

“I Wanna” — The Art of Persuasion

When you read the text above,¹ what do you see? A letter from a boy to his mom? An intriguing children’s book? Or how about . . . potential curriculum material? The book *I Wanna Iguana* by Karen Kaufman Orloff has served as the curriculum guide in my 4th- to 8th-grade writing class over the past month. For the first week, we immersed ourselves in persuasive litera-

ture such as *The Perfect Pet*; *Thank You, Sarah*; and *My Teacher for President*.² Together as a class, we read each of these books, talked about persuasive writing, marked what we noticed (hereafter called “noticings”), and compared texts. I then put copies of *I Wanna Iguana* in my students’ hands and told them, “I want to know what you notice in this text.”

Energy is high, although students don’t quite grasp the journey on which they are about to embark. “Working in

pairs, I want you to mark your noticings as you read through the text,” I explain. “Remember to consider the idea of persuasive writing.” Fifteen minutes later, I have six *I Wanna Iguana* books filled with green Post-It notes. I commend the students on their noticings as we discuss some of the things that they saw the author do in the text. Although I’m excited, I start to panic a bit. *This is great! Now what?*

From Noticings to Teachable Substance

I did have some ideas I wanted to try. During my lesson planning, I had been reading *Study Driven*, and so I knew that it was now time to turn my students’ fantastic noticings into curriculum. I consolidated all of the Post-Its into a list. “Wow! *I Wanna Iguana* is full of such great craft,” I marveled.

BY SARAH COULTER



The students had noticed things like how the illustrator, David Catrow, supported both sides of the conversation through his artwork. His drawings reflected whatever was being said at that moment. The students also observed that throughout the text, Alex, the main character, was trying to “sweet talk” his mom to get what he wanted. As they made noticings such as those listed above, unbeknownst to them, my students’ understanding expanded, and the fog around the idea of persuasive writing began to dissipate.

On one page, a student noted on a Post-It, “The mom doesn’t fall for it. And she doesn’t even agree with Alex.” Studying the text made it clear to the students that Alex was going to have to be persuasive. My students were learning to read like writers. Katie Wood Ray said it well: “If [I] had done all the noticing for [my] students, pointing out the features [I] wanted them to see in the gathered texts, [my] students would have had no reason to learn to notice text features themselves.”³

At the end of the study, my students wouldn’t have been any better off than they were at the beginning because if I had done all the work, the learning would have been applicable only to this

unit. Instead, they were developing a new skill—to read like a writer, which meant asking themselves, *What did the writer do to make this work?* And my students helped to generate curriculum that showed them that thinking was an important part of making a writing class work. From this day to the end of the unit, the students’ noticings became the focus of our writing sessions together.

To organize the work they had done, I created a master chart of the classes’ noticings for the students to insert in their writing logs. It listed the page number of the noticing, the observation made, and a possible lesson to go with it. This chart coincided with a calendar I created for assignments and discussion topics. The students could follow along to see which of their noticings we would focus on each day.

“But Teacher, I Don’t Know What to Write”

I wasn’t about to fall victim to this, which is the oldest line in the book. So I adopted a preventative strategy—prewriting. Week Two involved *a lot* of prewriting. We created lists of topics like “Things We Would Like to Own” and “Pets We Would Like to Have.” Next we copied text from our lists and did five-minute “quick writes.” Most of these assignments were done in class. I would model, the students would prac-

tice the strategy from the mini-lesson, and we would share. Talk was a significant element of our study as we developed ideas and concepts.

It was important, as well, that students were allowed to make choices and to have time to work on their own. While brainstorming, I remembered the book *Living and Teaching the Writing Workshop*.⁴ I had completed many of Kristen Painter’s writing invitations. She had some great ideas, but after reviewing them, I realized they didn’t fit the needs of my students in the area of persuasive writing. Her ideas did provide inspiration as I continued thinking through how to structure the remainder of the unit.

One night, I sat down and wrote 10 writing invitations on large cards, keeping in mind the persuasive writing curriculum that the students had developed. I then added an example of the writing invitation to the bottom of each card, laminated them, and presented them in class the next day. The writing invitations included, but were not limited to:

1. Create a pro and con list about your topic.
2. Change point of view. Pretend you are someone else considering your topic.
3. Draw a Venn diagram to compare

two opposing opinions on your topic.

The students were to complete those assignments as part of prewriting. While they were able to choose which ones they wanted to complete, the syllabi or writing guide gave them guidelines about how many they needed to complete each week.

The students were writing—and not just when I told them to. Some students would borrow a writing invitation card to complete at home or in their free time during the day. When they had finished, they had pages of ideas ready to weave into their writing. They were primed for success.

Non-Linear Approach

The students also kept writing logs that contributed to the success of the writing project. Each day, they added more information to their logs through note-taking during mini-lessons and book observations. In creating the syllabi for the unit, I borrowed an idea from Katie Wood Ray,⁵ who created a study guide that required the students to continually review their writing to reflect on what they had learned thus far.

These reflections kept the students aware of the big picture of the unit. This approach also ensured that I stayed up-to-date on what each student was learning. In one of his reflections, Jason⁶ observed, “When we started doing these writing exercises I knew I could write a good book. The steps are: If I get stuck somewhere, I will look back at my notes, and they will help me get unstuck.”

The students continually alternated between their new writing and older entries in their writing logs. So, when Week Three arrived, the students had already developed a clear vision of what their book compositions would look like. And as Jason observed, if there was a problem, their logs were right there with all those great ideas. The students’ writing logs weren’t just a place to store old assignments but became an interactive guide to writing books.

Most of the book plans came together within two days, and by Tuesday or Wednesday, every student was working on his or her first draft with titles such as:

1. *I Want a Four-Wheeler*
2. *Can I Have a Big Sister?*
3. *Can We Go?* and
4. *Dear Mr. President: Giving Wealth to the Poor.*

Valuing One Another’s Ideas

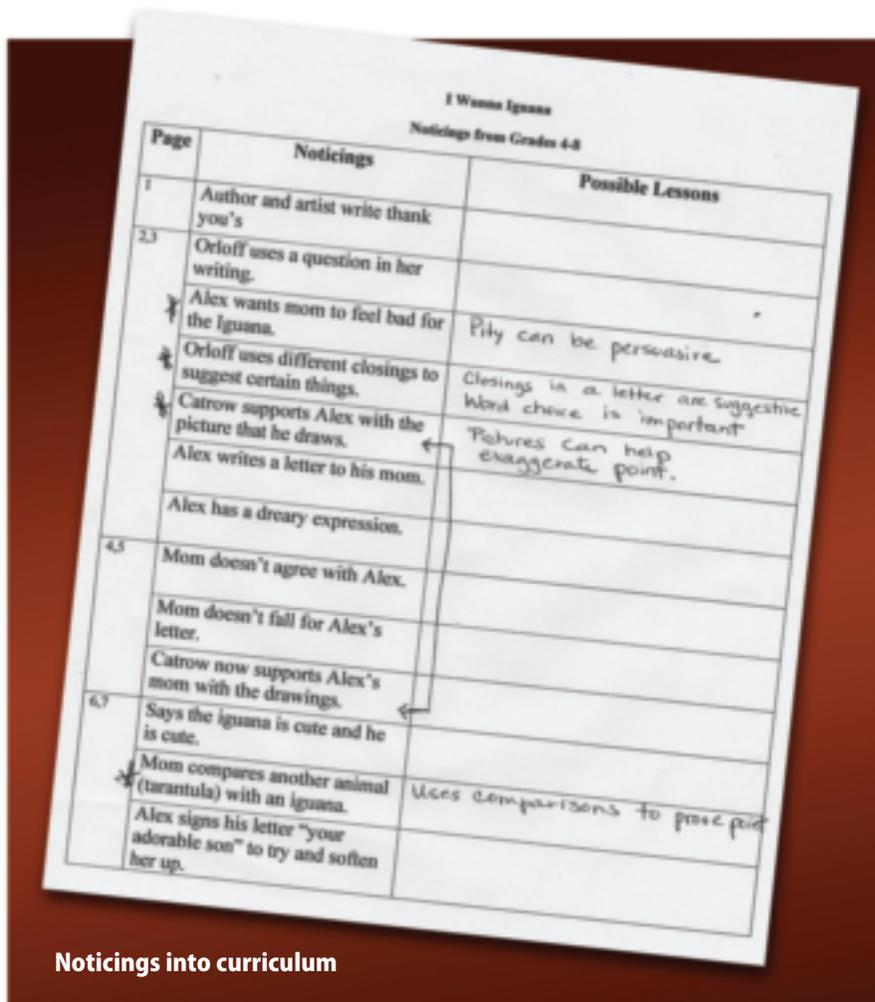
Mace (4th grade) expressed the concept well when he wrote in a reflection essay at the end of the study, “I enjoyed most how we got to work together and explain what we were thinking about.” I continually promoted community in our writing class during each unit of study. Throughout the writing process, I asked students to volunteer some of their work for class revisions. I copied each assignment onto a transparency, displayed it, and let the students offer opinions and advice.

One day, we took an excerpt from Malik’s (6th grade) book, *I Want a Four-Wheeler*. Placing it on the overhead, I inquired, “What suggestions do you have for Malik?” Within a few mo-

ments, hands were waving in the air, “Add clues to where they are”; “Try a misery attempt like ‘Mom, I hurt my foot. Waaahhh! Uh . . . Could I have a four-wheeler?’”; and “Have Mom trip over the spy toy so it’s like a distraction before asking for the four-wheeler.”

Meanwhile, Malik jotted down notes on a special piece of stationery I had given him. “Is that helpful?” I asked. He excitedly nodded his head, ready to begin working. The talk continued throughout the classroom in subsequent class periods. Some students reacted to each other’s ideas, others met with peers and jotted down notes, and still others talked about how to create a more persuasive essay.

I maintained the same atmosphere when I conferred with each student. I asked questions like “What’s your favorite part of the essay so far?” and “Which section would you like to improve?” It wasn’t my intention to tear apart their writing. They quickly



Noticings into curriculum

learned that they could trust me to be supportive.

The writing conferences were mini-conversations that went like this:

Teacher: "Who is your audience?"

Sean: "My mom."

Teacher: "It looks like you want a big sister?"

Sean: "Yep."

Teacher: "Let's look at this another way. How would Mom benefit from you having a big sister?"

Sean: "She wouldn't have to take care of me as much."

Teacher: "OK." (I write his ideas on a Post-It.)

Sean: "She wouldn't have to drive me places."

Teacher: "Good." (I add it to the list.)

At the end of this conversation, Sean had put together a list of things to think about and consider. I encouraged him to use these ideas in his writing, and then moved on to conference with another student. The students appreci-

ated my help because we had worked together. Instead of dictating what Sean needed to do, I guided his thinking by making the list and reviewing things we had learned in class, just as the class had done with Malik.

Making an Impact

With research and time, the teaching of persuasive writing study offers nearly endless possibilities. I continue to be amazed as I see how my students have bought into it. When they do an in-depth study like this, they really get to know and understand the concept being taught. At the conclusion, they have taken ownership and made it real for themselves. But I'll let a few of my students speak for themselves:

Mae (4th grade): "I enjoyed writing my book and coming up with ideas. My absolute favorite was at the presentations."

Haley (5th grade): "Writing a persuasive book is hard, but it pushed us to understand that life is hard."

The enthusiasm displayed by these girls was carried home by others. One

student described his book to his mother and shared with her what he was learning at school. She later came to school to describe his excitement about his book. And another student conferred with her mother at home to see what she thought of the book so far.

Now that the learning had extended beyond the classroom walls, I knew it was worth the extra time and effort. It also provided evidence that the students were closer to understanding the writing process and succeeding on their next assignment.

Don't Limit Persuasive Writing to Writing Class

The challenge is to expand persuasive writing across the curriculum, not just at the elementary level, but also as students move into high school and college. This type of unit provides a foundation upon which students can build. While researching genre studies of persuasive writing, I came across



some ways that other teachers are expanding their students' skills of persuasion.

A high school science teacher, Michael Rochow⁷ saw panic in the eyes of his students whenever test time rolled around. So he decided to change this by providing an assessment alternative: writing assignments.

Rockow designed various assignments that used persuasive writing. One of the highlighted science assignments asked the students to decide whether Pluto should be a planet. They researched, planned, took notes, and then wrote their arguments.

I would add that, in doing this study, students might first study previous writing assignments in a genre-study format and make noticings about what other students did to create an effective essay. This could be planned in collaboration with the English teacher so that the students better understand the workings of persuasive writing before applying it across the curriculum.

College business teachers have opportunities to conduct a persuasive writing study as well. In *Business Communication Quarterly*,⁸ a professor wrote about one of his favorite assignments. Lee Spears developed a project that gets his students involved with non-profit organizations. After collecting data, attending board meetings, and collaborating with the president/manager of the non-profit organization they chose, the students developed solicitation letters and business reports. Spears also had his college students study previous proposals. He brought out the various characteristics of the documents and discussed the students' noticings.

While *I Wanna Iguana* is an excellent place to start with teaching persuasive writing and conducting an in-depth genre study, there are multiple possibilities for teaching persuasive writing across the curriculum and throughout the students' school career.

Changing Gears

After finishing my genre study on persuasive writing, I continued to reflect on the importance of teaching persuasive writing, not just as a teacher but as a Christian teacher. I asked myself: *How is knowing how to write in this genre going to benefit my students in their walk with Jesus?* I thought about the Great Commission and how Jesus told His apostles to “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19, NIV).⁹ *That's it!* I thought. When teaching others about Jesus, our testimony has to be persuasive. We have to be able to meet the people where they are, and as Paul so elegantly stated, “I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some” (1 Corinthians 9:22, NIV).

What does that have to do with persuasive writing? *Everything!* Below is a list of guidelines for composing persuasive writing that my students compiled in our initial study. Next to each guideline I've listed just one verse in the Bible that relates to that particular guideline.

When persuading others, you must:

Use comparisons to prove a point (Luke 10:3, KJV—“Behold, I am sending you out as lambs in the midst of wolves”).

Think about what the other person thinks is important (John 13:20, NKJV—“... he who receives Me receives Him who sent Me”).¹⁰

Be real (Luke 18:13, 14, NIV—“The tax collector stood at a distance. . . and said, “God, have mercy on me, a sinner””).

Use questions to prove a point (Romans 3:27, NASB—“Where then is boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? Of works? No, but by a law of faith”).¹¹

Jesus and His disciples were living billboards, continually seeking others who would believe and give their hearts to Jesus. This study, conducted in a 4th- to 8th-grade classroom, represents only the first step in introducing persuasion to children. The vision must be bigger than this and go beyond the study of picture books. For now doors are open because the students are beginning to understand what it means to sell a point,

and in the case of Christian living, to “sell” the gospel's Good News. This unit has the potential of going beyond a textbook exercise and can move into teaching the students how to persuade others to accept Jesus as their Savior and to live according to His will. ☞



Sarah Coulter, M.S., is currently an early education teacher at Shenandoah Valley Adventist Elementary School in New Market, Virginia.

She received her M.Ed. in Literacy from Southern Adventist University in Collegedale, Tennessee, and has been teaching at the elementary level for 10 years. At the time this article was written, she was teaching at Yale Adventist School in Yale, Virginia.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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3. Katie Wood Ray, *Study Driven* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 2006), p. 25.
4. Kristen Painter, *Living and Teaching the Writing Workshop* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 2006).
5. Ray, *Study Driven*, op cit., p. 118.
6. Students' names have been changed to protect their privacy.
7. Michael Rockow, “This Isn't English Class! Using Writing as an Assessment Tool in Science,” *Science Scope* 31:5 (January 2008):22-26.
8. Lee Spears, “Adopt-a-Nonprofit: A Project in Persuasion and Collaboration,” *Business Communications Quarterly* 59:3 (September 1996):3.
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