

UNDERSTANDING EFFECTIVE ARGUMENT

One reason for your study of issues in English is that we live in a world where we are constantly subjected to attempts to persuade us, whether these be commercial, political, social or moral. You need to be able to assess the methods and motivations of a range of forces that have an impact upon your life.

Consider what persuades you best: is it flattery, hectoring, logic, appeals to altruism?

Consider the fine line between an emotional argument and a calmer, dispassionate one. How useful are emotional appeals? Remember that some people may respond to these, yet others may find them annoying and intellectually shallow. For instance, what is more effective: pictures of crying children, or data about their plight?

UNDERSTANDING THE USE OF LANGUAGE

Analysing the use of language by writers and others is not just a case of looking at particular words and phrases, but understanding how they use language in an overall sense. Is the relentless logic of an argument what stands out, or is it the writer's ability to present the issue in a down-to-earth, everyday manner that everyone can identify with?

How important is humour in the art of persuasion?

Does the writer move seamlessly from the particular to the general and so present the reader with a compelling argument?

Are you more impressed by an article that contains a clever allusion to some other event, or an article that doesn't make you rush for your dictionary to check the meaning of a word?

Does colloquial language help in the presentation of an argument, or does it trivialise the issue and detract from the overall quality of the case being presented?

Think about how we all use individual words and phrases to achieve particular meanings. What does it mean to refer to the "chattering classes" in a debate about civil liberties? What does it mean when union representative Sharon Burrow is described as a "union boss", whereas the chairman of BHP is referred to as an "executive"?

SOME SOURCES OF MEDIA TEXTS

PRINT

Newspapers

- *The Age*
- *The Australian*
- *The Herald Sun*
- *Australian Financial Review*
- *Melbourne Weekly*
- *The Weekly Times*
- *Jewish News*

MAGAZINES/PERIODICALS

- *The Bulletin/Newsweek*
- *Time*
- *The Economist*

AUDIO-VISUAL

Television

- The 7.30 Report
- Four Corners
- Lateline
- Foreign Correspondent
- Sunday
- Face to Face
- Meet the Press
- A Current Affair

Radio

- AM & PM
- Assorted talkback

This is certainly not meant to be an exhaustive list, but a broad guide to what is available. It is worth having a good look at the "Green Guide" to see what is available, especially on radio. It is also worth spending some time browsing through your local newsagency. You might be surprised at the wide range of material that is available.

MEDIA TEXTS

FEATURE STORY

The feature story gives a basic outline and is often an excellent source for background information on an issue. The writer is usually, although not necessarily, neutral, giving information such as quotations from people with expertise or interest in an issue.

Some questions to ask about feature stories:

- Does the story exaggerate or go beyond the given facts?
- Do the quotations present a balanced view of the issue?
- What is the language like? Is it controlled, interview style, dispassionately analytical, bold, provocative, colorful, questioning, probing, entertaining?

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

All newspapers publish a selection of their readers' letters. Current contentious issues are bound to appear in letters to the editor. Letters offer good opportunities for analysis because they provoke and encourage debate.

An effective letter is of sufficient length, offering accurate, truthful, logical, coherent views about an issue.

It will have an interesting introduction and a captivating conclusion. It can be powerful, provoking intense reactions or getting to the heart of an issue through the strength of personal conviction, authoritative use of evidence and skill in argument.

The language in letters is often personal, passionate, provocative, detailed, emotive, angry, accusing, sarcastic, analytical, rebuking.

EDITORIALS

Most newspapers publish editorials each day. These are articles representing the views of the newspaper. They are often written by a team of senior editors and journalists.

Think about the philosophical and political attitude of the different newspapers in order to better analyse their editorials. For example, *The Australian* of late has been very critical of Treasurer Peter Costello. This may be related to his lukewarm response to various proposed tax reforms.

Consider the different readerships of the various papers. Who reads *The Australian* *Financial Review*? Are they the same people who read the *Herald Sun*? Does the national focus of *The Australian* influence the presentation of a story compared to the Melbourne newspaper *The Age*?

OPINION PIECES

Regular columnists such as Moira Rayner, Frank Devine, Sean Carney, Terry Lane, Jill Singer, Andrew Bolt and others, provide good examples of people persuasively arguing their points of view.

There are usually half a dozen columnists writing in the various newspapers each day. Aim to read several of these on a regular basis. Get used to the techniques individual writers use repeatedly. Terry Lane, for example, is often trenchant, hyperbolic and satirical. Phillip Adams is humorous, but serious. Gerard Henderson tends to be opinionated, but more restrained.

CARTOONS

Often issues are most forthrightly expressed using a visual image. Each of the daily newspapers offers a number of regular cartoonists. They are often highly subjective, exaggerated and blunt.

In addition to the regular cartoons that provide a point of view on a current issue, usually with a joke, cartoons can take a number of forms:

Caricature/illustration – people in the news are often presented in a particular way in order to convey a particular point of view.

Pocket cartoon – these are often part of a written story, relying on a joke relating to the story. Tandberg in *The Age* is a prime example of this.

MAGAZINE FEATURES

These often appear in the weekend newspapers or special pull-out supplements such as *The Australian's* Media section, or Good Weekend in *The Age*.

Features are an excellent source of information on an issue since they are usually much longer than regular newspaper articles. Some present a point of view, using graphics or photography to complement the text.

TELEVISION AND RADIO REPORTS

These can be found in programs such as the ABC's *7.30 Report*, or *Four Corners*. Commercial stations such as Channel 9 show *A Current Affair* and *Sunday*.

Audio visual material allows you to discuss visual methods of persuasion, as well as verbal. You can examine how the report uses pictures, music, editing and lighting to present a point of view on an issue.

PERSUASIVE LANGUAGE TECHNIQUES

| Persuasive Technique | Definition | How It Persuades |
|----------------------|--|---|
| Adjective | Describing words usually connected to a noun (naming word): e.g. The bright red house (bright and red = adjectives), (noun = house). | Adds emphasis. |
| Alliteration | Repeating and playing upon the same letter: e.g. A back-breaking job... | Adds emphasis and reinforces meaning, especially where an idea is repeated. Often used to create a highly emotive image. |
| Anecdote | A short account or story of an entertaining or interesting incident: e.g. "In my experience..." | Usually makes reader sympathetic and receptive to the point; can set up a character, then position reader to accept or reject that individual character. |
| Associations | Words that create meanings beyond the literal meaning of the word: e.g. Attractive, alluring, pleasing, charming. | Suggests or influences reader response in certain ways, often subconsciously. Implied meanings need to be identified. |
| Attacks/praise | The writer attacks or praises an opponent or idea. This is really an assertion of the writer's viewpoint: e.g. Denigrating or humiliating the person , discrediting opponents as unreliable, dishonest, suggesting unsatisfactory associations. | These methods are often effective in placing the reader in a position of agreement with the writer/speaker. This process works by forceful assertion through appropriate language and insistent claims that are not usually associated with evidence. |
| Bias | One-sidedness in presentation of view/opinion: e.g. Eminem's tour promoter obviously sees no danger in what Eminem says. | Can subjectively influence the reader by intentionally only presenting one side of the argument. |
| Clichés | Worn out, over used expressions: e.g. fit as a fiddle, turn over a new leaf, Pushing the envelope. | Are familiar, often colloquial, so can offer a shortcut to convey meaning. |

| Persuasive Technique | Definition | How It Persuades |
|--|---|---|
| Colourful words and descriptive language | Words that are heightened, vivid, lively, full of interest: e.g. Hot= “blistering, sultry, muggy, suffocating...” | Produce a picture and/or induce an emotion. Engage reader by gaining attention and often put a new slant on familiar events and issues. |
| Contention | The main line of argument in a text. A statement of the main idea being argued or debated. What the writer wants you to agree with. The contention focuses on WHAT is being argued. | The contention pinpoints the issue and the writer’s point of view on it. Your main task is to analyse how readers are being influenced and persuaded to agree with the main contention. Analyse language use and persuasive techniques, not the argument itself. |
| Emotional Appeals | Emotional appeals are often subtle; they play on people’s emotions such as fears, insecurities, hopes, desires and things that are valued. Can target: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A sense of justice or injustice. • Family values. • Tradition or custom. • Patriotism. • Moral values. | Writers of media texts frequently appeal to our emotions. Invariably, these appeals relate to our values and attitudes. Often, the appeals are relatively subtle, as we are unaware of the ways in which our own values shape our opinions. Be aware that writers often shrewdly know how to persuasively direct our opinions through their appeals. Can manipulate reader to take notice of issues by triggering an emotional response. |
| Emotive Language | The deliberate use of strong emotive words to play on a reader’s feelings. Language that carries strong emotions: e.g. Powerful emotive words like “sleazy, slimy, vicious, disgusting, outrageous” – words that have a legitimate use in appropriate circumstances – are used in unusual contexts to describe an action or situation. | Evokes strong emotional response in order to coerce/force agreement from reader. Such language is intentionally used to stimulate strong emotional reactions that manipulate the reader’s responses. |

| Persuasive Technique | Definition | How It Persuades |
|----------------------|--|---|
| Generalisation | A general statement that infers or claims that whatever is being asserted is true for most people or a majority because it is true in one or some cases. | <p>Can appeal to our general sense of what is true and so sound authoritative.</p> <p>May pick up on prevailing prejudices and stereotypes in the culture and so seem convincing because familiar.</p> <p>Can use a kind of emotional appeal to our agreed prejudices and untested opinions.</p> <p>Look closely at any generalisation to see how it works to make the reader agree.</p> |
| Inclusive Language | Includes reader/audience by assuming “we all agree or disagree”. | Engages reader and is often friendly – gains sympathy or persuades reader to reject an idea, individual. |
| Language Style | How the writer ‘says’ things. The kind of language used to suit the writer’s purpose: e.g. Formal, informal, colourful, plain, everyday, ornate, poetic, literary, reasoned, informative, and so on. | <p>Language style is deliberately chosen to influence the reader. For example, formal styles create an impression of authority and research that can impress readers with information, knowledge, the importance of writer. Readers can feel close to, or distant from, the writer depending on other techniques.</p> <p>Colloquial styles are chatty, friendly, and inclusive because readers are treated more as equals. Language is accessible and familiar. You always need to consider style in the context of the entire article; do not assume particular styles will always have the same effect.</p> |

| Persuasive Technique | Definition | How It Persuades |
|-----------------------------|---|---|
| Loaded Words (Labelling) | Words that are loaded with associations: e.g. Words like capitalist, communist, salesman, etc. | This is a shorthand way of belittling or discrediting someone by suggesting 'association with undesirables'. This tactic usually assumes the reader's agreement with the 'emotional baggage' that such words carry. Loaded words can be powerful in swaying the reader to a point of view and are exploited by writers who know how to position the reader for various purposes. |
| Repetition | Repeated words, phrases, sentence patterns, ideas. | Gives emphasis and prominence to a point or idea; repeats ideas to reinforce point, makes reader remember point. |
| Rhetorical Questions | Questions that have the answer embedded in them; they often use irony. | Powerful device to manipulate the reader to agree because it assumes the answer is obvious. Can position the reader/audience in such a way that to disagree would be to dismiss some point that clearly commands agreement. |
| Tone | Refers to the voice of the writer; the writer's attitude both to the subject matter and the reader. Tone can be emotive (but identify the emotion): e.g. Angry, sympathetic, sarcastic, etc. | Reflects the writer's attitude, which can position the reader to agree or reject something. If the tone is very aggressive, the language itself can be forceful and persuasive; a calm tone often informs a reasoned piece of writing. Changes of tone are important too as they can signal a new direction. |

COMMON MISTAKES

TECHNIQUE RATHER THAN ANALYSIS

One common mistake is for students (and some teachers) to identify and analyse the techniques used, and then state whether or not they were used successfully. In so doing, they are resurrecting some of the skills which were taught in 'clear thinking', but failing to apply them in the manner required.

Another common error, into which some students fall, is to engage in argument or rebuttal with the writer, showing where his or her approach is mistaken.

Rather, what you must do is to show how the writer is using (or attempting to use) language to persuade readers to his or her point of view.

EXAMPLE

Text:

Organised crime in this state is now raging out of control. Unless the Premier acts to clamp down on these thugs, women and children will not be safe on our streets.

Sample Analysis:

The writer is using hyperbole which is ineffectual. Because we are aware of this, she is discredited, and her subsequent arguments appear false.

EXERCISE

- What do you think is wrong, or right with this analysis? Has the student correctly identified some of the demands of the task?
- What could be done to make it fit the criteria relevant to this task? Try writing your own analysis.

ALTERNATIVE ANALYSIS

In hyperbolic tones the writer describes the issue of organised crime as 'out of control' with 'thugs' threatening the safety of ordinary citizens. Such dire words imply a kind of anarchy, with the authorities powerless to act. Talk of children and their safety plays on the fears of many voters that that our city streets are not the safe places they once were, further heightening the community's sense of helplessness and alarm.

Can you see how this alternative analysis offers a more **sustained** exposition of likely audience impact?

SUMMARY

This is the other major error made by many students when tackling this task. Instead of identifying the ways in which the writer has used language to persuade her readers, many students instead summarise what the writer has said. Be wary if you find yourself using phrases like:

- the writer states
- the writer says

EXAMPLE

Text:

Typical of the failure of our state government is the way it has grovelled before the green lobby groups and banned grazing of cattle in the high country. This would never have happened in the days when farmers had a say in the parliament. Unlike ivory tower academics, they have real knowledge of life on the land and the true meaning of the word conservation.

Sample Analysis:

The writer is clearly very angry about the failure of state governments to accede to the demands of the mountain cattle men. In most aggrieved tones he accuses governments, past and present, of bowing down to the demands of conservation groups.

Can you see how this student has merely *summarised* the text and paraphrased the writer's words, doing little to analyse the **impact** of those words? Instead you need to use more of what I like to call *adjectival analysis*, which means that you need to analyse and describe the techniques that the writer has used to persuade. Read the example below:

ALTERNATIVE ANALYSIS

Appealing to the rural readers of the newspaper, the writer criticises both the state government and various 'green lobby groups'. The government, especially, is mocked for its weakness in having 'grovelled' to those groups. The implication of this attack is that all politicians are cowards who will give in to the demands of pressure groups. This appeal to his target audience – rural and disaffected – seems designed to play upon their suspicions about 'out-of-touch' politicians. In addition, the writer seeks to lump together 'green lobby groups' with 'academics' in a kind of mutual guilt-by-association. They are depicted as being woolly idealists, in contrast to the sturdy common sense of men and women on the land. Such a dismissive approach positions the writer as being on the side of 'sensible' rural folk, while marginalising the concerns of 'green' groups as irrelevant and unrealistic.

Can you see how the latter analysis pays close attention to **the target audience**? It does not use broad generalities such as 'the general public'.

TECHNIQUES OF PERSUASION

ALLITERATION

Alliteration is a succession of words beginning with the same sounds. It is a device much favoured by headline writers, offering a catchy summary of the story to follow. However, as a rhetorical device it can also be quite glib and misleading. The temptation is to fall for the easily remembered and readily digested summary, with little or no analysis required. Alliteration is much favoured by the tabloid media!

EXAMPLE

'Doctor Death: Friend to the Dying'

- What do you think is the purpose of using such alliteration?
- What issue is about to be explored in the article to follow?
- What effect has been created by using this technique?
- How does it make the reader think?
- What other kind of persuasive device is being used here?

SAMPLE ANALYSIS

The loaded language of the *Herald Sun* headline is a classic example of tabloid fearmongering. The catchy alliteration of 'Doctor Death' plays upon the readers' worst fears. Most of us would think of our doctors as caring and competent people. For such esteemed professionals to be linked to 'Death', rather than healing, is indeed disturbing. Moreover, there is the still more alarming reference to the doctor as a 'friend' to the 'dying'. Our worst fear - that the one who should bring us comfort in our last hours is an entirely different kind of 'friend' – is here confirmed.

ANALOGIES AND METAPHORS

The most important thing to remember with analogies and metaphors is that they seek to paint a picture for us. As persuasive devices they can be quite effective, as human beings often respond to visual stimulus more than to the written word.

EXAMPLE

A state without strong leadership is like a ship without a rudder.

SAMPLE ANALYSIS

Arguing that 'a state without leadership' is like a 'ship without a rudder', the Premier sought to play upon the fears of her audience concerning a change in government. The implication of her remark was that the leader of the opposition is too weak to be trusted.

ANECDOTES

An anecdote is a story drawn from personal experience and can also be a highly effective rhetorical device. Much more than dry statistics, anecdotes tell us about human experience and have the flavour of plausibility about them.

EXAMPLE

I know many people who enjoy the odd flutter at the pokies. Not one of them is addicted to gambling.

SAMPLE ANALYSIS

Addressing the parliamentary committee on problem gambling, a spokesperson for the hotel industry referred to the 'many people' she knew who enjoyed the 'odd flutter at the pokies'. The key words 'odd' and 'flutter' in her statement sought to defuse her audience's concerns about the proliferation of gambling in the state, implying a harmless bet taken on the odd occasion.

APPEALS TO TRADITION

These appeals rely upon a sense of the past which is worth preserving. They can be very convincing, especially to an older, more conservative audience.

EXAMPLE

The Union Jack has long had pride of place on the Australian flag. It would be a slap in the face to our forefathers if we were to abandon it now.

SAMPLE ANALYSIS

Addressing the RSL membership yesterday, State President Brian Luxton, drew on his understanding of history to argue in favour of retaining the Union Jack. This, combined with the rather emotive reference to our 'forefathers' and the 'slap in the face' to their memory, seem designed to appeal to the sentiments of his target audience. Their great deeds are effectively linked to a long military tradition, now seemingly under threat from this proposed change.

APPEALS TO PAROCHIAL BELIEFS AND VALUES

Like appeals to tradition, this kind of rhetoric often implies a 'shared' set of values. They may pertain to members of a local or school community, a town, or any area restricted in size and number.

EXAMPLE

Residents of our 'tidy town' can feel justifiably proud of its achievements, and need no advice from outsiders as to how we should run our festival.

SAMPLE ANALYSIS

Using the inclusive term 'our' in reference to her town and festival, the mayor denigrated those 'outsiders' who would offer her any advice. Thus she appealed to the parochial elements in her audience who would resent any suggestion that their organisation of the festival had been less than perfect.

APPEALS TO OUR SYMPATHY

As the title suggests, such appeals are designed to win over an audience by appealing to its sympathetic side. They may often involve the use of emotive and exaggerated language to enhance their appeal.

EXAMPLE

How can poor teachers, overworked and under-resourced, be expected to take on this latest curriculum initiative? It's simply heartless of the government even to propose such a scheme.

SAMPLE ANALYSIS

Brian Chalker, President of the Teachers' Association, appeals to the sympathies of the school board, arguing that 'overworked' teachers cannot possibly accept this latest curriculum 'initiative'. Contrasting the schemes of a 'heartless' government with the demands on 'poor' teachers, he seeks to highlight the victim status of his fellow professionals and spare them any extra workload.

APPEALS TO PATRIOTISM

Such appeals rely upon a shared sense of values regarding one's country, its past, and the need to defend it at all costs. Politicians can use them in quite devious and manipulative ways to coerce their audience into agreeing with a certain policy.

EXAMPLE

Freedom-loving Australians, those who truly support this country and its proud democratic traditions, will get behind this latest military initiative by the government.

SAMPLE ANALYSIS

Arguing in favour of recent military interventions by Australia, the Prime Minister made an unashamed appeal to all 'freedom-loving Australians', to those who 'truly support this country'. Such a blatant appeal - with its implication that those who oppose him are somehow unpatriotic - seems designed to play upon the patriotic instincts of his audience. What kind of person would not support such an initiative?

Note:

There are many other kinds of appeals with which you should be familiar. They include:

- Appeals to common sense ('the only sensible approach is to ..').
- Appeals to fair play ('our sense of compassion and decency demands that ...').
- Appeals to fear ('our traditional way of life is under threat if').
- Appeals to self-interest ('do the ratepayers wish to see their money spent in this fashion?').
- Appeals to guilt/shame ('how can we stand by and see young lives wasted ...?').
- Appeals to family values ('the traditional family unit has always protected').

ATTACKING THE PERSON

This kind of approach attacks the person, rather than seeking to address the argument. It is commonly employed by politicians and can be a quite successful diversionary tactic. By deriding the opposing person, rather than the argument, the unnamed politician is here seeking to avoid answering the question.

EXAMPLE

In opposing increased taxes, the leader of the opposition has been exposed as the vile opportunist we have long known him to be.

SAMPLE ANALYSIS

Yesterday, in Parliament, the Prime Minister chose to attack the leader of the opposition for his supposed lack of integrity. The personal nature of this attack sought to divert parliament's attention from the issue of taxes.

COLLOQUIAL LANGUAGE

Also known as the use of the vernacular, colloquial language seeks to engage the reader with its warm, down-to-earth style. In a subtle way it can be a form of inclusive language as not every member of the audience may share its usage.

EXAMPLE

When we go down the street it's easy to see who the real Aussie is and who is not. Fair dinkum, it looks more like Baghdad than Bondi.

SAMPLE ANALYSIS

Writing to the editor of the *Sydney Daily Telegraph*, Bondi resident, Jack Hallam, makes clear his disgust at the wearing of the burqa in the main street of his suburb. Adopting the colloquial language of an older Australia and appealing to the citizens of that country, he seeks to mock those who would adopt other styles of dress.

EXAGGERATED LANGUAGE

Another name for the use of exaggeration is **hyperbole**. This technique is commonplace in argument and often makes for interesting or even humorous reading. Often, however, it also involves conscious distortion of the situation or event being described. The trick is to recognise hyperbole when you see it, and not to simply refer to it as 'colourful language'. Instead you should try to identify exactly how the exaggeration works and why the writer has chosen to do it in a particular way.

EXAMPLE

Gambling in Victoria is now of epidemic proportions. It is a social disease eating at the fabric of our society.

SAMPLE ANALYSIS

In describing gambling as a 'disease' of 'epidemic proportions', anti-gambling campaigner Clare Ryan sought to bolster her case for restrictions on all forms of gaming. Such hyperbolic language, with its connotations of something quite out of control, infecting every corner of society, seemed designed to spread fear and alarm in the community.