

'A CUNNING, MASTERLY AND HUGELY READABLE BOOK.'

Jeremy Bullmore

CAN I
CHANGE
YOUR
MIND?

THE CRAFT AND ART OF PERSUASIVE WRITING LINDSAY CAMP

Can I change your mind?

The craft and art of
persuasive writing

Lindsay Camp

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'This is a cunning, masterly and hugely readable book. You'll learn at least as much from how he writes as from what he writes about – and that's saying a great deal.'

Jeremy Bullmore, former creative director and chairman of J Walter Thompson, columnist for *Campaign*, *Management Today* and *The Guardian*

'Lindsay Camp is a dangerous man, and this is a dangerous book. Behind that charming exterior lies the revolutionary thought that words can change people, organisations and the world. Whatever next? I know, he persuaded me, but ...'

John Simmons, author of *We, Me, Them & It: How to Write Powerfully for Business*

'I would have described this book as educational, entertaining, compelling and persuasive but, having read it, I'd say it will liberate and transform your communication skills.'

Ben Casey, Creative director of The Chase and Professor of Design at the University of Central Lancashire

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For my friend and mentor, David Stuart.

And in memory of my highly persuasive father.

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Thank you

My warmest thanks to Jeremy Bullmore, whose writings have inspired me and whose ideas about how communication works I have shamelessly borrowed in this book.

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And thanks, finally, for keeping me out of trouble, to my lawyer, Anna Keeling (who also has the misfortune to be my wife).

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Section One

Persuasive principles

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Chapter 1

Persuasive writing – who needs it?

Why Lily is to blame for me writing this book; what I mean by persuasive writing, and why it's a skill that can be useful to just about anyone, both at work and in real life; and finally, a bit about what I write for a living, and why it might be relevant to you.

One day, a couple of years ago, I asked my daughter – who was seven at the time – what she'd been doing at school. If you have children, you'll know how rarely this question receives a satisfactory answer. So imagine my surprise when she replied 'persuasive writing'.

Persuasive writing! When I was that age, as far as I can remember, my school days were spent colouring in, collecting interesting twigs for the nature table and gasping at the incident-packed adventures of Janet and John. It was one of those moments when a parent realises just what a different world his kids are growing up in. But, more to the point, it was the moment when it first really struck me that my painfully acquired professional skills might have a wider usefulness than I had ever previously imagined.

Actually, that isn't quite true. I had, I suppose, always been vaguely aware that the basic principles which govern the kind of writing I do for a living could, and should, be applied to many other types of written communication. But what that brief conversation with Lily brought home to me was the fact that the rest of the world was starting to cotton on; to understand that the ability to argue a case effectively in writing isn't just a handy accomplishment – like being able to change a fuse or fold a napkin into a crown – but a basic life-skill.

Put simply, if seven-year-olds all over Britain are learning to write persuasively, it's time everyone did.

What exactly do I mean by persuasive writing?

Before we go any further, I think we need to be as clear as possible about the subject under discussion, and how it might be relevant to you. So what, specifically, is it that distinguishes persuasive writing from other kinds of writing? My answer – and I hope Lily's teacher would agree – is that:

In persuasive writing, the main purpose is to influence the way a reader thinks, feels or acts.

Let's try to pin it down further by listing 10 examples of persuasive writing, as defined above:

- Your CV
- Any kind of proposal or fund-raising document

- An email to your biggest client, tactfully pointing out that unless your invoice is settled promptly, your company might be compelled to take appropriate measures
- Recruitment materials of any kind
- A letter to your bank, explaining why you need a bigger overdraft
- A memo to your staff, suggesting they might like to give up their Sunday afternoon to take part in a charity event
- Any press release
- Your performance appraisal form, explaining to your boss why you deserve a big pay rise
- The flyer for the PTA promises auction – only two weeks left, and all you have so far is an evening’s baby-sitting and one free dental inspection
- Any invitation

Anything there that rings a bell with you? I hope so; but not to worry if there isn’t. My aim, at this stage, is just to impress upon you that you don’t need to be planning a career in advertising, marketing or PR to benefit from reading this book. The principles and skills that I am going to talk about can, to a greater or lesser extent, be applied to virtually anything you will ever need to write.

An exaggerated claim? I hope not, since good persuasive writers have no truck with hyperbole; but to justify my contention, we may need to broaden our terms of reference a little.

An introduction to ‘semi-persuasive’ writing

Of course, it’s true that the examples I chose above are the types of writing task which most closely resemble the work produced by a professional copywriter. What is your CV, after all, if it isn’t an advertisement selling what you have to offer to a potential employer? But let’s consider some other types of writing which, at first glance, may seem to have little or nothing to do with persuasion.

Any suggestions? Well, how about an email replying to a colleague who has asked for some information; a contact report on a meeting with a client; oh yes, and a school history essay. Obviously, in none of these three cases is the writer’s main purpose to influence how the reader feels, thinks or acts. But equally obviously, whatever prompts a writer to write, the result may well influence the reader – although the effect may be slight or imperceptible in many cases. Will the colleague receiving the email be satisfied with the information supplied? Will the client respond positively to the summary of what took place at the meeting? And will the teacher marking the essay be impressed not just by its content, but by the effort that has gone into it?

Looked at in this light, virtually everything we write has a ‘persuasive’ aspect to it: the capacity to influence, either positively or negatively, the person (or people) who will be reading it.

But is it Art? (If so, wrong book I'm afraid)

So is there any kind of writing which can't, in this very loose sense, be considered 'persuasive'? Yes, I think there is. For me, true creative writing – Writing as Art, if you like – comes from a completely different place, where completely different rules apply. And the most important of these, I believe, is that genuine artists should be driven by the desire for self-expression.

This doesn't mean, of course, that they don't care about how people respond to their work. But what it does mean is that they can never let this dictate to them. Artists must always give absolute priority to finding the best possible way of giving shape and substance to their own vision, regardless of whether that makes it more or less 'accessible' to the general public; easier or harder to understand. A real creative writer would never change a single comma just to please the reader.

As persuasive writers, on the other hand, we're perfectly happy to tweak our punctuation – and do much more besides – if it makes our reader more likely to respond in the way that we want.

Persuasive writing: the same principles always apply

I hope you won't mind if I close this first chapter by telling you a little more about myself – not because I'm hoping to dazzle you with my professional achievements

Who needs persuasive writing? Just ask your local hereditary peer.

So, it's 1999 and you are a lord. You're minding your own business, happily passing your days oppressing the peasantry or killing things on your grouse moor, when that nasty oikish Blair fellow announces that he's planning to abolish you.

Well, what he actually announces is that almost all hereditary peers are to be booted out of the House of Lords. Only 92 out of a total of over 750 will be permitted to retain their membership of the best gentlemen's club in town. And if you think you ought to be one of those happy few, you should write a 75-word manifesto explaining why. What are you going to write? If you're the late Lord Monckton of Brenchley, you get out your fountain pen, fill it with green ink and scribble:

I support:

The Queen and all the Royal Family.

The United Kingdom and not a Disunited Republic.

Action against cruelty to animals, particularly fishing with rods. All cats to be muzzled outside to stop the agonising torture of mice and small birds.

The police must be supported against the increase in violent crime.

Organic food not GM.

There should be more grammar schools not less.

LEVEL UP not level down. God willing.

And then, having presented such a compelling case to your peers, you wonder why you weren't elected. More proof, if needed, that these days nobody – noble or commoner – can predict when basic persuasive writing skills will come in handy.

or make you gasp with envy at my glamorous lifestyle, but because I want to establish as clearly as I can, from the outset, how the things I write for a living are relevant to the things you may need to write.

I started my career as a trainee copywriter at J Walter Thompson, then the biggest advertising agency in the UK. Arriving quite rapidly at the recognition that I was too good and kind for the ruthless cut and thrust of ad agency life, I fled from London and started working as a freelance.

That, terrifyingly, was nearly 25 years ago – since when I have written virtually everything it's possible to be paid for writing. A slight exaggeration maybe; but, to give you some impression of the diversity of the work I do, let me list, pretty much at random, a few of my fairly recent assignments:

- A website for a big commercial law firm
- A speech about the need for radical change in the design industry
- An annual report for a well-known high street retailer
- A label for a champagne bottle to be presented by a firm of estate agents to their clients on moving day

- A fund-raising newsletter for a young people's charity
- A set of 'brand language' guidelines for a major financial institution

As I said, I'm not trying to impress you. My point is that the one constant in my professional output is the need to persuade. The main purpose of everything I write is to influence the way a reader thinks, feels or acts. Of course, writing a couple of short sentences to appear on a champagne label is different from writing a 10,000-word annual report. But I firmly believe that, in both cases – and in everything I'm paid to write – the basic principles of persuasive communication apply.

And, thanks in part to Lily, I have come to believe that they can be successfully applied much more widely still.

Remember that entertaining TV commercial you saw last night? That website where you booked your last holiday? Even that mailshot you received this morning and chucked straight in the bin? They all have something to teach you about how you could be a better, more persuasive writer.

Chapter 2

The three Rs of good persuasive writing

A brief introduction to the Big Theory that this book is based upon, summed up in the snappy slogan, 'Remember the Reader and the Result'; a hypothetical caravan-related example of where this theory leads us; and the famous Indian Wood Carver analogy.

In a moment, I'm going to tell you my Big Theory about persuasive writing. But first, I'm going to tell you my Big Theory about Big Theories. It's that books which appear to be based on a Big Theory usually aren't. In most cases, they are based on quite a small theory, which may amount to little more than a fairly obvious statement of a common-sensical point of view.

I'll give you a couple of examples. Those management tomes that sell in their thousands in departure lounge book stalls around the world. All, as far as I am aware, could be summarised in a dozen or so words: 'Be nice to people, treat them well, and they will work harder and more productively'; or, of course, the opposite: 'Be nasty to people, treat them mean, make them fear for their

jobs, and they will work harder and more productively.’ Or how about diet books? Here’s the Lindsay Camp Way to a Healthier Slimmer You in just six words, one of them not strictly necessary:

Eat less, take more exercise, dummy!

If we were being cynical, we might conclude from this that the authors of books based upon Big Theories are rogues and charlatans, intent on defrauding gullible readers; that their only skill lies in taking a self-evident commonsensical point and teasing and stretching it to fill a fat tome.

But instead, let’s put this more charitable interpretation on my Big Theory about Big Theories: that, in almost every field of human activity, the basic principles of what works, and what doesn’t, are pretty self-evident and commonsensical; but, in the hurly burly of everyday life, people tend to lose sight of them, and simple truths become obscured. So the writers of those Big Theory-based books aren’t attempting to pull the wool over anyone’s eyes, but to remove the scales; to show their readers something that may once have been familiar in a fresh light; to strip away complexities that have built up around a subject over time, and reveal the surprisingly simple truth.

Anyway, that’s my justification for the fact that I could easily distil all the wit and wisdom I have to offer you on good persuasive writing into one not particularly long sentence. Here goes:

My Big Theory about Persuasive Writing

The secret of good persuasive writing is to be as clear as you possibly can be about two things: who your reader is, and what result you are hoping to achieve.

In fact, I could even encapsulate it in a snappy six-word slogan, which I'm tempted to call the Three Rs of Persuasive Writing:

Remember the Reader and the Result.

Or, perhaps, just RRR.

A very rough indication of what RRR means in practice

We'll get down to details later. But let me give you the merest hint of where this Big Theory leads us. Let's imagine that you have a caravan that you really love, but which financial necessity compels you to sell. (Not entirely plausible, I know, but bear with me.) You decide to put a postcard in the window of your local corner shop. You sit down to write. And, because you love your caravan so much, what you write is a poem about the last, wonderful holiday you had in it. The only problem is that the poem turns out rather long, so that you have to write it very small indeed on the postcard, and there isn't room for any tedious details about what type of caravan it is, how many it sleeps, what kind of floor coverings and kitchen appliances it features, and so on.

The milkman's note test

The best thing I've written recently? Without hesitation, I'd say it was the note I wrote to the milkman a couple of nights ago, which I'm now going to reproduce in full:

'No milk today thanks, Dave!'

I'm serious. Just consider how effective it was. When I came down next morning, bleary-eyed, there on my doorstep was ... nothing. No milk at all. Not a single bottle. My note had been 100% successful in achieving its objective.

Why? Two reasons. First, because I knew when I wrote it precisely what that objective was. And second, because I had a very clear picture of my reader in my mind before I started.

Worth bearing in mind next time you write something that doesn't read quite as persuasively as you'd like.

You've forgotten your reader, haven't you? How is anyone supposed to buy your beloved caravan if they don't know anything about it?

Luckily, you realise this in time, and rewrite the postcard, including all the information that somebody looking for a caravan might want, as well as a nice picture of you and your family having a lovely time on holiday in the Brecon Beacons. It's much better. Except that this time you forget to put your phone number at the bottom. So, while you may have many potential buyers ready to outbid each other for your caravan, they have no way of contacting you.

You've forgotten the result you're trying to achieve.

Of course, you wouldn't be foolish enough to do any of the above. But my Big Theory is based on the observation that many intelligent people – including you, perhaps – do indeed make mistakes similar in kind, if not in degree of stupidity, every time they sit down to write¹.

¹I was worried when I wrote this that the hypothetical example was too far removed from reality to be enlightening. Then, a few weeks later, somebody put one of those take-away menus through my letterbox. Delicious-sounding Moroccan food, tempting prices, prompt home delivery ... no phone number or address.