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Teaching Persuasion and Critical Thinking Using the State of the Union Address

by Claire C. Robinson May.

Like many law professors, I like to encourage my first-year students to be politically aware and engaged. I also want them to develop their critical thinking skills. In addition, as a legal writing professor, every spring it is my job to teach them the art of persuasive writing. I use the president's State of the Union Address as a teaching tool to do all three.

I tell my students that the State of the Union Address is an advocacy piece, not simply an objective report on the state of the nation. The United States Constitution provides that the president "shall from time to time give to the Congress Information of the State of the Union, and recommend to their Consideration such Measures as he shall judge necessary and expedient . . ." U.S. Const. art. 2, § 3 (emphasis added). In keeping with the nature of the speech, the president and his speechwriters use a multitude of persuasive writing techniques to convince Congress and the American people to support the president's agenda for the country.

For my first class assignment in the spring semester, I ask my students to watch the televised State of the Union Address. If they can't watch or record the speech, I ask them to read the transcript the next day in the newspaper or on-line. As they watch or read the speech, students must make a list of the persuasive writing techniques they recognize. These could be phrases intended to trigger certain emotions and historical comparisons (such as the "Axis of Evil"), rhythmic devices in speech (rhyme or repetition, short, staccato phrases, or other such devices affecting how the speech sounds), the order in which topics are discussed, or any other technique they think the president uses to make his case.

When we meet, I ask the students to list the persuasive techniques they found, and we review some of the examples on video. Then we evaluate whether each technique "worked." Did the president go too far or just far enough in his attempts at persuasion?

We discuss the use and effectiveness of persuasive writing techniques ranging from large-scale organization and sentence structure, metaphor and analogy, to rhythm and diction. The students recognize for themselves that there is room for creativity in persuasive writing, but that it is also possible to overdo it. They see that there are legitimate (and not so legitimate) ways to shade the facts in order to lead your audience to the conclusion you want. They get excited about learning and practicing the art of persuasive writing.

In addition, the exercise pushes students to think critically about the political issues of the day. First of all, they have to watch the State of the Union Address itself, which experience tells me many would not otherwise do. By analyzing the use of language in the speech, students begin to reflect on the political issues, objectives, strengths, and vulnerabilities the chosen language serves. More broadly, the students develop and exercise their ability to delve beyond soundbites, hyperlinks, and headlines in their thinking.

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