2000

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Recommended Citation

Miles, Maggie (2000) "Pick a Prop, Spin a Story, and Presto: Persuasive Writing Comes Alive!," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 16: Iss. 1, Article 11.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.1368>

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Pick a Prop, Spin a Story, and Presto: Persuasive Writing Comes Alive!

Maggie Miles

Nicholas slouches on the front passenger seat of my rental car while Barnaby silently endures the back seat as I madly search for a K-8 school building in rural Michigan. I keep passing corn fields, barns, gas stations and antique shops with no sign of a school.

Earlier I had flown into Chicago's O'Hare Airport from my home in northern California for two weeks of consulting for an intermediate school district (ISD) as a "demonstration teacher." In addition to offering conventional workshops, I am expected to illustrate my techniques by actually taking over a class. As stressful as jumping from one new class to another may be, it can't compare to the panic I feel as I search desperately for the school, where I'm expected within minutes to enter my first class of 7th graders to help them develop strategies for persuasive writing. The assignment is prompted by a new emphasis on persuasive writing in the state's reading and new social studies proficiency exams.

Ah, a school bus up ahead. A good sign. And what's that? An American flag flying in the distance? I suddenly feel right at home. I pull into the school parking lot, grab my briefcase, shove poor Nicholas into a shopping bag (to keep him out of sight), and head for the office.

In each school, the arrival routine is the same: Find the principal, get the schedule and head off to the first of three or four classes for the day. Sometimes I come early and work with the teachers before school; other days we meet after school. In

some of the buildings, the teachers have substitutes and will stay with me all day. In other buildings, they will sit at the back of their own classrooms, observe, and occasionally participate.

Despite my haste to get started, I can't help noting the Amish buggy in the parking lot and the timid children in traditional Amish dress. My mind races: How can I take possible cultural differences into account as I tackle my first class? Looking out at the Amish boys with suspenders and girls with white lace bonnets and black jumpers, I choose not to tell them I come from California, a culture radically different from their own. No, I'll just say I am visiting and am here to help them with their writing.

Persuasive Writing

Persuasive writing: writing to persuade. I know many teachers are frustrated with the new social studies test; others are being good sports and are using several of the model lesson plans from the state. As I look out at the sea of faces and think of some of the suggested sample topics, however, I cringe at the titles: "Women in Combat," "Should School Uniforms Be Compulsory?" "Should Schools Test Randomly for Drugs?"

How can these students relate to these topics and write a convincing persuasive argument? How can we help them understand some of the fundamentals of good writing: purpose, audience and voice?

I begin the lesson with a challenge. I tell the

students I have a problem and need their help. I explain that I know of a young Russian boy, about their age, who has a grandmother living in nearby Centreville, Michigan. The boy has been invited to live with his grandmother for a month and attend their school. Should he leave his family and homeland for a month, or should he stay in Russia? I explain that before the hour is over, each of them will have written a persuasive letter to this Russian youth.

Nicholas Comes to Michigan

Then, rather dramatically, I open my shopping bag and pull out Nicholas. A diminutive rag doll, he measures a mere one foot tall and is wearing an ornate Russian costume, complete with straw shoes with tassels and a three-corner pointed hat. His sienna-colored yarn hair falls almost to his neck in the back and boasts bangs in front.

I prop Nicholas on the lectern and then divide the class into four groups of six children each. Half of the groups will make up reasons why Nicholas should stay in Russia; the other two will try to convince him that he should come to Michigan. (As usual, several students ask to move to another group, but I quickly explain that we don't have the time to accommodate everyone's wishes.)

After I write "pro" and "con" on the board, we talk for a few minutes about what it means to persuade another person and how one can build a convincing argument. As a warm-up activity, I ask them to think of examples in their own lives, both at home and school, where they have wanted to change someone's mind. One of the girls hesitates and then timidly volunteers that she wishes her parents would let her go to slumber parties. Another child thinks it would be great to be allowed to chew gum at school. The room buzzes as the children share opinions about Nicholas' dilemma. Some come up and look at Nicholas; others touch his clothing. I assign a note taker for each group, and a reporter, who will share the group's findings. (Assigning specific tasks helps the group stay focused.) The groups then work for about ten minutes.

After the whole class reconvenes, each re-

porter reads aloud his or her group's list of reasons supporting the pro or con. We talk about which sentences are facts and which are opinions. Each sentence is then labeled "F" or "O." I encourage the students to use the opinion sentences, just as long as they can support them. Their next task is to write a letter to Nicholas outlining the reasons for him to come to Centreville or to stay in Russia. Each writes an individual letter and begins with "Dear Nicholas. . . ."

Here are a few excerpts from their letters:

- "If you are planning to come to Michigan you will have to buy some new shoes. Your shoes will not make it in the winter here."
- "I am afraid you will get too homesick. It will be too expensive for you to call Russia all the time and you might miss the food you are used to. Our cafeteria food isn't that great either."

My all-time favorite letter included the following:

- "Nicholas, I strongly advise you not to come here. I know your grandmother in Centreville and I have been to her house. She always has a lot of boys there and she works them very hard. Chores, chores, chores—that is what you will do all day. You will have no free time!"

After several volunteers read their letters, we take a class vote as to whether Nicholas should come to Michigan or stay in Russia. Two-thirds of the class encourage him to come. (The vote gives students the opportunity to voice their opinions and helps appease students who wish they had been assigned to another group.)

After class, the classroom teacher told me that she had never thought of using a prop or a storyline, nor had she thought her male students would write letters to a rag doll! Already her head was spinning with props she could bring into class for future writing assignments.

Barnaby and the Middle Schoolers

After teaching for two days in high schools, I look forward to spending more time with middle-

school students. I have retired Nicholas to the trunk of the car, and this time I stuff Barnaby into my shopping bag. I head for a very rural school and call the principal for directions. She tells me that yesterday a visiting playwright never showed up and she feared he was lost. She cautions me not to turn into a particular lane, or I would never find my way out again. (I wonder whether that should be the first place to seek the wandering playwright.) I end up finding the school in a rather unique way. I ask a policeman for directions and he ends up giving me a personal escort! Once at the school, I adhere to my regular routine: Find the principal, get my teaching schedule for the day, and head for the first class.

The new class is a mixture of sixth and seventh graders. I introduce myself to the class and begin by writing the word “quarantine” on the board and defining it. I give a brief history of its derivation and explain how the Latin word, *quadraginta*, means “forty,” which was the number of days of detention imposed upon ships, persons or animals suspected of contagious diseases in centuries past. I then begin my narrative.

I know a boy, Mike, about their age, who has a wonderful puppy named Barnaby. I then reach into my bag and pull out a large stuffed puppy and place him on the teacher’s desk. Barnaby is very soft, has long droopy ears and resembles a Golden Retriever. There is not one child in this class of 25 who isn’t staring at this silly stuffed animal. (Who says seventh-grade boys are too cool?) Mike loves his puppy and has just found out he and his family have to move to England which mandates a six-month quarantine period for all imported dogs. Mike may take Barnaby with him on the airplane, but he will have to give him up when they arrive. He will, however, be allowed to visit him at the kennel once a week. Mike has a good friend in the USA, Steve, who has offered to keep the puppy. The question before the class is “Should Barnaby be put in quarantine?” Each student must write a persuasive letter to Mike, Barnaby’s owner.

I then divide the class in to four groups: two groups who must convince Mike to take his dog and

put him in quarantine, and two groups who must persuade Mike that he should give the dog to his friend, Steve. Once again, I assign a recorder and a reporter, and I visit the groups as they compile their argument. I use the same format I used with the doll, Nicholas, and the reporters read out their lists of reasons. They label their sentences “fact” or “opinion.” To push their thinking a little further, I put on the board this question: “Is a dog a member of the family?” Within seconds, students are defending or refuting this question. One student blurts out, “I’d rather put my sister in quarantine!”

Here are a few excerpts from the letters they wrote Mike:

- “Do not put Barnaby in the kennel for six months. He will not even know you when he gets out and puppies need love everyday, not just once a week. And he might even die when he is in there.”
- “Going to see your puppy every week will help you in your new place because he is your friend. You have enough new things to get used to and you don’t want to be missing Barnaby all the time and worrying about how Steve is caring for him.”
- “I think you should give your puppy to your friend Steve. He can send you photos of Barnaby as he grows up. If the photos make you too sad, you can just throw them away.”

To extend this lesson, I ask the students to come up with different ways they could research this problem. How could they learn more about quarantine, the long-term effects of confined life on a puppy, etc. Students suggest we consult psychologists, visit the kennel ahead of time, call previous families whose dogs had been in quarantine, and call national associations, among other actions. My favorite response came from the student who wanted to give Barnaby to Steve for a trial period. He then wanted to document Steve’s care of the dog with a hidden camera, no less.

No Confusion As To Purpose

On the extended response portion of the Michigan Social Studies Test students are required to compose an essay that addresses a public-policy issue, and they have to take a stand—hence the need for practice in persuasive writing. On the reading test, students also have to write a persuasive essay. How can we as teachers help our students master, let alone feel comfortable, writing in the persuasive mode?

Students need to be eased into working with persuasive writing before they address “big” topics and public-policy issues. We cannot expect our students to write passionately about “Women in Combat” or “Random Drug Testing” if they have had no practice in formulating persuasive arguments that revolve around more down-to-earth issues. Students need to be able to identify with the topic and learn how to formulate a convincing argument. Only then they will be ready to explore more complex subjects.

Will the students I worked with ever move to England and place a pet in quarantine? Probably not. Will they ever have to write letters to a Russian boy? Probably not. But they can imagine what it would be like to leave their home and/or give up an animal they love, and they have no trouble tackling the narrative. By focusing on a prop and becoming involved in a story that included a conflict, students begin to view persuasive writing in a less threatening way. After our work with either Nicholas or Barnaby, the students understand what it means to take a stand and to build a convincing argument. In fact, they are eager to work in their groups and to write their individual letters.

As teachers, we hear a lot these days about “one’s voice” in writing and the need to have a clear purpose and a defined audience. Addressing letters to either Nicholas or Mike (Barnaby’s owner) provided students with a clearly defined audience, and they had no trouble expressing themselves in their own voices. More important, there was no confusion as to the purpose.

So, the next time you are debating as to how to teach persuasive writing, look around for a prop, create a story line that involves a conflict, and presto! Persuasive writing will come to life!

About the Author

Maggie Miles, a high school English teacher and educational consultant, recently relocated from California to northern New Jersey. She also has taught in northern Italy, Michigan, and Ohio.