Ralph Waldo Emerson: “Self-Reliance”

Inquire: Persuasive Essays

Overview
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.”

Big Question: Is Ralph Waldo Emerson’s “Self-Reliance” a successful example of a persuasive essay?

Watch: Ralph Waldo Emerson and the Persuasive Essay
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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?

**Read: “Self-Reliance”**

Ralph Waldo Emerson is perhaps the most central figure of the American Romantic movement, having influenced the national character of much of the writing that came after him for many years. He was also the main influence of the American Transcendentalist movement, with his essay “Nature” being a formative text of the transcendentalist philosophy. A prolific essayist, Emerson wrote about a diverse array of subjects, most often individuality, freedom, and the nature of the soul.

His persuasive essay “Self-Reliance” is primarily a dictation of his personal philosophy of reliance on original thought and action, as opposed to thoughts and actions directed by social pressure or expectation. In this section, Emerson describes his thoughts on the advancement of society and whether it has any benefit to the human condition.

**Self-Reliance**

“Society never advances. It recedes as fast on one side as it gains on the other. It undergoes continual changes; it is barbarous, it is civilized, it is christianized, it is rich, it is scientific; but this change is not amelioration. For every thing that is given, something is taken. Society acquires new arts, and loses old instincts. What a contrast between the well-clad, reading, writing, thinking American, with a watch, a pencil, and a bill of exchange in his pocket, and the naked New Zealander, whose property is a club, a spear, a mat, and an undivided twentieth of a shed to sleep under! But compare the health of the two men, and you shall see that the white man has lost his aboriginal strength. If the traveller tell us truly, strike the savage with a broad axe, and in a day or two the flesh shall unite and heal as if you struck the blow into soft pitch, and the same blow shall send the white to his grave.

The civilized man has built a coach, but has lost the use of his feet. He is supported on crutches, but lacks so much support of muscle. He has a fine Geneva watch, but he fails of the skill to tell the hour by the sun. A Greenwich nautical almanac he has, and so being sure of the information when he wants it, the man in the street does not know a star in the sky. The solstice he does not observe; the equinox he knows as little; and the whole bright calendar of the year is without a dial in his mind. His notebooks impair his memory; his libraries overload his wit; the insurance-office increases the number of accidents; and it may be a question whether machinery does not encumber; whether we have not lost by refinement some energy, by a Christianity entrenched in establishments and forms, some vigor of wild virtue. For every Stoic was a Stoic; but in Christendom where is the Christian?

There is no more deviation in the moral standard than in the standard of height or bulk. No greater men are now than ever were. A singular equality may be observed between the great men of the first and of the last ages; nor can all the science, art, religion, and philosophy of the nineteenth century avail to educate greater men than Plutarch’s heroes, three or four and twenty centuries ago. Not in time is the race progressive. Phocion, Socrates, Anaxagoras, Diogenes, are great men, but they leave no class. He who is really of their class will not be called by their name, but will be his own man, and, in his turn, the founder of a sect. The arts and inventions of each period are only its costume, and do not invigorate men. The harm of the improved machinery may compensate its good. Hudson and Behring accomplished so
much in their fishing-boats, as to astonish Parry and Franklin, whose equipment exhausted the resources of science and art. Galileo, with an opera-glass, discovered a more splendid series of celestial phenomena than any one since. Columbus found the New World in an undecked boat. It is curious to see the periodical disuse and perishing of means and machinery, which were introduced with loud laudation a few years or centuries before. The great genius returns to essential man. We reckoned the improvements of the art of war among the triumphs of science, and yet Napoleon conquered Europe by the bivouac, which consisted of falling back on naked valor, and disencumbering it of all aids. The Emperor held it impossible to make a perfect army, says Las Casas, ‘without abolishing our arms, magazines, commissaries, and carriages, until, in imitation of the Roman custom, the soldier should receive his supply of corn, grind it in his hand-mill, and bake his bread himself.’

Society is a wave. The wave moves onward, but the water of which it is composed does not. The same particle does not rise from the valley to the ridge. Its unity is only phenomenal. The persons who make up a nation to-day, next year die, and their experience with them.”*


Reflect: Methods of Persuasion

Poll
What do you feel is most likely to persuade you to change your mind about something?
- Evidence and statistics
- Personal stories
- Passionate speeches/writing

Expand: “Self-Reliance” as a Persuasive Essay

Transcendentalism, the central philosophy underpinning much of Emerson’s writing, is focused on the power and goodness of the individual, and expresses the idea that society and modernity are corrupting influences that should be cast off in exchange for naturalism and instinctual knowledge. This philosophy came about as a reaction to the intellectualism promoted by the Enlightenment. As such, Emerson’s goal with “Self-Reliance” was to spread his ideas about the power of the individual to guide oneself through life, by not relying too heavily on past ideas and by persuading the reader by using rhetorical devices.

In the section on society, Emerson employs rhetoric in the form of creative metaphors to cause the reader to think about the issues he presents from his point-of-view. Specifically, he continually refers to the “wave”-like nature of societal advancement where one social gain comes at the cost of another, thereby keeping the totality of society in a static, ultimately unchanged state. Using this logic, Emerson extrapolates that society is a hindrance to humanity.

To further this argument, he contrasts Western society with a primitivistic and tribal image of the “naked New Zealander,” arguing that without the benefits of an advanced society, they are physically stronger and thus better off than those living with those advancements.

Emerson elaborates on this throughout the next couple of paragraphs, again starting off with a metaphor about how the advent of the coach has caused “civilized man” to lose the “use of his feet.” He cites many of the amenities enjoyed by Western society at the time, linking them to the former abilities that humanity has subsequently lost because of these advances. He then links this lack of true advancement to what he
sees as a “Christianity entrenched in establishments and forms” that resists change and genuine insight. The discussion on “great men” continues this thought, arguing that even though great advancements are celebrated, they are proven unnecessary by the great works of history that are accomplished through simple means.

Throughout these discussions, notice that Emerson doesn’t cite sources, statistics, or other resources, but relies on his reader to have at least a passing knowledge of what he refers to. He keeps these images simple, and never belabors a particular image too long. This keeps the reader engaged with the ideas Emerson is attempting to communicate, without getting distracted by tangents or lost in the discussion. This is what rhetoric as strategic use of language means.

Lesson Toolbox

Additional Resources and Readings

Persuasive Essay
- A short rundown on how to write a persuasive essay
- https://essayinfo.com/essays/persuasive-essay/
- Source: EssayInfo.com

LITERATURE - Ralph Waldo Emerson
- A video biography of Ralph Waldo Emerson and his work
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EOkdFMw0pmk&t=2s

Ralph Waldo Emerson
- A biography of Emerson, with descriptions of his philosophy and influences
- https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poet/ralph-waldo-emerson
- Source: Poets.org

The Poems of Ralph Waldo Emerson
- Complete collection of Emerson’s poetry
- http://www.bartleby.com/370/
- Source: Bartleby.com

Lesson Glossary

- **transcendentalism:** an American philosophical movement from the early to mid 19th century which valued nature, individualism, and progressive social values
- **rhetoric:** spoken or written language that is carefully constructed in order to have an impact on the listener or reader

Check Your Knowledge

1. The job of rhetoric is to strategically use language to form a reasonable argument that the reader understands and finds relatable on an emotional or intellectual level.
   A. True
   B. False
2. Emerson critiques new technologies like the stagecoach.
   A. True
   B. False

3. Emerson believes that society never advances.
   A. True
   B. False

Answer Key:
1. A  2. A  3. A

Citations

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