

# **Civil Minds, Civil Action: A Unit of Study on Public Persuasion**

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## **High School Junior English Class**

### **Introduction and Rationale**

For the next two weeks, this class will be working on our “Civil Action Projects.” Our “Civil Action Projects” combine learning valuable writing skills with giving students a chance to take civil action. The unit will focus on writing a persuasive essay.

The reason that this unit will cover such a long period of time is that it is of utmost importance that students learn to write an effective essay. Students may think that essay writing is a school-bound activity only, and this unit seeks to point out the importance of good writing skills in everyday life. It also seeks to show students how they can use writing skills to their advantage in the “real world.”

The students will be introduced to the form of the persuasive essay. At this point in their high school careers, the students should be familiar with a thesis statement, but they will be reviewed and practiced in the beginning of a unit. A thesis statement is what they want to persuade their audience to agree with, believe, or value. A person who can state and defend an argument well is bound to be able to persuade people more effectively than a person who cannot. Also, the importance of thesis writing to the success of college essays will be stressed.

After the students have learned how a persuasive essay works, they will begin to write an essay of their own. They will have time to research and pick a topic that is of importance to them. They should choose to write about something that they feel is not being handled correctly, is unjust or simply socially wrong. The audience of this paper will be a person who is in the position to make a change about the topic. This person may

be a lawmaker, the head of a local historical society, a CEO of a corporation or anyone who is able to amend the wrong that was perceived by the student.

After the essays have been drafted, we will focus on peer review skills. The students will be reminded that they have a personal investment in their topic, and the ability to make a change. After reviewing the essays several times, the unit will culminate by sending the essay to the person to whom it was addressed, and presentation of the projects to their peers.

This project is important because it combines writing skills with teaching students to take a stand for what they believe is right. Being able to write persuasively is a skill that will help students through college and virtually every career. Defending a position will personally invest the students in their writing, as well as their argument. This unit will not only help students become better writers, but better citizens.

## **Day 1**

### **Orientation**

Today the students will be introduced to the persuasive essay. This is the beginning of the unit. The rest of the unit will be tied in with today's lesson.

### **Learning Goals**

By the end of the lesson the students should be familiar with the elements that form an argument such as claims, definition, support and warrant.

### **Preparation**

Students: None

Teachers: Teachers are to have made copies for the class of chapter one of Anne T. Rottenberg's Elements of Argument if the class does not have the textbook. Also, copies of chapters 4-6 should be made for the group activity. The teacher should also have prepared an outline explaining the schedule of the next two weeks activities.

### **Materials**

Outline of activities

Packet or textbook

Rottenberg, Anne. Elements of Argument. Boston: Bedford Books, 1997.

### **Activities**

10 minutes: Explanation of the project. Distribute outline. Read through with students and allow time for questions.

15 minutes: Class reads the chapter to themselves.

15 minutes: The class breaks into four groups. Each group is assigned one element of argument. Each group is given the copy of the chapter dedicated to their element. They will be the experts.

15 minutes: Each groups had a chance to present what they have learned about their element to the class. At the end of the hour, the students should all receive a copy of chapters 4-6 to use as reference if they do not have the text.

### **Evaluation**

Judging by the quality of the students' analysis of their elements and the number and quality of their questions, the teacher should decide if the students are ready to start a new lesson the next day. This activity is worth **five** credit points for participation in the group activity. All students will be awarded the full points unless they are unwilling to participate.

## **Day 2: Thesis Statements**

### **Learning Goals**

By the end of the lesson, the students should have an understanding of how to write an effective thesis statement.

### **Preparation**

Students: Should have read the chapters of Elements of Argument from the previous day.

Teachers: Prepare an overhead with strong and weak thesis statements. (See Day 2 Overhead). Prepare a list of ideas that can be generated into a thesis for the students to work with. The teacher will also make a list of controversial social issues to get the students thinking about what they would like to write about.

### **Materials**

Overhead projector, computer (if not available for all students, a monitor so they can all see)

### **Activities**

5 minutes: Explanation of the thesis statement, what it does, and the role it will play in their persuasive essay.

20 minutes: Computer activity. Class reads “How to Write A Thesis Statement.”

<http://www.indiana.edu/~wts/wts/thesis.html>. This site includes how to write a thesis if the topic is assigned, not assigned, and how to tell a strong essay from a weak one.

20 minutes: Overhead activities (Day 2 Overhead). Teacher leads discussion while students take notes.

10 minutes: Topic Brainstorming. The teacher writes a list of possible topics on the board to get students thinking about what they would like their persuasive essay to argue. The students do not need to pick a topic from this list; it is only to get them started. The teacher should guide the topics, trying to focus on local issues, rather than overdone topics such as abortion, euthanasia, or gun control. Students can add to the list written on the board.

Possible topics could include:

- Driving age
- Curfew
- Block scheduling
- Abstinence only education
- Local environmental concerns
- Animal testing

### **Evaluation**

If the students understand how to formulate thesis statements in the correct manner, they can continue onto the next day’s lesson, if they are struggling, as evidenced in their inability to write an effective statement, more review may be needed the next day.

### **Day 3: Topic Brainstorming**

#### **Learning Goals**

By the end of the lesson, the students are to have an idea about what they are going to write about.

#### **Preparation**

Students: Students are to come to class with a list of topics they are interested in writing about. They are also to bring a book of their choice for SSR.

Teachers: Teachers are to prepare a writing workshop for students to think deeper into their topic.

#### **Materials**

Chalkboard or overhead projector

#### **Activities**

30 minutes: Students are to pick the topic that they find the most interesting. Students are to respond on paper to a list of questions the teacher has prepared about their topics. The teacher writes the questions on the board or overhead. This activity will be handed in when it is finished.

##### **Pre-research Activity**

1. What is your topic?
2. Why is your topic a problem?
3. Who does it affect?
4. How did you find out about it?
5. What do you expect to find?
6. Who can you address about your problem?
7. How do you think the person(s) you are addressing will respond?
8. Why is this important to you?
9. Do you feel you have the power to do something about your topic?
10. How will you persuade others to care about your topic?

25 minutes: SSR. The students are to read the book they have brought because they won't be reading any literature for several weeks. During this time, the students should have an opportunity to individually ask the teacher questions if they are unclear about their topic.

#### **Evaluation**

The teacher will read over the students' prewriting activity and will decide if the topic is appropriate and if the student has logical reasoning for choosing the topic. This writing assignment is worth **ten** points, one point for thoughtfully answering each question. Tomorrow, the teacher will confer with the student about their topic choice.

#### **Day 4: Topic choice approval and library research**

##### **Learning Goals**

By the end of the class period, the students will have their topic approved by the teacher and will have some background research supporting their side of the issue.

##### **Preparation**

Teacher: Read and grade students pre-research activity from yesterday. Be ready to answer questions students may have, and help them refine their topics if it does not fit the project. Create a rubric to use for grading the projects (See Suggested Rubric).

Students: Students are to come prepared with an awareness of where to find research for their topics.

##### **Materials**

None

##### **Activities**

The students will begin their research on their projects in the library. One at a time, they should consult the teacher about their chosen topic. The teacher will read over their writing activity from the day before with the student present. If student has demonstrated adequate reasoning about their topic choice, their topic will be approved. No student should begin major research without a consultation. At this time, students will sign up for the first or second day for their presentations. The teacher should also help students find resources if they cannot find them on their own. The teacher should also pass out a rubric for the grading of the final project (See Suggested Rubric).

#### **Days 5 & 6 : Library research**

##### **Evaluation**

After the end of Day 6, students should have enough information to create an outline to bring to class on Day 7 that is worth **ten** points for completion.

**Day 7: SSR or work time**

**Learning Goals**

By the end of the class, the students will have begun their drafts.

**Preparation**

Students: Bring all research and outline to begin writing draft. Students may have started writing drafts outside of class.

**Activities**

5 minutes: The teacher checks off each student's outline for completion.

50 minutes: During this class period, the students are free to work on their projects. They may do so in the classroom, the library or the computer lab. They also have the option to read silently if they are beginning to be burned out on the project, but they will need to finish the project on their own time.

**Evaluation**

By the end of the hour, the students will have begun their drafts, and will have received credit for bringing their outline. Their first draft is due tomorrow (**ten** points for completion).

**Day 8: First draft due, peer review for content**

**Learning Goals**

By the end of the lesson, the students will have learned how to conduct an effective peer review, as well as put the skills into practice by reviewing classmates' papers.

**Preparation**

Teachers: Prepare worksheet about peer review (See Peer Review Checklist).

Students: Finish first draft of essay.

**Materials**

Overhead projector. Students are to bring several copies of their paper.

**Activities**

10 minutes: Discussion of peer review. Distributes and discusses the peer review worksheet. Questions for the worksheet include: Is this coherent? Is there supporting information? Is the research from reliable sources? Teachers are to remind students that today they are not looking for superficial errors, such as spelling.

45 minutes: Break the class up into small groups of about 4 students. Students exchange papers in groups and peer review.

**Evaluation**

By the end of the lesson, the students should have their papers reviewed by about three classmates. They are to bring their revised drafts to class tomorrow.

## **Day 9: Peer review and work day**

### **Learning Goals**

By the end of the lesson, the students have reviewed at least three classmates' papers for superficial qualities such as spelling, grammar, punctuation and word choice.

### **Preparation**

Teachers: Be prepared to instruct students in what they are reviewing for today.

Students: Bring revised essay.

### **Materials**

Overhead projector or chalkboard. Students are to bring several copies of their paper.

### **Activities**

5 minutes: Discussion of peer review. The teacher makes a list on the board of the qualities they are evaluating today, like spelling, grammar, punctuation, word choice, and capitalization. Also, students can note suggested changes from the things they reviewed for yesterday, if they see that something has gone unnoticed, or needs major change.

45 minutes: Break the class up into small groups of about 4 students. Students exchange papers in groups and peer review. If they finish early, students can make changes on their final drafts.

### **Evaluation**

By the end of the lesson, the students should have their papers reviewed by about three classmates. Their final draft and first round of presentations is due tomorrow.

**Day 10: Final draft due to teacher, sending of persuasive essays, topic presentation**  
**Day 11: Topic presentation**

**Learning Goals**

By the end of the lesson, the students should have the satisfaction that they have made a small difference. The first round of students will present their essays to the class.

**Preparation**

Students: Are to have finished their essays made two copies and prepared a presentation about their topics.

**Materials**

Students are to bring an addressed envelope with a stamp and all necessary supplies for their presentations.

**Activities**

1 minute: Students turn in one copy of their finished essay.

9 minutes: Ceremonial sending of essays, from the office or a nearby mailbox.

45 minutes: Students present their topics to their class (approximately 5 – 7 minutes each).

## Civil Action Project Outline

Over the next two weeks, we will be working on our “Civil Action Projects.” During this unit, we will utilize the form of the persuasive essay in order to try to make a difference in the world. We will be picking topics that we want to amend and using our writing skills to try to persuade people in the position to make a change to consider our positions. Here is our schedule for the next two weeks.

Day 1: Orientation

Day 2: Thesis statements

Day 3: Topic Brainstorming

Day 4: Topic choice approval and library research

**Due today: Topic choice and topic choice writing assignment**

Day 5 & 6 Library Research

Day 7: SSR or work time

**Due today: Outline**

Day 8: Peer Review

**Due Today: First Draft**

Day 9: Peer Review

**Due today: Second Draft**

Day 10: Sending of persuasive essays, topic presentation

**Due today: Final Draft**

Day 11: Topic presentation

**A thesis statement in an essay is a sentence that explicitly identifies the purpose of the paper or previews its main ideas.**

**A thesis statement is an assertion, not a statement of fact or an observation.**

- **Fact or observation:** People use many lawn chemicals.
- **Thesis:** People are poisoning the environment with chemicals merely to keep their lawns clean.

**A thesis takes a stand rather than announcing a subject.**

- **Announcement:** The thesis of this paper is the difficulty of solving our environmental problems.
- **Thesis:** Solving our environmental problems is more difficult than many environmentalists believe.

**A thesis is the main idea, not the title. It must be a complete sentence that explains in some detail what you expect to write about.**

- **Title:** Social Security and Old Age
- **Thesis:** Continuing changes in the Social Security System makes it almost impossible to plan intelligently for one's retirement.

**A thesis statement is narrow, rather than broad. If the thesis statement is sufficiently narrow, it can be fully supported.**

- **Broad:** The American steel industry has many problems.
- **Narrow:** The primary problem if the American steel industry is the lack of funds to renovate outdated plants and equipment.

**A thesis statement is specific rather than vague or general.**

- **Vague:** Hemingway's war stories are very good.
- **Thesis:** Hemingway's stories helped create a new prose style by employing extensive dialogue, shorter sentences, and strong Anglo-Saxon words.

**A thesis statement has one main point rather than several main points. More than one point may be too difficult for the reader to understand and the writer to support.**

- **More than one main point:** Stephen Hawking's physical disability has not prevented him from becoming a world-renowned physicist, and his book is the subject of a movie.
- **One Main point:** Stephen Hawking's physical disability has not prevented him from becoming a world renowned physicist.

**Break up of points**

<b>Day one participation points</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Pre-research activity</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Outline</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>First draft completed</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Final Paper</b>	<b>50</b>
<b>Presentation</b>	<b>25</b>

Total	110
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**Final Paper**

Coherent thesis	10
Use of elements of argument	10
Tone, style	10
Creativity	5
Length (3+ pages)	5
Spelling, Grammar, Punctuation	10

**Presentation**

Preparation	5
Presents, does not read paper	5
Length 5 – 7 minutes	5
Visual Aid	5
Student Poll (Were classmates convinced?)	5

## Peer Review Workshop Day 1

Today you will be reading and responding to your classmate's essays. Feel free to respond directly onto their papers. For today, try to look beyond spelling and punctuation, but look at what the paper is actually *saying*. Try to look at these elements –

- Does the title fit the paper?
- Can you tell who it is addressed to?
- Is there a coherent thesis statement?
- Do all assertions make sense?
- Are the sources reliable?
- Does the paper “flow”?
- Is it presented in a logical order?
- Does it have the proper tone for a persuasive essay?
- Do the supporting arguments back up the thesis?

## Peer Review Workshop Day 2

Today you will be looking at the surface of the paper, or any errors that will detract from the credibility of the writer. If you notice anything that should have been taken care of in yesterday's peer review, please note it now. For today, concentrate on:

- Spelling
- Punctuation
- Grammar
- Format
- Word Choice