GENRE	CONTEXT	AUDIENCE
EFFECTS	METHODS	PURPOSE

GENRE

Genre means 'type' or 'kind'. What might surprise you is that an analysis at the level of a text's genre can produce interesting and subtle points that can achieve the highest marks. A generic text is one that follows the conventions applicable to its genre. The genre conventions of a text are the first thing noticed about a text and it is this which makes genre potentially important. This is because we are all 'conditioned' to react to generic texts in 'culturally determined' ways. These generic aspects work at a subconscious level and affect both the reception and interpretation of a text.

Some background to genre will help. As we grow and learn about the world, we develop a mental set of prototypes or 'maps' for the many kinds of people and things we meet or hear about. When a new kind of thing or person comes our way, it will contain certain signifiers of meaning that we recognise and 'tick off' against our mental prototype. This helps us to categorise the person or thing so that we can react appropriately. Imagine this. What would you do if a flying insect buzzed towards you – you knew it wasn't a wasp but was yellow, black and stripy? You would weigh up these generic characteristics – these signifiers of meaning – against your pre-existing mental prototype of this genre of insect and... first scream then run a mile! Genre with things is like stereotypes with people: it is a helpful recognition mechanism that helps prepare us for the new or unexpected; but, we can be easily fooled and accept genre rather thoughtlessly.

- An important point about genre is that an audience's reaction to it is culturally conditioned and not always helpful.

If you look briefly at the forms of the all-but unreadable texts below, with almost no knowledge of their content, you'll still know for sure what genre each is. And – this is a key recognition – you'll be able to recognise the effects of particular genre conventions that act to shape your initial approach, expectations and interpretation of such texts.

- For each of the texts make a list of effects of genre on your reception and interpretation.
- Add to the list the genre conventions of each that gave rise to these effects.

'Reader-response' theorists suggest that genre conventions are one of the ways in which texts 'position' their audience and 'construct' an 'ideal reader', thus influencing both the initial reception and the eventual interpretation of the text towards that intended by its creator. Theorist Louis Althusser suggests that generic aspects can be said to act in a way that 'calls' to the reader with such authority that the reader responds with a particular mind-set.

- For example, the genre of a news article creates a powerful sense of authenticity, trustworthiness and authority; yet maybe surprisingly, so does the genre of a lifestyle magazine; indeed, the general conventions of publishing itself act to create similar effects whatever the content of the publication. Somehow we have come to trust the printed word rather more highly than it perhaps deserves.

- Genre can create expectations that are very influential. This is because genre conventions are things we grow up with and have become conditioned towards: they seem entirely normal, even natural, such that we cannot easily shake off the 'genre mind-set' they can easily impose on us. Genre can create powerful ideas about a text – it can create a power differential, for example, that allows a text to be very influential.

CONTEXT

Context is another aspect of a text that you ignore at your peril for it invariably brings with it many marks! If you think about it, context gives rise to text in the sense that someone's situation and circumstances are what cause them to want to communicate an idea to someone else in the form of a text, either written or spoken. You should now be able to gather why context is so very central to language study and how revealing it can be.

- A discourse is a text considered in its real-world context of use and from this you will see that all discourse is to some extent at least, context bound.
- All of your analyses should be at the level of discourse. If they are not, you are losing marks.

There are two aspects to context that must always be central to your consideration: the context of production, i.e. that which gave rise to and affected the text's creation (i.e. of its speaker or writer and the circumstances in which it arose); and the context of reception and interpretation, i.e. that which affects the meanings created by the text.

The word context itself derives from an ancient Latin word meaning 'weave together'. In language study, context refers to the many subtle ways in which a text has, 'woven' into it elements, aspects of the social, cultural and historical circumstances of its production. What is also the case, but less often recognised, is that when a text is read or heard, elements of its audience's context is also inextricably 'woven' into its reception and interpretation of the text. Would you rather follow the advice of a favourite celeb star or a teacher? Hmm? Your context is the reason for your answer: aspects of the circumstances of your life as a young teenager – wanting so desperately to be cool above all else – lead you to such a choice... (-; But you get the point?

An example might help. Imagine a letter written from the WWI trenches by a soldier to his sweetheart. The language chosen by the writer as well as the interpretation of the language by its reader will be affected by their individual, yet very different, contexts. Reading that same letter today your own context will further affect your own reception and interpretation of the text (this is because contemporary attitudes to concepts such as war, masculinity, femininity, heroism and cowardice are very different from a century ago). It is not too hard to carry this analogy across to almost any other situation and recognise how context 'weaves' itself both into the production and the reception and interpretation of very many types of text.

- The sum-total of the social, historical and cultural context under which we live is given the name zeitgeist. We are all affected – and in surprisingly similar ways – by our current age's zeitgeist in terms of our attitude to many things: to gender, to sexuality, to ethnicity, to youth and age, etc.

AUDIENCE

Audience refers to the particular kind of reader or listener for which a text is intended (i.e. the text's target audience). Reflecting long and hard on the needs of a text's audience and how well or otherwise it meets the needs of its audience is a harder task than many realise; it certainly deserves a good deal of time and consideration.

An easy but easy pitfall is to fail to recognise that a text you are analysing is unlikely to have been aimed at you – a student. Forgetting this often leads to erroneous assumptions about the text. It's important always to 'put on the target audience's cap' as a text might be seriously boring to a seventeen-year-old teenager but no less than enthralling to its intended older target audience.

EFFECTS

When language is used, it creates effects on its audience. Important effects created by language include engaging its readers, moving them emotionally, surprising, attracting or entertaining them, creating authority and trust, and so on. Your eventual skill in being able to detect such effects will, in large measure, determine your success or otherwise on your course.

METHOD

Particular effects are created by the use of certain language methods. Having a good technical vocabulary will allow you to recognise and label a writer or speaker's linguistic methods and is an important part of your textual analysis skills. In conversation, for example, your ability to identify and label an 'adjacency pair', or in persuasive or descriptive writing to be able to recognise and label features of figurative language are important skills.

PURPOSE

When language is used, there is always a purpose to its use – a purpose for its target audience.

- Don't fall into the trap of being too simplistic regarding purpose. A newspaper article's primary purpose might be to inform, but many informative articles are also highly persuasive – and they can also be entertaining.

- It's an important realisation that when language is used, there are often two levels of 'purpose'. There will always be a particular local purpose – this is one that applies at the point a particular use of language occurs; but texts are usually coherent and unified examples of social discourse, so an individual local effect will always in some way be contributing to the overall purpose of the text. Discussing both of these aspects often provides you with a more subtle and complete analysis.

STYLISTIC ANALYSIS

An analysis of style aims to 'break down' or 'deconstruct' a text in order to uncover its important individually-effective parts to work out how these form part of an effective whole. A successful stylistic analysis will aim to avoid stating the obvious and have as its focus only those more important and subtle language choices made by its writer or speaker. This kind of analysis will allow for a useful and subtle commentary to be made concerning the effects of the key stylistic choices, the methods used and the purposes intended.

Consider a news article for the quality broadsheet newspaper, 'The Times'.

- Its genre will have to some degree constrained its writer's choices of style because the genre convention require the use of, for example, headings, sub-headings, by-lines, photographs and short paragraphs (because the writing will appear in narrow columns); news writing also requires quick and brief answers to the so-called '5W+H' news reporters' questions (i.e. who, what, where, when, why and how). You will be able to think of other genre conventions that apply to journalistic texts, for sure.
- The context of the reader is important in newspaper writing as this genre is often read in less than ideal circumstances where concentration is difficult or not desired, for example, over breakfast, on a train, in a busy office.
- In this example, the audience will likely be in an upper income bracket and be well-educated and this will affect the choices of lexis, grammar and semantics.
- The purpose of the article is likely to be a combination of informing, persuading and entertaining.

Professional writers, such as journalists, often expend much effort over choices of style, checking and rechecking what they have written as they write. They know of course, the writer's number one secret – that one of the best ways to write effectively is to read back their writing – as it is written – not as its writer (who will tend to see what is meant to be there), but as its future intended reader (who tends to be far more discriminating and noticing of errors).

- Good writers become successful because they learn, metaphorically, to 'put on their reader's hat', imagining themselves in their reader's context; as they write, they read as a typical future reader would read. Poor writers think only of themselves; and often create self-indulgent texts of little value.

It might help to imagine a situation from your own life where an effective style is important. You need to convince your mother that you just must go on that o-h s-o-o c-o-o-l overseas school trip with your best friend. You will clearly need to select your style of language with care. Your purpose will be to create a style that will persuade a particular audience in a certain social context – your mother. Such a style will show close attention has been paid to:

- language choices (i.e. aspects of lexis and grammar – see part two of this guide for more on these);

- tone – which will help suggest the writer's attitude and mood (these are called the prosodic or 'suprasegmental' features of language and are those that are related to such aspects as rhythm, intonation, stress, pace, etc.).

- In speech, the body and facial 'language' used (these are called the paralinguistic features of communication).

    o There is an important – but subtle – aspect of meaning that would become quickly apparent if you were to analyse such a conversation. This is the way the social context (i.e. the place, time, relationships, etc.) of the communication acts to infer or suggest meaning beyond the literal content (i.e. the denotation) of the words chosen.

    o This inferred level of interpretation arises because the semantic value of certain words and phrases alters according to context. Some meanings will be influenced by who is doing the speaking as well as where, why and when they speak; meaning can also be affected by the relationships of the participants in the discourse, the shared knowledge each has of similar situations, the expectations of each participant, and so on. Language and the creation of meaning is a complex human function.

o This inferred level of meaning is properly referred to as pragmatic meaning. It is the 'extra' meaning that arises owing to the social force of the utterance rather than merely its semantic value – the literal sentence meaning. Pragmatics comes to the fore whenever people interact. Terms such as lexis, semantic value, pragmatics and others are all covered in depth in the second part of this guide.

Imagine this part of the above imaginary conversation:

You: But if you won't give me the money, m-u-u-u-m, I'll have to work extra hours to pay for it...'

The 'force' intended here (i.e. the pragmatic value) is along the lines of: I'll then not have so much time to do my schoolwork so, by refusing to pay for my trip to the US, you will be directly contributing to my poor school results – and ruining my future prospects... You can see how this subtle level of inference is entirely dependent upon the social context – and especially the social relationships – that exists at the time the conversation occurs.

- In this instance, the pragmatic value is produced by a use of irony contained within the utterance – a sense of there being a meaning in addition to and different from the literal: a meaning with an 'ironic edge'.

'DISCOURSE'

Now, think about this: if the above conversation with your mother was transcribed and used in an English Language lesson, it might well be analysed not simply for its semantic value, but probably much more profitably as an example of what could be called 'early 21st century, middle-class, parent-son/daughter social discourse'.

- Can you think why?

Can you also recognise that certain linguistic features of the discourse would suggest, not just the meanings being created, but also such subtle aspects of the discourse as:

- the relationship between the participants; the power differentials that exist between them; their linguistic competence... and much more.

- If you looked at such an example of similar discourse in class today, as you analysed and considered it carefully, certain of the words and phrases would seem to 'stand out' from the text more than others; it's worth thinking that they have a kind of 'linguistic glow' around them. It is these words and phrases, as well as aspects of the structure of the whole text that would reveal much rich detail in a textual or discourse analysis.

THE 'OVERVIEW' or 'BIG PICTURE'

An effective stylistic analysis essay is best begun by developing a succinct overview of the text under analysis, one that provides a succinct sense of the text's big picture. This provides a real sense that you have thought about the text as a whole (which is important):

- Before you can properly analyse the style of any text, you will need to have first gain a clear sense of its big picture. This means gaining a 'rounded appreciation' of it and its social circumstance, i.e. as an example of a particular type of discourse.

- An essay that opens with a succinct overview and provides an idea of the text's 'big picture' – focused, of course, through the requirements of the exam question – sets an authoritative tone from which a detailed analysis can follow.

- To summarise, this table is a reminder of the key elements that should form part of any and every successful stylistic analysis:

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