, the basic assignment. In order for the students to be conversant and knowledgeable about the subject that they are presenting but also about the subject about which they are writing a letter to the editor the students need to research the background of this subject, even if they are only using past issues of the newspaper.

C8. All students demonstrate that they can work effectively with others. Students present an editorial or letter to the editor, and the class as a group discusses its persuasiveness and the value of the subject. Discussions on topical matters can get heated, and an ability to work effectively with others is desired.

Strategies

As I have stated, I am teaching this unit at the same time that I am developing it for this course. I have also used the editorial page and "Letters to the Editor" in past classes effectively as a means of teaching persuasive writing. As I use various strategies to teach this unit, I found that some strategies work well and that some strategies need some adjusting. I found that almost everything needed at least a little adjusting, and that the necessary adjustment was to have almost everything more structured.

I told the class that they would be receiving a grade for class participation, but I found that the class needed a little more structure for the participation to have meaning. I made a daily class participation sheet with everyone's name and mark for positive input, negative input, and no input. I would have preferred the high interest in the subject matter to be the main generator of class participation, but some students have the need for outside impetus to generate their interest. Besides, I found that the class participation sheet was a good means to keep the class from going off on a tangent.

Another change I made was in their journals. Each day the students spend the first few minutes of class time writing in their journals. By the end of the year a lot of the students have come to really enjoy writing in their journals; their writing and their ability of self reflection have improved greatly. However, some students ask me to give them a subject in which to write. In the past, I have told them that that was more like a writing assignment rather than journal writing. But, in order to get them thinking about current events, I gave the class a choice to either write in their journals as they have done in the past or to write on the current event or headline that I write on the board each day. I found that this gives some students that little extra time that they may need to think about what is going on in the world.

I started the unit by showing the students the editorial page and the op-ed page in the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*. I showed them where to find it each day and what editorials and "Letters to the Editors" were. I also showed them the editorial page in the *Pittsburgh Courier*, and discussed with the class that these were opinions, not facts. I also pointed out that different papers had different agendas and to expect their opinions to be slanted toward that agenda. I also gave the class two handouts from *Journalism Today*, a National Textbook Publication: "The Editorial Page" and "Identifying Editorial Elements." These helped the student recognize such components of an editorial page as the editorial cartoon, letters to the editor, the editorial, and the staff box. I then handed out the front section of many issues of the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, had the students read the "Letters to the Editor," select one that captured their interest, and then had them read it to the class for discussion. It didn't work. Some of the students followed through, but the class wasn't able to focus on the letter being read. The students aren't dynamic enough readers or good enough public speakers to command the attention of the other students. However, when I copied a "Letter to the Editor" and handed it to each student, I had better success.

The next day I used a letter that I photocopied from the *Pittsburgh Courier* titled, "Bush Does Not Have a Mandate to Lead." This only captured the interest of about a third of the class. The class, instead of discussing the idea that the Democrats should set the political agenda, discussed the electoral folly in Florida. We were not able to get to the merits, style, or persuasiveness of the writer.

The next day I copied another letter from the *Pittsburgh Courier* titled "Open Letter to Burlington." This letter was about racial profiling and the writer being suspected of shoplifting. The letter generated a lot of interest; however, the discussion was centered mainly on the joys and perils of shoplifting. It was difficult to bring the discussion around to the purpose and the merits of the letter. I thought that this experience, although not what was desired, was a better one than the day before. I at least had the whole class engaged, and I feel that it is easier to direct a discussion than to jump start one. It was at this point that I decided to initiate a class

participation grade sheet. The students needed and liked the structure. Students would accost me after class to make sure that I gave them the participation grade that they thought they deserved.

Even though the class participation grade sheet produced the desired effect, it did not produce it for the desired reason. The problem is: What is going to get these students to work this hard other than being ordered to for a grade? Having the students read topical essays of high interest is one method to inspire students to work, but as demonstrated by the few classes illustrated above, student interest and having the students interested in what is planned for the learning process are two different things.

When given a prompt for a persuasive essay, students either complain that the topic is unknown to them, is of no interest to them, or is the same old stuff. I have given students topics in the past with which I thought the students would be able to identify, like capital punishment, abortion, the legalization of marijuana, and school vouchers, just to have the students complain, "Not this 'stuff' again." I know that students will say anything to avoid writing, but I also feel that there is some validity to their complaint. Just as the students were not interested in President Bush's mandate but were interested in the voting debacle in Florida, students are not going to be interested in capital punishment unless Sean 'Puff Daddy' Combs is sentenced to death. I don't think that I need to spell out the amount of interest that would generate. My dilemma is whether to wait for something of high student interest to happen, or to plod on and hope that something catches on. Obviously one cannot count on serendipity, so one would then have to opt for plodding on.

Planning a unit without the hope of a meteoric event of student interest happening may not be as doomed to failure as it might seem. I think that one should proceed on the premise that nature abhors a vacuum. I don't mean that something of student interest will happen in any given week, although there is a good chance that it will. I mean the vacuum that there is in the classroom. I contend that the students will find something of interest if given the opportunity, and it is the teacher's task to provide the context to that interest. I found that the students are more responsive if the teacher is more of a guide than a dictator. That is why I was not too concerned when the students were talking about their shoplifting high jinks instead of racial profiling. Heretofore the only time that the students had been involved in conversation was when the teacher had to tell them to be quiet. After the students read the letter about racial profiling titled "Open Letter to Burlington," they were all engaged in a conversation about one thing, even though it wasn't the subject that was planned. And, even though the students were cutting in on each other, they were raising their hands and waiting to speak because everyone had something to say. I even appointed a student mediator, which worked out better than a teacher trying to install Robert's Rules of Order. Now the teacher has the job of making something out of something rather than making something out of nothing. I decided to have a few more classes reading "Letters to the Editor" rather than getting the students to write on racial profiling, but I could have used this subject if I wanted to. Some topics could be: Has something ever happened to you in a store or restaurant, or other establishment, that got you so mad that you wanted to tell the world about it? (That is what an "open letter" is.) Have you ever felt that you have been singled out unfairly for observation or punishment? (That is students' first complaint when they get caught.) Could you write a letter of recommendation giving a store advice on how to stop shoplifting? (Informative essay rather than persuasive.)

I spent a week handing out editorials and letters to the editor on a myriad of subjects, not only arguing about their merits but also about how they were written, how effective they were, and what the elements were that made them effective. I had the class make a list of the things to look for in the effective use of persuasive writing. The students are use to rubrics and generally don't think much of them. I handed the Pittsburgh School District rubric on persuasive essays out and had the students match the elements on the rubric with the elements on the list we developed from the editorials. I then had the class develop its own rubric by altering the official one. Even though the class's rubric did not differ quantitatively from the official one, the class felt that they had "ownership" of the new one, and they felt that it was a lot more understandable and usable.

The students now knew what to look for in an editorial or letter to the editor, and their assignment was to bring one in, and to present it to the rest of the class. In order to give the students a clearer idea of what was expected I handed out a work sheet titled "Finding a Letter to the Editor" (see appendix). The students were not only to find a letter to the editor which interested them and was on a subject which they felt comfortable leading a class discussion, but they were also to find a letter to the editor which either had the elements of persuasive writing that were in the class developed rubric or one that lacked those elements.

At first no one could find a letter to the editor of interest, so I was prepared with the newspaper to examine the letters to the editor that day. There were letters of praise, critical letters about the newspaper, and letters about the mayor. Then a student brought in a letter about violence in the streets and drive-by shootings. The discussion in the class was good, and the class decided that the letter was bad. All the writer did was rant and not back up her statements with any facts. I found that the use of a letter, not as a paradigm of excellence, but as something to be criticized, worked out far better. The class could readily see that the writer wasn't making her point and why. I made a point of telling the class to find letters that they could criticize, that this would enable them to say more about the letters and how they were written. That letter was followed by many more about school violence and safety. The issue of school safety piqued everyone's interest because the class thought that Oliver was not a very safe school. The class didn't feel afraid, but they knew that anyone could bring anything into the school building if they wanted to. A few students brought in the same letter to the editor, but this didn't pose any problems because students were glad to share the stage with other students.

The students wanted to write to the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* on the issue of school safety. I told the class that I didn't want to send twenty-five letters to the same newspaper on the same subject. I did assign them to write a short letter to the editor to be read in class. The class by this time was used to picking apart letters. The letters that the students wrote were generally rants; full of hearsay and anecdotes. With most of the letters on school safety it was obvious that they were not persuasive. The class, now practiced in the skill of detecting essays that didn't meet the standard according to our rubric, could see where other students didn't meet the standard, which eventually helped in each student's own effort to revise to be more clear and focused. The one thing that was obvious was their lack of background information. In the past, I had been filling the class in on subjects like, United States history, the political parties, and racial profiling. The students thought that they knew a lot about violence. They thought that this was their subject and I that they could teach me rather than the other way around. However, with the lack of

foundation and any real solutions in their letters, it was evident that in order to be persuasive they would have to do some research.

In the past, research was something that was assigned for a student to do, and not something the student would do in order to sound like he or she knew something about the subject. When the students made off-the-wall statements and came up with statistics off the top of their heads, I would say, "How do you know that?" or "Where did you get that information?" The students said that I was stupid if I didn't know these things, but they also knew that they had to back up what they were saying.

The next exercise was to use a flowchart (see appendix). This gave the students a visual organizer that they could use to apply the fundamental elements of a persuasive essay. First we took some of the letters to the editor that were presented in class and inserted the elements of the essay into the boxes in the flowchart. When there was an element missing, it was easy to see where the writer went wrong. The students were also to use their letter on school safety to see if it had all of the elements that were in the flowchart. This helped the students revise their essays; especially the ones who like to fill in work sheets. I found that since the class was focused on ideas and how to get them across, the more I could use structured assignments, the more the students felt they were on track, or the more the students felt they were doing "school work."

I thought that this would be a good time to give the class the assignment to come up with a letter to the editor to the *Oliver Bear Facts*. Here again, the students individually came up with virtually nothing. We discussed what was important to them and came up with very little. I thought that "lunch" and "school rules" would provoke the students to action, but I found that these were passe subjects that generated no interest. This took place at the beginning of February, and one student went off on a tirade about why Oliver had done nothing about "Black History Month." I really hadn't done much in my class, and I asked what other teachers had done. The class was united in putting Oliver down for this gross oversight. I told the class to address this subject to the school newspaper.

Someone in the class suggested that we write a group letter. I was agreeable because by using this method we could have one model to discuss what to include, how to include it, and where to include it. We could also use the class-generated rubric and the flowchart to facilitate the student's understanding and use of these tools. This could have been done better if I had been prepared to compose the letter on the computer and project it on a screen. Some students got frustrated with the tedium of discussing what to write and wrote individual letters on their own. Luckily the school newspaper was coming out the next week and we had our impetus and our deadline. Unfortunately something happened in the printing process and the newspaper didn't come out. None of the students have mentioned the lack of the student newspaper being published because they are used to nothing happening and prefer nothing happening to having to make something happen.

If the students had written to the *Pittsburgh Post Gazette* or to the *Pittsburgh Courier* this would not have happened. Of course the editor might not have chosen their letter to publish, but I think that would be preferable to not having a newspaper come out at all. Writing a letter to the editor to a local newspaper was the penultimate assignment. I handed the students the work sheet,

"Writing a Letter to the Editor" (see appendix). They had to show their prewriting with the flowchart, their first draft, and then their letter to the editor. Most of the letters were surprisingly good, and a few even showed signs of research. The class went to the computer laboratory and used the word processors to make their letters to the editor publishable, and we sent the ones that were topical and had real merit (newsworthiness) to the newspapers. Everyone used their letter as an example of a public document for their portfolio.

We finished the unit with the assignment: "Writing to persuade" (see appendix). This was kind of repetitious, and the students felt that I was beating a dead horse with the use of letters to the editor. I originally had the concept of the students writing a school newsletter where they could feel that they could make a change – where what they wrote really mattered, and wasn't just an assignment for a grade or for their portfolio. (It was). The students were to use the flowchart for this assignment too, but for most of the students, the flowchart was too simplistic. When the students first used the flowchart, the students had trouble filling in all the spaces; now the students found that they had more details and more counterarguments than there was room for. We went to the computer laboratory so the students would have a finished product for their portfolio.

Conclusions

Because I was devoting more time to using editorials in the development of persuasive writing, and because I was using this unit for the Teachers Institute, I made several changes from when I taught it in previous years. Now that I have had the experience of using this unit this year, I would make several changes when I use it next year. As I have said, I had some success in making apathetic students become more involved, however I was aware that the students were using this opportunity to divert scholastic activity to general bull sessions. This is a trap that I found I was very susceptible. It seemed as if one was doing a great job at getting the students to learn, but what the students were really learning was how to avoid any actual work. What I would change next year is to make a schedule of assignments and sticking to it. Rather than putting a lot of pressure on the students getting one grade on one presentation, I would have the students have several, smaller assignments. I have a kitchen timer, which I use for tests; this could be used to time the presentations and discussions. If I had a schedule of students and limited the time spent on each presentation, I could fit many more presentations into one class period, and, therefore, have time for each student to do more presentations. If the students wanted to spend more time talking about a specific subject, I could tell them to put it on paper. The students could write about the subject in their journals. They could then use what they have written for their letter to the editor. As much as I enjoy having a lively discussion with the class, I have to keep in mind what my objectives are, and not let the students divert my plans no matter how interesting the discussion gets because most of the students are just going along for the ride; trying to avoid work.

This segues to what I think would be ideal for this unit: Team teaching with a history or social studies teacher. As an English teacher, I'm a closet history teacher. Almost any type of literature that is read in class comes with a mini lesson in history. One naturally teaches about the state of the theater in Elizabethan England when teaching one of Shakespeare's plays, but one also has to teach about every stage of American history when studying American Literature. One has to

teach about the depression for the students to understand how much a dollar was worth in the 1930's, and one has to teach about the American civil rights movement when reading literature from that era. During this unit, I spent time explaining the history and the power of the press to the class in order for the students to understand why people write letters to the editor and editorials. Not only that, but I spent class time explaining the two party system, the electoral system, the U.S. constitution, as well as the basic tenets of the Republican Party and the Democratic Party. Although I left a lot of the information gathering up to student research, I still had to devote a great deal of time to teaching American history and civics. I couldn't help thinking that the students could be getting credit for this work in their history class. I will look forward to someday team-teaching this unit in tandem with a history class, but in lieu of that, I think that I will try to find some literature that uses the power of the press and literature that exemplifies civil disobedience.

Another thing that I might do in this unit in years to come is something that I had thought of doing but didn't get around to. I would like to take this process a step further and have the students publish a student newspaper or newsletter of their own. Back in the early 1970's, one of my classes published an underground newspaper that had everyone talking. The students got quite a thrill out of it, and they pressed their capabilities to the limit. Times have changed, but the need to express oneself is omnipresent. The students taking this unit this year, although engaged, were only doing the assignments for class work. A sure way to end insouciance is to have what the students are doing have meaning in the real world. I found out during this unit that the student didn't have nothing to say, they were just convince that anything that they had to say would make no difference.

As I looked back from the student's first writing until this last, I could see a marked improvement in the way the students expressed themselves in writing, but more than that, I was most happy with the way the students could think.

At the beginning of the unit, the student's journals had been filled with what they did, what they were going to do, and if they were in a good mood or not. Now their journals were filled with how they felt about what was going on in the world. At the beginning of the unit, the only thing that the students wanted to talk about was rap music or what their fellow students where up to. Now the students wanted to talk about what was going on in the world, and I found myself needing to curtail interesting discussions of world events. At the beginning of the unit, the only part of the newspaper that the students read was the horoscope and the sport section. Now the students were bringing in articles on a wide range of subjects from various sources. The students, to some extent, had changed from: "What are you going to make us do today?" To, "I would like us to do this today." They had changed from reluctant students to proactive students. One of the greatest joys that I had while teaching this unit was seeing the student's eyes instead of the tops of their heads. The student's hands were in the air instead of folded on their desks.

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Name _____ Date _____

FINDING A LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Using a current or back issue of any newspaper, find a letter to the editor that you think is interesting and persuasive. Staple it to this paper and write why you think it is interesting and, most importantly, why you think it is persuasive. Does it grab the reader's attention? How does it influence the reader's actions?

Name _____ Date _____

USING A FLOWCHART

Using one of your own ideas for an editorial, one that tries to persuade people to take some action, complete the flowchart below.

Name _____ Date _____

WRITING A LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Look through your local newspaper and read the letters to the editor. Using a format similar to those letters you have read, write a letter to the editor of the newspaper on some topic that interests you. It could be about something in the news recently or something you think could be done to improve the way of life in your community. It could be to praise the paper for its coverage of some event or to condemn the paper for its lack of coverage. Or it could be on anything else. Keep your letter short (200 words is best) and go straight to the point. Be as persuasive as possible.

Name of paper _____

Address _____

Dear Editor:

Sincerely,

Name _____ Date _____

WRITING TO PERSUADE

In one way or another, the purpose of most editorials and letters to the editor is to influence people's actions. This is the primary function of the persuasive editorial. Remember, the specific parts of an editorial: (1) an introduction; (2) the reaction – your opinion; (3) the details; (4) the conclusion – solutions. Knowing this, complete the following exercise.

Find something around the school or your community that you would like to change.

Do the required research to find out why things are the way they are.

Think of a solution for the problem that you want to change.

Then write a letter to the editor of about 250 words telling your peers or the community what the problem is and what should be done about it.