

Persuasive Writing in *Freakonomics Revised and Expanded*

by

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Crime rates in the United States have decreased because abortion was legalized and fewer future criminals were born. That sounds like an outrageous assertion to make. Yet IT is precisely the kind of assertions made by Steven Levitt and Stephen Dubner in their book Freakonomics Revised and Expanded. The assertions made in the book are so shocking that they are a perfect example of why persuasive writing skills are important. So when the writing of these two authors is measured against popular academic principles of persuasive writing, how does IT measure up? Since the same basic argument style is used through out the book, I will look specifically here at the argument mentioned above, that declines in violent crime were a result of *Roe v. Wade*.

In A Writer's Reference, Diane Hacker makes the point that in persuasive writing, "Your aim is to explain your understanding of the truth about a subject or to propose the best solution available for solving a problem – without being needlessly combative" (67). Hacker explains further that while stating one's stand too timidly is ineffective, doing so aggressively also limits the effect of writing if the author comes across as too argumentative. How do Levitt and Dubner measure up? While they are very matter of fact about their assertions, they do temper them. This is illustrated by the fact that very early in the argument they comfort the reader by writing, "This theory is bound to

provoke a variety of reactions, ranging from disbelief to revulsion, and a variety of objections, ranging from the quotidian to the moral” (127). Essentially the authors here say to the reader that a feeling of outrage is normal in response to the suggestion these two issues may be linked. It’s fine to feel repulsed at the idea of controlling violent crime by aborting fetuses, but let’s look at the evidence and see if that’s what happened. This softens their argument, making it more palpable to the reader.

The statement quoted above shows Levitt and Dubner’s use of another key principle of persuasive writing. This is the principle of building common ground with your audience. Emphasizing the why this is critical, Hacker reasons that, “If you can show that you share your readers’ values, they may be able to switch to your position without giving up what they feel is important” (73). Basically this tells us that you can’t expect people to completely abandon their moral standing. Levitt and Dubner do not attempt to convince the reader that abortion should be used as a form of crime prevention, but only that the crime reduction was an unintended consequence. In doing so they realize that the argument may stir a moral objection. They establish common ground by acknowledging that feeling such objection is acceptable and one can do so and still accept the argument they are making.

Highlighting another critical principle, Hacker emphasizes, “You will need to support your central claim...with evidence: facts, statistics, examples, and illustrations, expert opinion, and so on” (70). Levitt and Dubner excel at this principle by quoting a plethora of statistics that provide multiple independent points of support for their assertion. One example of this is when they argued, “One factor to look for would be a correlation between each state’s abortion rate and its crime rate. Sure enough, the

states with the highest abortion rates in the 1970s experienced the greatest crime drops in the 1990s, while states with low abortion rates experienced smaller crime drops.”

This leads logically into a closely connected principle of persuasive writing. Hacker informs us that a writer should “acknowledge opposing arguments and any contradictory evidence and explain why your position is stronger” (72). So a writer has to anticipate the arguments their audience will make and address them. Levitt and Dubner leverage this approach very effectively. Immediately after making the statement quoted above that states with higher abortion rates saw larger drops in crime, they address one of the counter arguments. They qualify their assertion by pointing out that the “correlation exists even when controlling for a variety of factors that influence crime: a state’s level of incarceration, number of police, and it’s economic situation.” They take another step toward addressing opposing arguments by asserting, “Moreover, there was no link between a given state’s abortion rate and it’s crime rate *before* the late 1980s – when the first cohort affected by legalized abortion was reaching its criminal prime – which is yet another indication that *Roe v. Wade* was indeed the event that tipped the crime scale” (129).

We’ve seen several principles that Levitt and Dubner do follow. But there is one principle of persuasive writing that they completely diverge from. Hacker instructs writers, “When you construct an argument, make sure your introduction contains a thesis sentence that states your position on the issue you have chosen to debate” (69). Thus Hacker is saying that a writer should be clear about the position they take up front and then begin to make the argument supporting their stand. Levitt and Dubner take an entirely different approach. They instead choose to state the issue they will be

examining and then first deal with other possible explanations, documenting why these explanations do not explain what occurred. Only much later in the chapter do they state their position.

In summary, Levitt and Dubner use most of the commonly accepted techniques to create effective persuasive writing. They state their claim assertively but not needlessly so, build common ground with their audience, back up their claims with specific facts, and anticipate and address counter arguments. However, they choose to take an unconventional approach when structuring their claim.

Works Cited

Hacker, Diana. A Writer's Reference. Boston, New York: Bedford/St. Martins, 2007.

Levitt, Steven, and Stephen Dubner. Freakonomics Revised and Expanded. New York: HarperCollins, 2006.