Ralph Waldo Emerson and the Persuasive Essay

Video Transcript

Persuasive essays, in contrast to argumentative essays, generally don’t use or require secondary sources to support their arguments. They are more reliant on the language the writer uses to convince the reader that the argument is sound. This is the job of rhetoric: strategically using language to form a reasonable argument that the reader understands and finds relatable on an emotional or intellectual level. Ralph Waldo Emerson, the early American writer and transcendentalist, demonstrates this mastery of language in his essay “Self-Reliance.”

Emerson is considered to be one of the most important early-American writers, having had a broad influence in the development of the national character of literature, especially in the American Romantic Movement. A poet, philosopher, lecturer, and essayist, his diverse and prolific writings have made him a mainstay of the classic American literature canon. His book of essays, *Nature*, is one of the pivotal documents of the Transcendentalist movement, which is centered around finding fulfillment in life through self-direction, freedom, and closeness with nature.

In “Self-Reliance,” which is one of the essays from this collection, Emerson discusses his ideas about the individual and the need for original thought and action as opposed to learned knowledge and social pressures. Emerson attempts to persuade his readers that society is a stagnating influence that keeps humanity from achieving its fullest potential. Throughout this essay, rather than citing empirical evidence, he uses rhetorical devices such as metaphor and extrapolation to support his arguments. In addition, he uses examples such as “The Naked New Zealander” to provide a concrete example that contrasts how Americans view the ideal society. By using examples such as these, he appeals to the logic and reason of his readers by giving them a point of comparison.

As with many persuasive essays, this method of argument is justified. His purpose is to appeal to the reason of his readers, instead of their factual knowledge. While Emerson may not win every reader to his view this way, it is still evident what his ideas are and why he believes them.
What other examples of persuasive essay have you encountered in the past? How do you think arguments can be persuasive without relying on other sources or evidence?

About this transcript:

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