Building from scholarly works on persuasion and compliance-gaining, a study investigated magazine query letters that attempt to persuade an editor to buy the article offered, examining what message elements make them successful. Forty magazine editors provided copies of 100 recently accepted magazine query letters, which were compared with 50 rejected queries. The first 100 words of each of the letters were coded using measures from previous research. Results showed that several time-honored techniques were not confirmed as useful: readability, use of proximity words, and use of metaphors failed to provoke a positive response in editors. The most significant differences separating successful from unsuccessful letters were the use of concrete/senses words, as well as vividness and cohesion of the text. Others factors in successful letters included greater human interest and vocabulary diversity, more realistic sentences, and use of an opening narrative. A successful freelancer will thus construct a query letter that includes these elements: a story, with several individual characters, told in concrete terms with varied language and with care to maintain a sense of flow by use of cohesive devices that refer back to people and things previously mentioned in the text. (Fifty-one notes which comprise about half the document are included.) (SR)
Persuasive Elements of 100 Successful Magazine Query Letters

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Introduction

Given the importance of the query letter as the primary sales tool of the 350,000 or more freelance magazine writers in the U.S. and given that U.S. magazines, regardless of their circulation size, obtain an average of 50% of their nonfiction articles from freelancers, it is remarkable how little substantive information is available about what makes a query letter successful. While there is a constant flow of advice books to freelancers from the book publishing industry (indeed, a whole publishing company surviving on that topic alone), none of these offerings have been based on empirical research.

This article examines the query letter empirically, building from scholarly works on persuasion and compliance-gaining. The present research provides insight into whether the message elements commonly found to be persuasive in experimental settings are equally compelling in real-life attempts at persuasion, namely, in magazine queries that attempt to persuade an editor to buy the article offered.

Background

Persuasion is one of the earliest practical matters to attract the attention of philosophers and scholars. One of the most commonly cited works in 20th century studies of persuasion is Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, although references to Demetrius, Demosthenes, Dionysius, Longinus, Cicero, Quintilian, and even
St. Augustine's works on persuasive oratory are common.

In the Elizabethan era, many treatises were written on the persuasive speech, and many great writers from that era onward—among them, Bacon, Burke, Donne, Milton, Pope, Shakespeare, and Spenser—have employed the classical strategies of rhetoric. The principles of classical (oral) rhetoric were, in Elizabethan times, applied to written discourse and made a central part of the curricula of English schools of the day. The classical value for a logical argument was balanced by the Elizabethan value for the poetic. Persuasive messages were thought to be most successful if they appealed to the mind and the senses. Both these aspects of the persuasive message—appeals to logic and the senses—continue to interest present-day researchers.

The formation of the American republic brought another wave of works on rhetoric and oratory, by figures as prominent in the fashioning of the democracy as John Quincy Adams and Alexander Hamilton. The importance of persuasive speech to the social changes of the period was cited by Corbett:

Students of the American Revolution need recall only Tom Paine's incendiary pamphlets, Patrick Henry's rousing speeches, Thomas Jefferson's daring Declaration of Independence, and Hamilton's and Madison's efforts to see constitutional democracy in the Federalist Papers to be convinced that in time of upheaval we rely heavily on the services of men equipped with persuasive tongues and pens.

The 18th century focus on moving one's audience also remains an interest of this century's persuasion researchers.

The primary elements examined in modern studies of persuasion and compliance-gaining, as in other lines of communi-
cation research, are the communicator, the receiver or audience, the context or environment, and the persuasive message.

This work focuses on the message, since the message is the main segment of the persuasion process in freelance writing that the writer can influence. Factors found to be significantly persuasive in experimental persuasion research were used to select the message elements to examine in this real-life persuasion situation. The message elements are readability/listenability, vividness, human interest, vocabulary diversity, realism and verifiability, cohesion, use of metaphor and simile, and use of narrative.

Much of the research done to date has focused on the spoken persuasive message. A clear relationship between elements of spoken and written persuasion has not been successfully established. While some research has shown a direct relation between persuasive elements of oral and written messages, other findings have been contradictory.

Here, message factors were selected for examination if they had been found to be persuasive in well-executed studies in either written or spoken messages. In addition to learning which persuasive message elements are most effective in a real-life persuasion situation, it may also be possible to discern which message factors are most persuasive in written, as opposed to spoken, persuasion attempts.

Method

The 100 editors of magazines listed in the Writer's Digest
magazine's "1990 Top 100 Markets" were asked to provide copies of recently accepted nonfiction article queries for use in this content analysis. Forty editors responded with a total of 100 accepted magazine query letters.

For comparison, 50 rejected queries sent to magazine at Whittle Communication were used. These queries were collected over a two-month period in 1989, before the company turned its focus to television.

The first 100 words of each of the query letters were coded using measures from previous research. The accepted letter totals were treated as one sample, the rejected letter totals as a second sample. For each sample, the arithmetic mean, range, standard deviation, and population variance were obtained. To determine whether there was a significant difference between the two groups sufficient to conclude that they were drawn from two different populations, the difference between the means of each measurement was divided by an average of the standard deviations of each of the two groups, or \( \frac{(\overline{x} - \overline{y})}{\sqrt{\frac{(s_1^2 + s_2^2)}{2}}} \). A difference of 0.1 standard deviation would not establish that the samples came from two different populations, while a difference of 0.5 would be quite significant.

Readability. In a comprehensive study of written persuasion, Carbone found respondents reacted more positively to persuasive messages containing shorter, simpler sentences and fewer multisyllabic words. Extensive research in reader attraction to news articles and advertisements has employed readability scales as well. Here, readability was calculated using the Gunning formula, which requires totalling the number of
sentences, dividing it into 100, adding to this the number of polysyllabic words in a 100-word sample, and dividing that total by 0.04. The result is regarded as a "grade level" of the writing comparable to the grade levels in the U.S. education system.

**Vividness.** Vividness has been operationalized as the use of concrete words, words relating to the five senses, words that make a subject seem close in time or space (such as "now" or "near"), and words relating to emotions. In all but one study (by Ralston and Thameling), vividness was found to influence persuasion success. Here, subtotals of words with clear denotations or words referring to things easily perceived using the five senses, "proximity" words, and emotional words were obtained and examined separately. These groups were also totaled for a composite "vivid words" category.

**Human Interest.** Carbone found that more credible persuaders create human interest by using more first and second person pronouns and describing issues by means of direct references to specific individual people. Low credibility persuaders, on the other hand, allege a generalized relationship between the audience and the issue.

Here, all words in each 100-word sample that referred directly to individual people (not groups or group spokespeople) were counted. Singular personal pronouns and proper names were included, as were references like "this teacher" when such references recalled an individual previously introduced in the text.
Vocabulary Diversity. Carbone; Bradac, Bowers, and Courtwright; and Bradac, Konsky and Davies established that more persuasive messages include greater vocabulary diversity.38 This factor was operationalized as the number of unrepeated words that occurred in the first 100 words of each letter.

Realism and Verifiability. Rosenthal, as well as Borgida and Nisbett,39 learned that abstract information is less convincing than concrete, specific, verifiable information in persuasive message. Petty and Cacioppo40 found that an advertising message that creates a favorable impression may bring about short-term persuasion, but to create a long-term positive evaluation of a product, concrete, verifiable information about that product must be offered. Hazelton, Cupach, and Liska found messages rated by their audiences as more persuasive if they were "more logical" and "less ambiguous," and Carbone found audiences preferred messages that included more realistic and factual sentences.41

Methods devised by Gillie42 are typically used to measure realism and verifiability in persuasive writing, and his methods were employed here. Specifically, the number of sentences in each 100-word sample that referred to events, conditions, or situations in the real, physical world were counted. (Tautologies, policy statements, interjections, imperatives, value judgments, emotional statements, and the like were excluded.) Then, of these realistic sentences, a second tally was made of the completely unambiguous sentences, those containing no words or phrases that could possibly be interpreted in two ways.

Cohesion. Cohesion in text is the sense of a single,
flowing piece of writing and cohesion has been found to assist in making text more persuasive. Cohesion is created by the use of surface connectors that tie current text to previous text through devices like the repetition of a key phrase or the use of "replacers" like pronouns, the definite article "the," demonstratives ("this," "that," "there"), and comparative forms ("as," "like"). Each occurrence of these words in the samples was counted. In addition, all substitution devices employing counter or marker words (i.e., using such as "ones" or "do so") instead of repeating words, a phrase or a clause were counted. The total percentage of marker words and phrases was obtained and scored as percent of "cohesive words."

Metaphor and Simile. Metaphor, simile, and analogy in persuasive messages have been examined by Bowers and Osborn, Reinsch, and McCroskey and Combs. Reinsch examined both metaphor and simile in persuasive speaking, where he found that metaphor made a speech significantly more convincing than literal language, but that simile did not significantly increase persuasive effect. Both elements were examined in the query letters at hand to learn whether Reinsch's results are generalizable.

Narrative Form. The use of narratives to relate true stories in the media has been thoroughly explored by many scholars, to such an extent that at least two scholars have declared the field "fully exposed." According to Aucoin, the essential components of a narrative are "a temporal sequence of events (having a beginning, a middle, and an end), an actor
(someone or thing that moves through time and is central to the action), connexity (the events must have some relation to one another), action (usually conflict), and a narrator (one who tells the story to the reader)." Because many trade press authors of books on freelancing advise a writer to open a query with the planned opening of the magazine article, to catch the magazine editor's attention, these queries were examined to see whether they used these listed elements of a narrative in their opening 100 words.

It would be expected that the successful queries would be characterized by fluent use of narrative, while the novice or rejected writers would be more likely to open with weak or poorly conceived text. Flower, Flower and Hayes, and Scardamalia and Bereiter\textsuperscript{48} have shown that more skillful writers conceptualize their main point in writing as they write, carrying out "a variety of problem-solving operations involving content-identifying goals and constraints, searching, [and] testing."\textsuperscript{49} Novice writers, on the other hand, "show little in the way of concerns about the main point."\textsuperscript{50}

Two coders were used, with an intercoder reliability of 92%.

Results

Results of this analysis of real-life persuasion attempts strongly confirmed some previous findings, while not supporting other experimental results.

Readability. The average readability of both groups was identical, at the 10.8th grade level. The ranges were similar, with accepted at 4.56 to 22.8 and rejected at 3.22 to 22. The
difference between the means of the two samples shows no significant difference between the two groups (at 0.0074).

**Vividness.** Three subcategories were combined for the total vividness measure, all parts of vividness definitions of previous researchers. Words with clear denotations and words describing the world as we can perceive it through the five senses were counted as a subcategory, "concrete" words. There was a statistically significant difference between the samples for this category:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Range</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Accepted</td>
<td>39.4%</td>
<td>24-54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rejected</td>
<td>22.3%</td>
<td>2-44%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Minium calculation of the number of standard deviations separating the two means\(^5\) showed 2.16 standard deviations between the means, well above the 0.5 needed for significance. On this measure, these two groups are clearly drawn from different populations. In other words, successful freelancers use far more concrete words than unsuccessful writers.

Other types of words defined as "vivid" by previous researchers were not very important in distinguishing successful from unsuccessful freelancers. In 100 words, neither the accepted nor the rejected query letters relied heavily on words to establish proximity in time or place or words that referred to emotions. Accepted letters averaged 0.2 proximity words, with a range of 0-4, and rejected letters averaged 0.6 proximity words, with a range of 0-9. Standard deviations between the means was 0.35 for proximity and 0.38 for emotions, greater than would be
expected for two samples drawn from the same population, but not reaching the 0.50 needed for a strong significance.

The combination of these three subcategories did show a significant difference between the two groups. Accepted queries included an average of 40% vivid words, while rejected queries averaged only 24% vivid words. The range of vividness in accepted queries was 28 to 54%, while for rejected queries the range was 2 to 44% vivid words. The number of standard deviations between the two groups was 2.08, well above the 0.50 mark.

**Human Interest.** Accepted queries included far more direct references to specific people (mean 5.1, range 0 to 22). Rejected queries averaged 2.3 mentions of specific people, with a range from 0 to 11. Again, a statistically significant difference between the two groups existed, with 0.89 standard deviations separating the two means.

**Vocabulary Diversity.** Vocabulary diversity means were similar for the two groups, with 69.5% diverse vocabulary used by the accepted writers and 62.74% diverse vocabulary used by the rejected writers. However, the standard deviation and variance in the rejected group were extremely high (at 18.04 and 325.57, respectively), so that the mean must be regarded as unreliable. Thus, the finding of 0.50 standard deviations' difference between the means of the two samples, though apparently significant, must be regarded as tentative at best. Vocabulary diversity cannot be considered a definitive difference between the successful and unsuccessful freelancer.

**Realism and Verifiability.** In an average of 5 sentences per
100-word extract from each letter, the accepted writers used 3.58 realistic sentences, while the rejected writers used 2.34. Of these realistic sentences, 2.15 of those from the accepted writers contained no ambiguities and were thus counted also as verifiable; at the same time, 1.98 of those from the rejected writers were verifiable. Ranges were: accepted/realism 0 to 6 sentences, rejected/realism 0 to 5 sentences; accepted/-verifiability 0 to 5 sentences, rejected/verifiability 0 to 4 sentences. Difference in use of realistic sentences was statistically significant, with a 0.91 standard deviations' difference between the means. Difference in use of verifiable sentences was not significant, at 0.13 S.D.'s difference between the means. Thus, successful writers may write more down-to-earth prose than unsuccessful writers, though that prose may not be clearly verifiable.

Cohesion. Here, an extremely significant difference existed between the two groups. The successful freelancers used an average of 11.8% cohesive words (range 1 to 25%); their prose was carefully built around continuing references to previously mentioned items. The unsuccessful freelancers used only 4.19% cohesive words (range 0 to 12%). The standard deviations' difference between the means was 2.58.

Metaphor and Simile. Interestingly, that holdover technique from the Elizabethan era is not widely used in real-life persuasive text today, nor is it helpful in persuasion efforts today. Successful query writers used an average of 0.21 metaphors, similes, and analogies, with a range of 0 to 2;
unsuccessful writers used an average of 0.21 metaphoric devices, with a range of 0 to 6. Standard deviations' difference was insignificant at 0.12.

**Narrative Form.** The accepted queries were much more likely to open with a narrative (41%) than the rejected queries (19%). The difference between the two groups' standard deviations was 1.14, more than twice the 0.5 level required for significance.

**Discussion**

While many measures of persuasion shown to be successful in experimental situations were supported by this research, several time-honored techniques were not confirmed as useful in persuading editors to buy magazine articles. Most surprising were the failures of readability measures, use of proximity words, and use of metaphors to evoke a positive response in magazine editors.

Readability, measured in terms of writing short sentences and using short words, does not seem to engage the attention of the professional editor. It would appear that what those words say, who they refer to, and how they develop a storyline are much more important than the mere tally of syllables and sentences.

Proximity, too, long considered to be a critical selection factor in newspaper stories, was not much used by successful query writers and so may be regarded as unimportant in engaging or persuading magazine editors.

Finally, metaphor, simile and analogy, so dear to the rhetorician, are not widely used in modern writing and tended to be used slightly more often by the unsuccessful persuaders he:}
Of the elements previous researchers have combined or used to define writing's vividness, only the strongly denotative (concrete) words and words referring to a world perceivable with the five senses were supported here as separating the persuasive from the unpersuasive writer. Proximity and emotion words did not contribute to the vividness difference between the accepted and rejected letters examined.

The subcategory of concrete/senses words, as well as the vividness and cohesion of the text, were the most strongly significant differences that separated the successful from the unsuccessful writers.

However, other factors were also supported as clearly defining the differences between the two groups: Greater human interest and vocabulary diversity, more realistic sentences, and use of an opening narrative also set the successful freelancers apart from the rejected ones.

A successful freelancer will thus construct a query letter that includes these elements; a story, with several individual characters, told in concrete terms with varied language and with care to maintain a sense of flow by use of cohesive devices that refer back to people and things previously mentioned in the text.

Footnotes


3. Ibid., p. 11.

4. Ibid., p. 33.


8. Karl R. Wallace, Francis Bacon on communication and rhetoric; or: the art of applying reason to imagination for the better moving of the will (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1943); George Williamson, The Senecan amble: a study of prose from Bacon to Collier (London: Farber and Farber, 1951); Brian Vickers, Francis Bacon and Renaissance prose (London: Methuen, 1969).


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19. Studies of the effects of the communicator on persuasion success fall roughly into five categories:


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25. human interest, Carbone, op cit.


37. Carbone, op cit.


48. Sondra Perl, "The composing processes of unskilled college


51. Minium, op cit.

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