

A Simple Classroom Behavioural Science Experiment

Dear Educator,

Thank you for taking the time to consider introducing your students to the topic of social influence or ethical persuasion. I've written a letter for you to encourage students to listen to my episode for young adults, but then realised we could turn it into a fun **behavioural science experiment** if you're interested. (If you're not interested in that, then just use the first version of the letter, which is on page 3 of this PDF)

The following pages contain **two versions of the letter** that you may, if you wish, provide to your students. Both letters invite students to listen to the same podcast episode and then provide you with feedback about whether they believe the topic would benefit students and whether they would be interested in learning more through a presentation.

The difference is that one letter has been deliberately written using a number of scientifically researched Principles of Persuasion, while many of those elements have been removed from the other. I have intentionally kept the wording as similar as possible so that the persuasive elements are the primary difference between the two versions.

Please feel free to adapt either letter to better reflect your own style of communication or the culture of your educational institution. However, if you intend to compare the effectiveness of the two versions, I encourage you to make as few changes as possible. Removing persuasive elements—or unintentionally introducing new ones—will reduce the value of the comparison.

If You Choose to Compare the Two Letters

Like any experiment, the reliability of the results will generally increase as the number of participants increases. Comparisons involving only a small number of students may produce differences that are simply due to chance rather than the wording of the letters themselves.

For example, rather than providing one version to fifteen students and the other to another fifteen, a more meaningful comparison may be achieved by distributing one version to several classes and the other version to several different classes. If your organisation has multiple campuses or educational facilities, an even better approach may be to use one version at one location and the other version at another.

To help preserve the integrity of the comparison, you may also wish to ask students not to discuss the podcast episode or the letter with other students until the activity has

concluded and you have had an opportunity to discuss it together in class. If students who received different versions of the letter begin talking about the episode beforehand, their enthusiasm—or even a simple reminder that the episode exists—may encourage other students to listen when they otherwise would not have. While this is a perfectly natural outcome, it also makes it more difficult to determine how much of the difference in listening rates was influenced by the letters themselves.

Regardless of which letter students receive, those who choose to listen to the podcast will hear exactly the same episode. Your decision about whether to invite me to present can therefore still be based on the advice and feedback of the students who actually listened. Those who chose not to listen are naturally less able to comment on the value of the content.

Approximately one week after distributing the letters, you may wish to ask students whether they listened to the episode.

Because some students may understandably feel inclined to answer "yes" even if they did not, I suggest first explaining that the letter they received was itself part of a simple behavioural science experiment demonstrating the science of ethical persuasion. Reassure them that their answer—whether yes or no—will have absolutely no impact on how they are viewed or assessed, and that the value of the experiment depends entirely on honest responses.

Obtaining truthful results will not only make the experiment more meaningful, but will also provide a better indication of how valuable students genuinely perceive this topic to be and how interested they are in learning more about it.

If a meaningful difference is observed between the two letters, this itself becomes a fascinating classroom demonstration that ethical persuasion can influence behaviour without manipulation, coercion or pressure. Students often find it intriguing to discover that they have personally experienced the science before learning how it works.

Should you decide to conduct this experiment, I would be genuinely interested in hearing the results. Every educational environment is different, and I would greatly appreciate learning what you observed. You can find an explanation of the differences at the end.

Kind regards,

Patrick van der Burght

Cialdini Institute Licensed Trainer – Speaker – Consultant – Author

NEXT PAGE IS THE 'PERSUASIVE' VERSION OF THE LETTER

Dear Student,

As your teacher, I am always looking for opportunities to help you develop knowledge and skills that will benefit you long after you leave this classroom. While academic knowledge is essential, there are also life skills that can profoundly influence whether you achieve successes available to you—or unnecessarily let them pass by. Recently, I was reminded of one such skill that many students are unaware of.

The World Economic Forum's Future of Jobs Report 2025 identifies Social Influence as the third most important workplace skill organisations expect to need in the years ahead.

Social influence, also referred to as ethical persuasion, has nothing to do with manipulation or coercion. Rather, it is the science of communicating particular truthful information that helps others recognise the genuine value of a message and increases the likelihood of gaining their agreement, cooperation or support.

Whether you are applying for university, seeking an apprenticeship or interviewing for your dream job, your success will often depend on your ability to communicate persuasively while maintaining your integrity.

I recently came across Patrick van der Burght, a Founding Member and Licensed Trainer of the Cialdini Institute, established to preserve and advance the work of Dr Robert Cialdini, widely regarded as the world's leading authority on social influence.

Patrick has produced a podcast episode specifically for young adults. In it, he explains human decision-making, why the Principles of Persuasion are so effective, and shares research-based strategies that students can ethically begin applying immediately.

We are all busy, but this won't take hours; the episode is only 74 minutes. If you like, and it's completely voluntary, listen to or watch the episode this week. **Until we've had a chance to discuss it together in class, I'd appreciate it if you kept the episode and your thoughts about it to yourself so everyone has a chance to form their own opinion.**

Afterwards, I would appreciate hearing your thoughts.

Do you believe this topic could benefit students like you?

Would you be interested in learning more through a presentation by Patrick?

Your advice will help me decide whether this is something worth exploring further for our students. I think you'll enjoy the episode.

Kind regards,



YouTube



Spotify



Apple Podcast

Dear Student,

As your teacher, I am always looking for opportunities to help you develop knowledge and skills that will benefit you long after you leave this classroom. While academic knowledge is obviously important, there are also life skills that can have a profound influence on the successes you'll achieve.

Recently, I was reminded of one such skill.

Social influence, also referred to as ethical persuasion, has nothing to do with manipulation or coercion. Rather, it is the science of communicating particular truthful information that helps others recognise the genuine value of a message and increases the likelihood of gaining their agreement, cooperation or support.

Whether you are applying for university, seeking an apprenticeship or interviewing for your dream job, your success will often depend on your ability to communicate persuasively while maintaining your integrity.

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The episode is only 74 minutes. Listening to it is entirely voluntary, but I encourage you to listen to or watch the episode this week. **Until we've had a chance to discuss it together in class, I'd appreciate it if you kept the episode and your thoughts about it to yourself so everyone has a chance to form their own opinion.** Afterwards, I would appreciate hearing your thoughts.

Do you believe this topic could benefit students like you?

Would you be interested in learning more through a presentation by Patrick?

Your feedback will help me decide whether this is something worth exploring further for our students. I hope you enjoy the episode.

Kind regards,



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Spotify



Apple Podcast

Understanding the Differences Between the Two Letters (for Educators)

Should you wish to turn this experiment into a short lesson on persuasion science, the following notes explain the differences between the two versions of the student letter.

I encourage you to read these notes before distributing the letters so that, once the exercise has concluded, you are able to explain to students not only **what** happened, but also **why** it happened.

To obtain the most meaningful comparison, students should be **unaware** that two different versions of the letter exist or that an experiment is happening. Each student should receive only one version, make their own independent decision about whether to listen to the podcast, and, if possible, avoid discussing either the letter or the episode with other students until the activity has concluded.

After you have collected the results, you can reveal that different students received different versions of the same letter and compare the percentage of students in each group who chose to listen to the episode. This often provides a fascinating introduction to the science of ethical persuasion, as students discover that they have personally experienced how small, truthful changes in communication can influence behaviour—without manipulation, coercion or pressure.

Do please be reminded that each principle of persuasion has many dynamics and subtle nuances. What is explained here are only some dynamics which happened to be used in this letter.

Difference 1 – Highlighting What Students May Be Missing

The Principle of Scarcity

The opening paragraph of the persuasive version introduces the possibility that, without certain life skills, students may unnecessarily miss out on successes that could otherwise have been theirs. It also mentions that this is a skill few students know about.

Both these elements activate the Principle of Scarcity. We naturally place greater value on things that are rare or becoming increasingly difficult to obtain, and we are more persuaded by the idea of losing something compared to gaining that same thing.

Difference 2 – Referring to the World Economic Forum

The Principle of Authority

The persuasive version explains that the World Economic Forum's *Future of Jobs Report 2025* identifies Leadership and Social Influence as the third most important workplace skill organisations are encouraged to develop in their teams in the years ahead.

Even if students know little about the World Economic Forum itself, the fact that a respected international organisation has researched workplace skills provides authority to the recommendation. As the Principle of Authority predicts, we naturally give greater weight to information that appears to come from, or is supported by, knowledgeable and credible sources.

Difference 3 – Explaining Patrick's Background

The Principle of Authority

When Patrick is introduced in the persuasive letter, students learn that he is a Founding Member and Licensed Trainer of the Cialdini Institute, that the Institute exists to preserve and advance the work of Dr Robert Cialdini, and that Dr Cialdini is widely regarded as the world's leading authority on the science of persuasion and social influence.

Each of these truthful details adds another layer of credibility and expertise to Patrick and Dr Cialdini. The fact that Robert Cialdini holds a doctorate also enhances credibility and trust through the principle of authority. In the less persuasive version, only Patrick is introduced and is simply described as "a trainer in ethical persuasion."

Difference 5 – Framing the Time Commitment

The Contrast Phenomenon

Both letters state that the episode is seventy-four minutes long.

However, the persuasive version first tells students that "*it won't take hours.*" By first anchoring the idea of "hours", it changes the reader's perception of the following number, which is the seventy-four minutes. This time frame now appears shorter and more manageable.

The persuasive version also includes the simple phrase "*if you like*." While both letters make it clear that listening is entirely voluntary, this small addition reinforces the student's freedom to choose. If people get the feeling that we wish to push our will on them with a request, it can activate a defensive reaction, which can reduce compliance. By reminding our audience that they are free to choose to do what they wish, this defensive reaction is less or gone and more people will feel less hesitation to do what was suggested.

There is one further truthful element within this paragraph that enhances its effectiveness and provides an interesting classroom discussion. I deliberately haven't identified it here, as I enjoy revealing it during presentations.

Difference 6 – Advice Rather Than Feedback

The Principle of Unity

The persuasive version asks students for their **advice**, whereas the less persuasive version asks for their **feedback**.

Although the difference appears subtle, these words encourage different ways of thinking. People asked for feedback often adopt the role of critic. People asked for advice are more likely to adopt the role of partner, becoming more invested in helping improve the outcome.

Discussing the Results with Your Students

Approximately one week after distributing the letters, you may wish to ask students whether they listened to the episode.

Because some students may understandably feel inclined to answer "yes" even if they did not, I suggest first explaining that the letter they received was itself part of a simple classroom experiment demonstrating the science of ethical persuasion. Reassure them that their answer—whether yes or no—will have absolutely no impact on how they are viewed or assessed, and that the value of the exercise depends entirely on honest responses.

Obtaining truthful information will not only make the comparison more meaningful, but will also provide a better indication of how valuable students genuinely perceive this topic to be and how interested they are in learning more.

Once you have gathered your results, you have a wonderful opportunity to explain that another group of students received a slightly different version of the same letter and to discuss the differences described above.

Whether or not the experiment ultimately leads to a presentation, I applaud your willingness to introduce your students to this topic. This exercise alone helps demonstrate that the way we communicate can significantly influence how other people respond to us.

Finally, I would genuinely enjoy hearing about your findings. If you are willing to share approximately how many students received each version of the letter, together with how many students in each group listened to the episode, it will help us continue learning about the practical application of persuasion science in educational settings.

You are welcome to contact me through the enquiry form at ethicalpersuasion.com.au/contact-us.

While the time I can donate to educational institutions each year is necessarily limited, I have to admit that if you have gone to the effort of conducting this classroom experiment, your request that I present to your students will be particularly difficult for me to decline.

Wishing you an influential future.



Patrick van der Burght

Founding Member & Licensed Trainer of the Cialdini Institute

Speaker • Trainer • Consultant • Published Author

Teaching the Science of Ethical Persuasion since 2000

Website: ethicalpersuasion.com.au

Contact: ethicalpersuasion.com.au/contact-us

Podcast *Ethical Persuasion Unlocked* 'Young Adults' Episode:

ethicalpersuasion.com.au/podcast/0020

Resources for Further Exploration

If you would like to independently explore the science of ethical persuasion before making a decision, the following resources may be of interest:

About Patrick van der Burght

- Keynote presentation highlights video
ethicalpersuasion.com.au/keynote/
- Ethical Persuasion Unlocked – Episode 20
ethicalpersuasion.com.au/podcast/0020
- How to Hear YES More Often
yesmoreoften.com



About the Science

- Dr Robert Cialdini's Explainer Video
The Science of Persuasion (17 million views)
ethicalpersuasion.com.au/video-science-of-persuasion/
- The Cialdini Institute
www.cialdini.com
- World Economic Forum
<https://www.weforum.org/publications/the-future-of-jobs-report-2025/>
- Forbes
The Top 10 In-Demand Soft Skills to Learn in 2024
<https://tinyurl.com/5a6azz56>
- Forbes
Six Timeless Books for 2025
<https://tinyurl.com/56eprwjx>

