# Should We Let the Pigeon Stay Up Late?

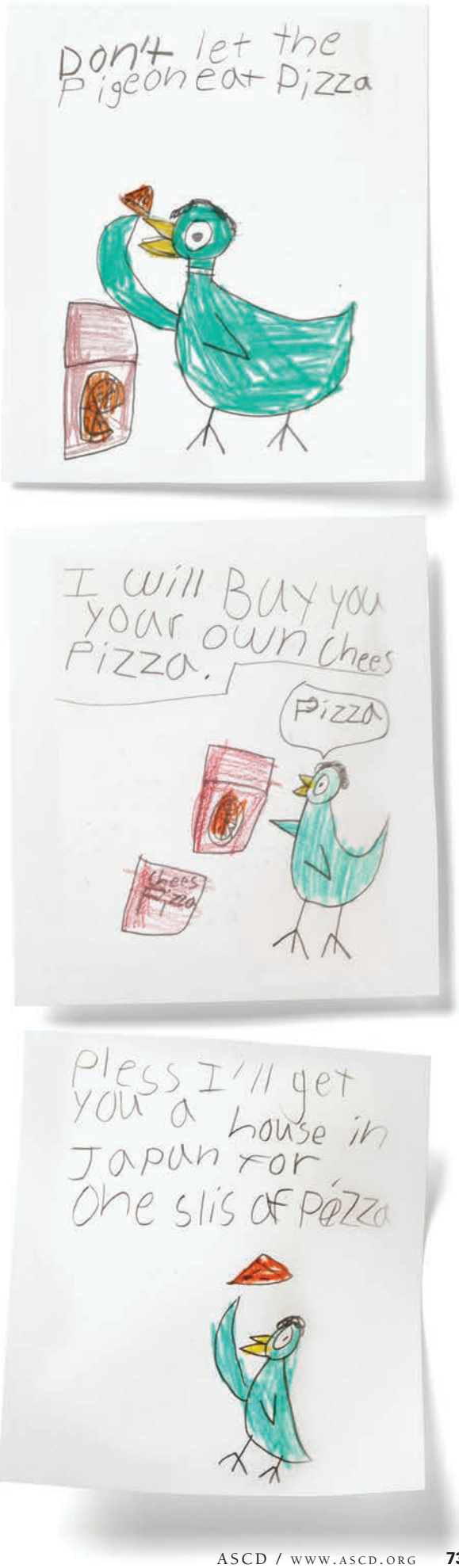
*Picture books can be engaging mentor texts to teach young children the fundamentals of persuasive writing.*

**Brandi Clark**

"Can I stay up?"
"No, go to bed."
"I promise to sleep in."
"No, go to bed."
"I promise to never ask again."
"Yeah, right."

What can be more universal than a child negotiating bedtime? If children are experts in pleading their nocturnal cases, then why not bring this expertise into the classroom?

Outside school, students are bombarded with persuasive communication daily in books, magazines, product packaging, TV, online advertising, and suggestions from friends. Students use persuasion themselves when they negotiate bedtimes, plead for items at the grocery store, or ask to attend community events. Yet in the classroom, the act of persuasive writing is scarce, and "children's exposure to these types of text is likely to be mainly through reading and listening" (Burrell & Beard, 2010, p. 8).

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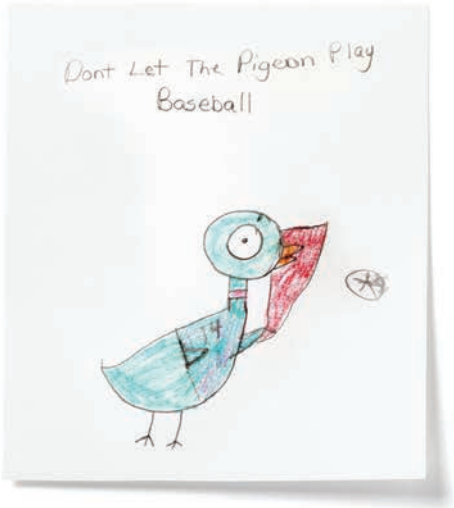
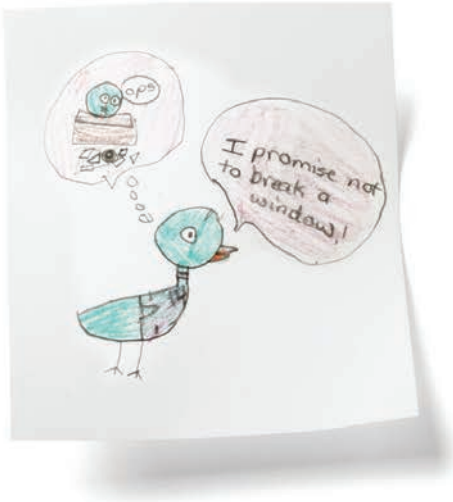
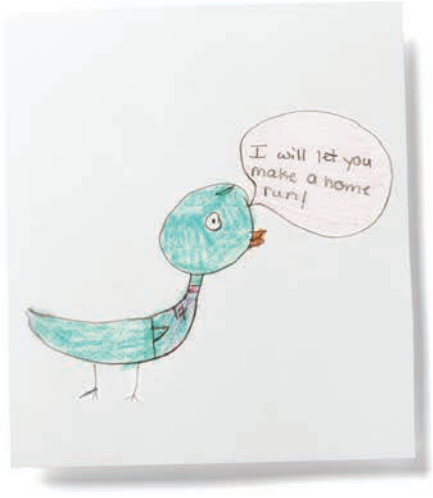



If we want students to become more skilled at the art of argument and persuasion, which they will need not only outside school but also to tackle the writing standards they'll face in the upper grades, we must begin to teach them persuasive writing in the primary classroom.

Writing inspiration often comes from reading great books. For young students, picture books can provide such inspiration. By using children's literature as mentor texts, we can expose students to an authentic form of persuasive writing and provide them with enjoyable, language-rich experiences that boost their comprehension and encourage sustained interest in writing activities (King-Dickman, 2011; Larison, 2007).

### Start with a Great Book

Getting students started with any form of writing is, in itself, a persuasive activity. My teaching motto: Make it real! Make it fun! Engagement starts with the right book.

For example, in *Don't Let the Pigeon Stay Up Late* by Mo Willems (Hyperion, 2006), the pigeon spouts numerous excuses to stay up late. I use this book in a readaloud with 3rd grade students. I play the role of the pigeon, and the students' role is to yell "No!" following each of the pigeon's well-crafted arguments. Not only do students enjoy the experience of yelling *no* (and who doesn't want that experience?), but they also experience firsthand an example of persuasive argument—one that most of them can relate to. We repeat the shared reading to draw attention to the structure of the book, the language used, and the variety of illustrations.

### Have Students Create Their Own Books

Following the shared reading, I invite the students to make their own foldable minibooks modeled on *Don't Let the Pigeon Stay Up Late*. The process begins with the whole group brainstorming a list of their favorite topics based on their hobbies, activities, and experiences. Then the students pick a topic from the group list or generate one of their own. Titles have ranged from *Don't Let the Pigeon Play Baseball* to *Don't Let the Pigeon Eat Pizza* to *Don't Let the Pigeon Use the Hot Tub*. Each student creates persuasive arguments and selects five for his or her book—a manageable number for editing and revision. With the support of a teacher or a peer, students order the arguments for maximum effect, leaving the most humorous for last. They then create their books, and I provide differentiated support—for example, some students dictate all or part of their arguments while I transcribe them.

*Don't Let the Pigeon Stay Up Late* is an effective mentor text that students can use as a model not just for their writing, but also for their illustration. Mo Willem's website (www.pigeonpresents.com/activities/pigeon_draw01.pdf) provides the directions to create your own drawing of a pigeon. I've observed a variety of learners—from 5-year-olds to teacher retirees—try their hand at following these directions, and I can confirm that the ability to create a pigeon that looks like what you intended it to be creates great excitement and self-assurance. Students accessorize the pigeon to match their topic. Finally, they share their finished books with peers.

The benefits of this activity go beyond entertainment. In addition to giving students writing practice and introducing them to the idea of a persuasive argument, creating pigeon books reveals much about the students: their lives, their humor, and their feelings. It capitalizes on the playfulness of putting yourself in the

pigeon's shoes to explore topics that are close to the brain and close to the heart.

### Move Up the Persuasion Ladder

As writing teachers, we need to establish where our students are and move them up the ladder to where we would like them to be (Lesesne, 2010). Having students create books modeled on simple picture books puts them on the first rung of the persuasive-writing ladder. The next step up the ladder is to encourage students to analyze persuasive arguments for their potency. For example, a teacher can reread *Don't Let the Pigeon Stay Up Late* and then ask students to rate which of the reasons the pigeon gives for staying up late are persuasive and which are not.

In the book *Bad Kitty Gets a Bath* by Nick Bruel (Square Fish, 2004), the narrator attempts to persuade Bad Kitty to have a bath using several more-detailed persuasive techniques, thus providing students with a model one more rung up the persuasive-writing ladder. After reading this book, students might return to their original self-made pigeon books and consider revising them to include stronger or more varied types of persuasion. For example, if the title of the student's book was *Don't Let the Pigeon Use the Hot Tub,* the revisions might look like this, using three of *Bad Kitty's* persuasive argument techniques—bribery, flattery, and reverse psychology.

■ *Bribery*. "I will clean the hot tub" transforms into "I promise that I will clean out the hot tub, even the drain, feathers and all."

■ *Flattery*. "You are the nicest person I know" becomes "You look more like a movie star every day, and movie stars have no problem sharing."

■ *Reverse psychology*. "I don't care if I use the hot tub" changes to "Fine, don't let me use the hot tub. I don't mind being dirty. In fact, flies love it!"

Here are some additional picture books that teachers can use to help students develop more-advanced persuasive arguments:

■ *I Wanna Iguana* and *I Wanna New Room* by Karen Kaufman Orloff and David Catrow (Putnam Juvenile 2004, 2010).

■ *Hey Little Ant* by Phillip and Hannah Hoose and Debbie Tilley (Tricycle Press, 1998).

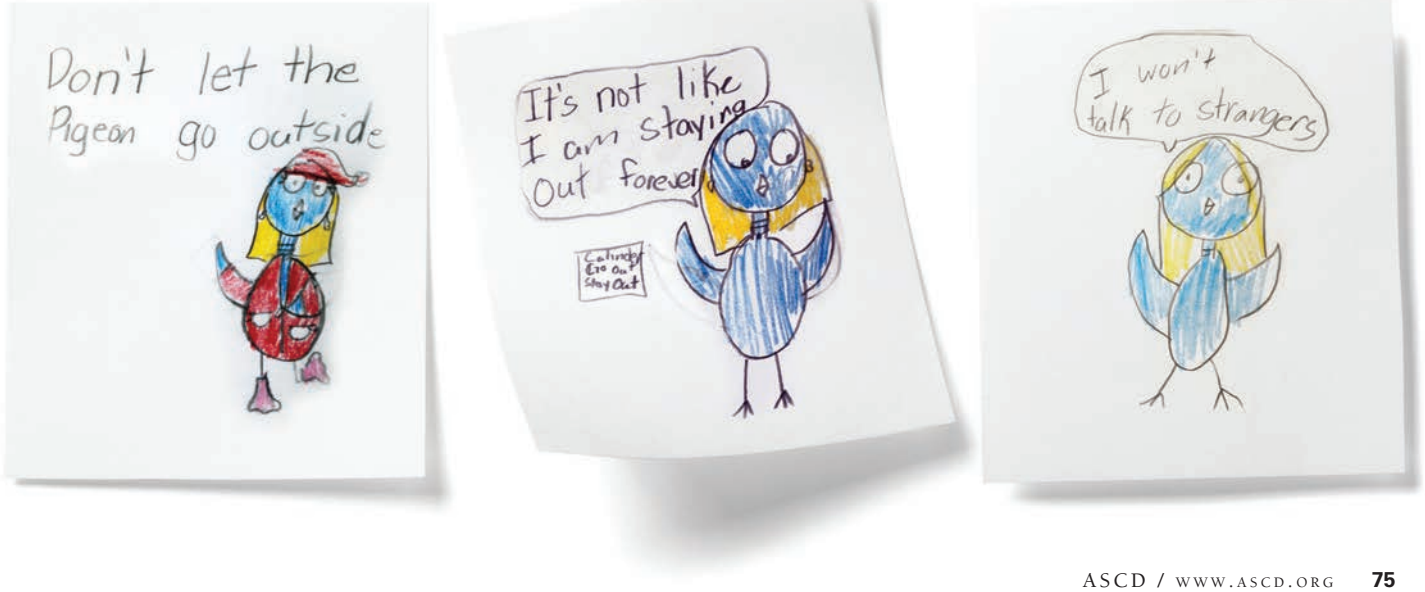
■ *Have I Got a Book for You* by Melanie Watt (Kids Can Press, 2013).

■ *Earrings!* By Judith Viorst (Alladin Picture Books, 1993).

■ *Should We Have Pets? A Persuasive Text* by Joyce Hogan, Sylvia Lollis, and Pamela W. Jane (Mondo Pub, 2002).

Diane Barone (2011) endorses modeling with picture books as a way to introduce students to persuasive arguments, and she suggests two additional activities we can use to help students move up the persuasive-writing ladder: (1) discussion webs that support students in crafting the details for an argument and (2) using fairy tale characters and plots.

**Young children can easily understand the benefits of using persuasive techniques** as they negotiate their everyday lives.



Discussion webs are graphic organizers set up to debate both sides of a question (such as, Should the pigeon stay up late?). Discussion webs can be as basic as a two-column chart labeled *yes* and *no*. Students collect evidence from the related book, filling in both sides of the organizer. Students then reach a conclusion based on the evidence collected.

Debating the motives of fairy tale characters also provides another motivational exercise in persuasion. For example, after reading the story of Jack and the beanstalk, students might compile lists of evidence from the text indicating whether Jack was "good" or "bad" and then use their list as a planner for writing a persuasive essay.

### Persuasion Is Part of Life

The foray into persuasive writing is a great way for students to begin immersing themselves in engaging writing at an early age. King-Dickman (2011) states, "If we expect students to take their writing seriously, then they must have opportunities to write for real audiences with authentic purposes in mind" (p. 28). Creating books modeled on scenarios like those in *Don't Let the Pigeon Stay Up Late* enables students to engage their peers in a story that reflects their own universes.

Moreover, young children can easily understand the benefits of using persuasive techniques as they negotiate their everyday lives. When we combine their love of books with their firsthand experiences, we create a happy marriage between the two worlds of literacy and life. At the same time, we build a solid foundation for the opinion pieces and research papers that students will be expected to do as they progress through the grades.

Have I convinced you yet? EL

### References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