

Persuasion in Literature

Literature was not born the day when a boy crying "wolf, wolf" came running out of the Neanderthal valley with a big gray world at his heels: literature was born on the day when a boy came crying "wolf, wolf" and there was no wolf behind him.

Vladimir Nabokov

"To be or not to be."

Hamlet (stating his position)

For English teachers, literature provides a treasure trove of persuasive rhetoric. How do fictional characters conduct themselves and use persuasion? How do the characters get themselves out of scrapes? How do they fashion their own destinies? How do they change their worlds? Imagine the mental processes students use when scanning through a plot, looking for moments when "plain old information" becomes a struggle between wills, a challenge, a fight of some kind. These are the moments that adult readers notice easily, but sometimes these conflicts pass right over younger readers who read more for plot than for character. The result? "This is boring."

On the other hand, when students take on the role of the character and speak in the character's voice, they engage in an amazingly complex combination of skills. At the very least, they are matching word choice to fit setting, character, and dialectical requirements; they are adapting the forms and conventions of language to suit the genre of writing they have chosen. But on a larger scale, the very act of pretending or role-playing means that they operate within a system of rules and symbols, systems that Lev Vygotsky describes as important for several reasons: it provides them with practice in developing appropriate voice for an audience and is also a precursor to civilized behavior.

Simply put, language play makes us better people, and the fun and creativity make it painless too!

This chapter begins with a lesson to help refresh students' working definitions of persuasion with detailed lists of how persuasion functions. Next is a lesson to guide students as they scan a piece of literature with a persuasive search-lens, seeking and listing moments in which any character tries to persuade anyone else to do something. Then with a list of characters' persuasion goals, students can do so much more than just write an advertisement or an essay. They can reenter the literature and speak as the character, using the persuasive rhetorical devices appropriate to setting, purpose, and audience.

What is the end result in their writing? You'll see a wider array of well-toned writing muscles and more willingness to pick and choose from among their rhetorical tricks.



Persuasion in Literature: Preparation – Step 1

A man never tells you anything until you contradict him.
George Bernard Shaw

The Point: Students can find dozens of instances of persuasion in any story. Before they can begin the hunt, though, a little readiness will help them start off on the same foot, with the same idea of what exactly it is that they are hunting for. The first step in analyzing stories for instances of persuasion is to make a concrete list of what persuasion is, what it does, and what it looks like. You may want to refer back to similar lessons in chapter one. This list will be useful as a reference tool when students address pieces of literature.

Teaching it:

What is persuasion? Not in school, but in the real world, what is persuasive talking and writing? Why do people do it?

(Have students answer aloud, or on paper if they are a quiet group, and then amass their answers into a list.)

Debriefing:

What do these things have in common?

What does persuasion NOT do?

Student responses:

Fourth grade

- To convince someone to give you something
- To convince someone to buy you something
- To goad someone into doing something else
- To goad someone into doing you a favor
- To convince someone to agree with you

Ninth grade

- To get something for themselves
- To gain something
- To get revenge
- To get people on their side
- To get someone to see something their way
- To get followers
- To make people change their minds
- To manipulate in some way
- To sell something

Eleventh grade

To remove obstacles

To ask for something

To control someone

To bring in customers

To get someone to think like we do

To get someone to look at it my way

To instigate, i.e. confrontation

To cause someone to change their thoughts

To keep others from reaching their goals

Spin-off:

- Choose any one of the goals. Create a scene, either as yourself or as a character from a book.
- Here's a fun one. There is a new game show on TV. It's called "Persuasion." Decide what the show is about, how the contestants compete, how it is scored, etc.
- Bring in persuasive ads that you think are aimed at people your age. Explain to the class exactly how each ad works. What do you have to believe in order to believe the ad?

For Younger Writers:

- Think of a time when you got what you wanted. What method of persuasion did you use? What works best with Mom? What works best with Dad? What works best with everybody?



Treasure Hunt for Moments of Persuasion in Literature – Step 2

"Little pig, little pig, let me in!"

B.B. Wolf (stating his position)

"Not by the hair of my chinny chin chin."

Little pig (stating his position)

The Point: Two forms of persuasion are prevalent in classrooms: advertisements and persuasive essays. In real life, however, persuasion is pervasive and takes many forms, and this is mirrored in literature. Knowing how to create persuasion is not the only useful set of skills for creative, problem-solving students; recognizing persuasion in motion is also valuable.

First, the teacher will direct the students to focus on a story that they all know. Together, they'll look at the list they created in the preparation exercise and find moments in the story where any of those goals are being tried. This exercise will simply compile a list of moments in a work which can be used further in subsequent exercises.

Teaching it:

Let's think about what we just read together.

Now let's look at the list we compiled, "What persuasion does."

Can you think of any moments in the story where someone is trying to do any of these things?

(Use some examples as models.)

Take several minutes and list as many moments like this as you can.

(Compile their responses into a larger list.)

Debriefing:

What patterns do you see in the lists we've compiled?

Why is there so much persuasion in literature?

Student responses:

Younger Writers:

Moments of persuasion in "The Three Little Pigs"

The wolf tries to convince the first pig to let him in.

The first pig tries to convince the wolf that he can't come in.

The wolf tries to convince the second pig to let him in.

The second pig tries to convince the wolf that he can't come in.

Moments of persuasion in *The Odyssey*

Telemachus tries to persuade the nurse not to tell his mother he is leaving.
 Athena begs Zeus to let Odysseus return home safely.
 Athena persuades Zeus to send Hermes to order Calypso's release of Odysseus.
 Hermes persuades Calypso that she must give up Odysseus forever.
 Calypso tries to persuade Odysseus to stay and be immortal with her.
 Calypso tries to convince Odysseus that she is better than Penelope.
 Nestor persuades Telemachus to search for his father in Sparta.
 Athena persuades Telemachus to become "his father's son".

Moments of persuasion in *Romeo and Juliet*

Paris convinces the Capulets that he should marry their daughter.
 Romeo persuades Juliet that his affection isn't fake.
 Friar Laurence tries to convince Romeo that he's in too big a rush.
 Tybalt persuades Romeo to fight.
 The Nurse tries to convince Juliet to forget Romeo and marry Paris.
 Juliet tries to persuade the Nurse to take her to the church.
 Juliet tries to persuade Friar Laurence to give her sleeping drugs.
 Capulet tries to convince Juliet to marry Paris.
 Capulet convinces Tybalt to leave Romeo alone at the feast.
 The Prince tries to convince the two families not to fight any more.
 Romeo's friends convince him to go to the Capulets' party.
 Romeo persuades the apothecary to sell him poison.

Moments of Persuasion in *To Kill A Mockingbird*

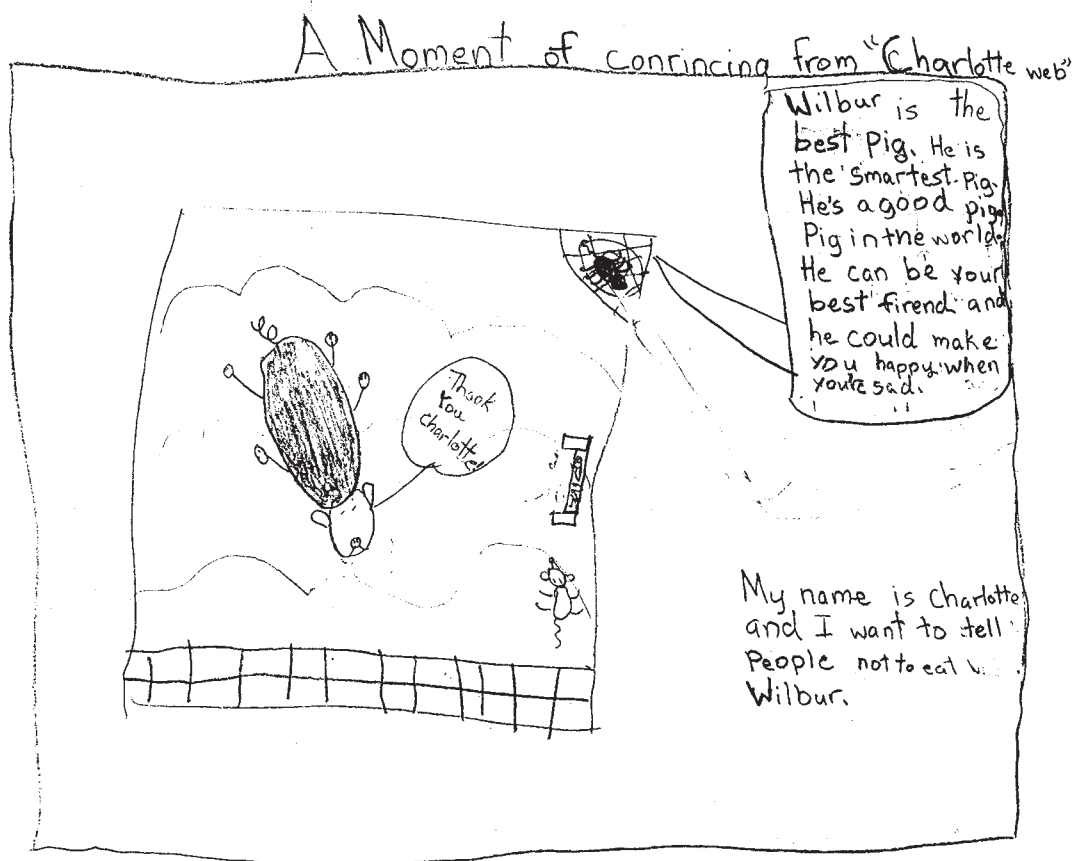
Scout tries to convince Jem not to go after his pants
 Atticus tries to persuade the jury of Tom Robinson's innocence
 Calpurnia persuades Atticus that Tim Johnson has rabies
 Atticus tries to convince Scout not to beat people up
 Scout tries to convince the teacher about the Cunninghams' ways
 Mayella tries to convince the town that Tom Robinson tried to rape her
 Mr. Ewell tries to convince the jury that he saw a rape
 Sheriff Heck Tate tries to convince Atticus that Mr. Ewell's death wasn't the children's fault

Spin-offs:

- Write about the trends you notice in the work. (See sample, Appendix 20c.)
- Choose a character and a moment, and practice the character's rhetorical persuasive skills in essay form, developing classical reasoning and using one of several structural forms.
- Write about the relationship between persuasion and plot. (Can there be a plot without moments of persuasion? Does conflict always result in persuasion? Does all problem-solving require characters to take positions and defend them?)

For Younger Writers:

- Write the character's words (real, imagined, or both) in a word bubble, and draw the speaker. At the bottom, write, "My name is (character's name) and I want _____." And at the top, "A persuasive moment from (name of work)."
- Take any single moment and rewrite the speech or conversation, using your own imagined words.
- Rewrite the moment in a modern setting.
- For a major project or a group project, make a character journal similar to *The Jolly Postman*, embedding a number of pieces described above.
- Lists of Persuasive Moments from *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *The Great Gatsby*, and *The Odyssey*.
- "A Moment of Convincing From *Charlotte's Web*."



Resources:

Appendix 20

Ahlberg, Janet and Allan Ahlbert. *The Jolly Postman*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1986. Many different genres of writing are incorporated into this clever book. It's a perfect model for unifying different pieces into one thematic thread.

Moss, Marissa. *Amelia's Notebook*. Berkeley: Tricycle Press, 1995. This delightful journal demonstrates a hybrid between journaling and scrapbooking and can serve as a perfect model for turning an assignment like "Ten persuasive moments in Huck Finn" into "Huck Finn's journal."

Romano, Tom. *Blending Genre, Altering Style*. Portsmouth: Boynton/Cook Publishers, 2000. Tom Romano has pioneered the "multi-genre" style of writing research reports, and this use of multiple genres is easily adapted to a study of persuasion in literature.





Stepping into a Character's Shoes – Step 3

A detective digs around in the garbage of people's lives. A novelist invents people and then digs around in their garbage.

Joe Gores

Hamlet as performed at the Brooklyn Shakespeare Festival: "To be, or what?"

Steven Pearl

The Point: Now that students have thought about persuasion and located persuasive moments in literature, they are all set to create original persuasion from within the piece of literature. If they choose one moment from the list of persuasive moments, and one form of writing from the genre list, they are ready to start playing with a point of view, and through this play they begin unraveling and analyzing the literature you study.

As a teacher, you can use this in many ways, from comprehension quizzes to final projects. Along with knowledge of persuasion, activities like this promote knowledge of character, plot, dialect, style and acting. They also help engage and motivate students.

Teaching it:

Choose one of the moments of persuasion from your list. Now look at the genre list. Adopt the voice of the speaker and write the moment in another form or genre: poem, children's book, want-ads, scripted telephone conversation, letter from one character to another, diary entry, legal document, prayer, song, whatever fits best, in your opinion.

Debriefing:

Does your writing mirror the point of view of the character you chose? If so, how?

Student Responses:

Write a real estate ad to sell Wuthering Heights to a prospective buyer. Be sure to include details about the structure.

For sale: Wuthering Heights. A delightful manor in the English moor. Quietly removed from society, this Gothic style house is perfect for any misanthropist. Strong foundation and deeply set windows protect the house from England's stormy weather. The plethora of grotesque carvings around the door give this house its own uniqueness. You'll forget the gloomy exterior when you step inside. The house has plenty of room and dark corners. The chimney will warm you on those cold English nights. Very historical. Come by and see for yourself! - Lauren Sewell, 10th grade

Write an ad for *Animal Farm*, the movie.

Tired of going out and watching the same human heroes beat overrated animal antagonists? Then "herd" on over to your nearest theater and go see *Animal Farm*. These overworked and underfed "Beasts of England" have had enough of Mr. Jones and they want the farm...for themselves!

Ladies, lonely on Sunday nights as your boyfriends watch "pig-skin"? Then join the "flock" and watch as our four-legged and feathered friends fight for their rights!

"Two legs bad and four thumbs up!" say Siskil and Ebert. So rebel against the old TV reruns and movies, and join Old Major, Snowball, Boxer, Moses, Napoleon, Squealer and the other animals on Manor Farm as they change it to Animal Farm! Remember, to them, man is the other white meat. - Gwen Adams, 9th grade

Resources:

Appendix 21

Appendix 21a, Student Multigenre Samples from *The Odyssey*. From Calypso's plea to Odysseus to stay, to a recipe for a hero, students demonstrate what happens when they match up a moment of persuasion with a choice from the genre list.

Appendix 21b, Genre List. This list is a bare-bones but exhaustive list of many forms of writing as they exist in the real world. Students can match up persuasive moments to the types of writing here and produce wonderful surprises.

Appendix 21c, Treasury of Projects. On this list, students find instructions for many writing projects in many different forms, complete with instructions for converting moments from literature into the various forms.

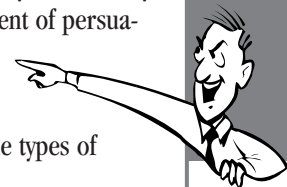
Appendix 21d, Student Sample: Cyclops, Redrawn by Brendan Keifer. The Cyclops never looked so good.

Lane, Barry. *51 Wacky We-search Reports* Shoreham, VT: Discover Writing Press, 2001. This book, written for students grades 3 –8 and beyond, models funny research papers and illustrates time-proven techniques for facing the facts with fun.

Maguire, Gregory. *Wicked: The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1995. This wonderful novel is told by Dorothy's wicked witch. It's a perfect example of speaking as a character.

Scieszka, Jon. *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs*. New York: Viking Penguin, 1989. This picture book has quickly become a classic for switching points of view or narrator voice. Rhetorical choices have never been so fun.

Romano, Tom. *Blending Genre, Altering Style*. Portsmouth: Boynton/Cook Publishers, 2000. The pioneer in multi-genre work, Tom Romano offers many samples and suggestions to turn this act of play into serious, formal inquiry.





Writing Persuasive Essays in Response to Literature

Fiction is obliged to stick to possibilities. Truth isn't.

Mark Twain

Hope is a thing with feathers / That perches in the soul, / And sings the tune without words / And never stops at all.

Emily Dickinson (stating her position)

The Point: When students use literary characters or literary works to back up their points in essays, they're fulfilling the dreams of English teachers the world over: they are leaning on literature to make meaning in their lives, to make sense of the world.

Teaching it:

Choose a human dilemma in any piece of literature, and ask students to discuss their points of view about that dilemma. Have them jot down anything quotable that their classmates say about people or human nature. Then ask the students to choose one of those, whichever statement they consider most true, to use as a thesis statement for an essay. Instruct them to use actions of the characters in the literature to illustrate their theses.

We have read *To Kill A Mockingbird*, and now you have thought about how people face forks in the road. Write an answer to this question in the next couple of minutes. Let's share answers and discuss them. Here's the question: What is the difficult truth about people, when faced with those choices? (Or rephrased, why don't people all make the same choices? What makes us decide when to step off the more traveled path?)

Sample student responses:

Ninth graders comments, on the subject of human choices when faced with forks in the road:

Mike : The path which you take should be based on what you need at that time.

Michelle P: Sometimes the two paths actually represent an easier and harder way of life.

Carina: Sometimes it's clear when someone has made the wrong decision.

Michelle K.: Going where you haven't been means learning.

Justin: Choosing the path less taken means that you get to lay down your own gravel.

Craig: It's human nature to blame others for being on the wrong road.

Kara: Destinations vary, depending on your route.

Kendall: Sometimes the choice is dictated by a person's will to be "cool."

Justin: The freeway was once a country road, too. The road more traveled is more carved and paved, and you know the way. You know what's ahead. On the road less traveled, you have to find your own way.

Mike: You take more of a chance, more risk, on the untraveled road.

Melissa: Choices like these are all a matter of what you want out of your life.

Scott: Kindness is the only way out of the worst choices.

Debriefing:

Was it surprising to hear how much wisdom came from the class?
Did anyone hear an opinion worth pondering? Worth proving?

Spin-offs:

- Choose a statement and prove that it is not true, using examples from the literature to back yourself up.
- Get a copy of today's newspaper and create statements from the articles on the front page. Decide whether you agree with these statements or disagree and write about this.
- Try writing statements that grow from the messages of advertisements. Make lists of the messages of ads and share them with each other.
- Write scenes in which characters from the literature act out their own debates about the truth of these statements.

For Younger Writers:

- Make a greeting card or poster of a statement of truth.
- A popular, entertaining debate game show at Oxford University in England involves taking a famous quote and either arguing against it or defending it. For example, British playwright Tom Stoppard successfully defended the quote, "Wagner's music sounds better than it is." Standing behind a quote helps us to search for textual or anecdotal evidence to back up opinion. Judging such a contest gives students invaluable practice assessing the strength and weaknesses of arguments.
- Begin by picking the quotes. Each contestant gets three minutes to defend a quote. Judges score on "real reasons." Three real reasons means they win.

Resources:

Appendix 22, Student Sample Essay: "A Pit of Ignorance," by James Higdon.

Rosenblatt, Louise M. *Literature as Exploration*. New York: Modern Language Association, 1995. This classic book began the reader-response movement in literature, changing forever the perception that literature has finite themes and uses.

Gonzalez, Ralfka and Ana Ruiz. *My First Book of Proverbs: Mi Primer Libro de Dichos*. San Francisco: Children's Book Press, 1995. This beautiful book has a proverb on each page, accompanied by gorgeous artwork. The proverbs could be used as starters for persuasion or opinion statements.



Appendix 22



The Insight Garden: Growing Opinions from Art, Literature, and Life Seeds

Everything has been figured out except how to live.

Jean-Paul Sartre

The Point: Art is a way of making sense of the world. Great paintings, like great novels or great music, connect us and invigorate our own sense of who we are. Connecting between the visual and literal arts helps us and our students to develop opinions and create bridges between our lives and the work of artists. In this short guided writing exercise, students expand on an opinion and a piece of artwork. This synthesizes their experience from literature and life.

Teaching it:

(On an overhead projector, place a piece of artwork and an opinion or theme statement which correlates with a piece of literature you are reading in class. This guided writing will take ten minutes.)

Look at the artwork.

In the next minute, copy the opinion statement.

For the next three minutes, explain the statement and its validity. (What does it mean? What is your interpretation of it?)

Take a breath and indent. For the next three minutes, tell how it connects to the literature we're reading in class.

Take a breath and indent. For the next three minutes, tell how it connects to your life, our world.

Take a breath and indent one more time. In the next minute, finish with something this discussion leaves you wondering about the statement.

Note: This is only one way to present this material. The shortness of the writing time often helps students to focus and find their opinions, almost like the word association technique used by psychiatrists. Try a more leisurely approach and see what results you get.

Debriefing:

Did looking at the artwork change the way you started writing?

How difficult was it to connect the idea to your life?

Student Samples

Charlotte's Web,

written by NJWPT workshop participants, 2/8/0

We are all searching for a path, or a place to belong.
 Special friends sometimes have to stand by and watch.
 Sometimes it feels like the only person you can count on is yourself.
 How hard is it to be part of this world?
 Together we can light the way.
 The best ideas are often generated in isolation.

Romeo and Juliet

Loyalty between family members is one of the greatest passions in life.
 Nothing soothes a wounded heart like a little time and space.
 Some kinds of beauty last forever.
 Poor communication can cause serious problems.
 Human beings work harder to achieve the impossible.
 Love is springtime of the soul.
 Peace and hate co-exist everywhere.
 Romance doesn't change, no matter what culture, no matter what century.

Spin-offs:

- Complete the exercise, using only these directions:
 Explain the opinion statement with the artwork. Can you connect it to the literature you're reading? To your life? To the world? You have ten minutes.
- Flesh the essay out with "thick description" (sassy leads, dialogue, snapshots, examples, elaborata) for a full essay.
- Incorporate vocabulary words into these pieces.
- Copy occasional anonymous short essays onto transparencies for group proofreading.

Resources:

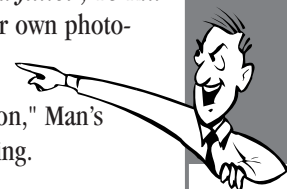
Appendix 23a, Sample Insight Statements for *The Odyssey*, *Charlotte's Web*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *To Kill A Mockingbird*, and *Lord of the Flies*. You can find artwork from any source, even your own photographs, to use with these thematic statements.

Appendix 23b, Student Sample: Connecting *The Odyssey* and "St. George and The Dragon," Man's Fascination with Monsters, by Adrian Ramos. A ninth grader shares his ten-minute writing.

Kellaber, Karen. Picture Prompts to Spark Super Writing. New York: Scholastic, Inc., 1999. This activity book presents art pieces on reproducible pages.

Cowan, Elizabeth and Gregory Cowan. *Writing*. New York: John Wiley, 1980. In this book, the authors introduce the "cubing" exercise, which is a short method for guided writing. The cubing exercise has been adapted for this lesson.

Appendix 23



Genre List

Acceptance speech	Diatribе	Lullaby	Rap
Ad copy	Dictionary entry	Magazine article	Rebuttal
Address to a jury	Directions	Manifesto	Recipe
Advice column	Dream analysis	Manual	Recommendation
Afterword	Editorial	Map	Referendum question
Agenda	Elegy	Memorandum	Research report
Allegory	Email	Memorial plaque	Resignation
Annotation	Encyclopedia article	Menu	Restaurant review
Annual report	Epilogue	Minutes	Resume
Apology	Epitaph	Monologue	Riddle
Appeal	Essay	Monument inscription	Roast
Autobiography	Eulogy	Movie review	Rock opera
Billboard	Experiment	Myth	Sales letter
Biography	Expose	Nature guide	Schedule
Birth announcement	Fable	News story	Screenplay
Blueprint	Family history	Newsletter	Sermon
Book review	Filmstrip	Nomination speech	Sign
Brief	Flyer	Nonsense rhyme	Slide show
Brochure	Foreword	Nursery rhyme	Slogan
Bulletin board	Fortune cookie insert	Obituary	Song lyric
Bumper sticker	Found poem	Oracle	Specifications
Business letter	Graduation speech	Packaging copy	Spell
Business proposal	Graffiti	Parable	Sports story
Bylaws	Grant application	Paraphrase	Storyboard
Campaign speech	Greeting card	Parody	Summary
Captions	Haiku	Party	Survey
Cartoon	Headline	Party invitation	Tall tale
Chant	Horoscope	Petition	Test
Character sketch	Human interest story	Platform	Thank-you note
Charter	Infomercial	Play	Theatre review
Chat room log	Instructions	Poem	Toast
Cheer	Insult	Police/Accident report	To-do list
Children's story	Interview questions	Political advertisement	Tour guide speech
Classified ad	Introduction	Post card	Translation
Comeback speech	Invitation	Prayer	Treaty
Comic strip	Itinerary	Précis	T-shirt design
Community calendar	Jingle	Prediction	TV spot
Constitution	Joke	Preface	Vows
Consumer report	Journal entry	Press release	Want ad
Contract	Keynote address	Proclamation	Wanted poster
Conversation	Lament Law (statute)	Profile	Warrant
Court decision	Learning log	Prologue	Warranty
Credo	Lesson for a child	Proposal	Wedding invitation
Daydream	Letter of complaint	Public address	Wish list
Death certificate	Letter of request	announcement	
Debate	Letter to the editor	Public service	
Dialogue	Limerick	announcement	
Diary	Love letter	Radio spot	