

writing about non-fiction texts

Non-fiction is writing based on reality rather than on its writer's imagination - which does not necessarily mean it will be the truth! Non-fiction writing includes biography, autobiography and travel writing; **media texts** are a category of non-fiction texts that are found in newspapers and magazines as well as in advertising, posters and leaflets.

WHAT WILL THE EXAMINER LOOK FOR?

While exam questions vary, the skills you need do not. You will be asked to show awareness of four aspects of a non-fiction or media text:

What the text is about...

- You will need to show an understanding of the text's **subject matter** and **content** and the ability to **locate and discuss aspects of specific details** within a text - which requires an understanding of the text's **big picture**.

Who it is intended for...

- this means being able to show how a text has been created to suit a particular kind of **reader** or **audience**.

How it 'works'...

- this means being able to identify the **methods** used to create the text (including aspects of its **genre**, **style** and **structure**) and to discuss the **effects** these methods create on the **audience** to help the text achieve its **purpose**.

Why it was written...

- this means recognising the **purpose(s)** (i.e. the **messages**) of the text.

WHAT ARE THE EXAM QUESTIONS LIKE?

There are four typical types of exam question you could come across (note that the examples below are not based on any particular text):

Questions that ask you to identify or locate details:

- ✓ What types of exercise are discussed in the newspaper article?
 - ✓ 'Identify five advantages and five disadvantages to exercising regularly mentioned in the newspaper article.'
 - ✓ 'List five facts and five opinions the writer includes in the newspaper article.'
- *In this type of question, you are being asked to **locate details** directly from the text and list them.*
 - *Normally one mark will be awarded for each correct point you make.*
 - *Unless made obvious within the question, **the answer does not need extra explanation or to be written in your own words.***

Questions that ask you to explain and summarise:

'What impressions does the article create concerning the need for exercise? '

'How does the writer defend the need for exercise? '

'What are the writer's attitudes towards exercise? '

- *In this type of question, you need to write a **considered personal response** and use **evidence from the text** to support what you say.*
- *This type of question requires a **mixture of your own words and quotations from the text**.*

Questions that ask you to discuss the writer's techniques:

'How does the writer try to persuade the reader that exercise is a good thing? '

'What impression of fitness does the writer create? '

'How is the article made convincing? '

- *In this kind of question, you would need to discuss, for example, the **persuasive techniques** used by the writer or the way something has been presented in the text.*
- *This means considering aspects of **language, style** and **structure**.*
- *This type of question tests your awareness of how language can be used for a specific audience and purpose.*
- *It requires a **considered, reflective** and **insightful response** using a mixture of your own words and quotations from the text.*

Questions that ask you to compare texts:

'Which of the two articles do you consider the most persuasive? '

'Which of the two texts do you find the more interesting and why? '

- *This type of question needs a **close discussion on the two articles**.*
- *You will need **to comment on aspects of audience, purpose, language and style**.*
- *As before, you are being tested on your awareness of how language can be used effectively for a specific audience and purpose.*
- *Again, this type of question expects a **considered, reflective** and **insightful** response **using your own words with support provided by quotations from the text**.*

WHAT'S NEEDED TO GAIN A HIGH GRADE

As with all texts, non-fiction and media text need the skills of **analysis** and **commentary**. In any text, its writer's aim is to create a **style** that will suit a particular kind of reader or **audience** to achieve a certain **purpose**.

The **style** created will utilise the two aspects language has: its **form** and its **content**. These two aspects will be working together to create certain **effects** on the reader, and, in turn (and accumulating through the **structure** of the text), these **effects**, the writer hopes, will achieve the text's **purpose**.

The purposes of non-fiction texts are various:

- **to entertain**
- **to inform**
- **to persuade**
- **to explain**

- **to advise**

... and very often, are a combination, particularly of information, persuasion and entertainment

WHAT TO LOOK FOR...

- **the big picture of the text.**
- **its genre conventions.**
- **its layout and presentation.**
- **its context.**
- **its structure - the way its story or detail unfolds.**
- **how facts are selected and used selectively.**
- **how opinions are used and made to seem authoritative, even factual.**
- **how persuasion or an argument is structured and developed.**
- **how persuasive and emotive language is used.**

So, from today, whenever you read any non-fiction or media text, practise your skills by...

1. Thinking about how its **genre conventions** and **form** act to 'condition' the way the reader responds to it.
2. Summarising its **subject matter, content, circumstance** and **story** of the text to gain a sense of its **big picture**.
3. Considering **who** the text was intended for and all that this implies.
 - **Audience** is a far more important consideration than most students appreciate.
 - Your aim should be to work out how the writer has chosen language and 'non-language devices' - often subtly - to create a **style** suited to a certain type of **reader** such that the text's **purpose** is achieved.

For example, a broadsheet newspaper article might seem rather boring to a fifteen-year-old student (especially if in the exam you comparing it with a leaflet aimed at a younger audience), but it certainly will not have been 'boring' to its intended **audience**: they expect it to be that way - it is a part of their **genre expectations**.

Imagine a jazzy-looking broadsheet article that broke all its existing **genre conventions**; would its reader still trust its content and feel it to be **authentic**? Would they even bother to read it? You can see how **genre, form** and **audience** are always important considerations for you to consider and comment upon.

- Try not to fall into the trap of judging an article aimed at a different kind of reader from yourself through teenage eyes; instead, try to 'become the text's reader' when you judge its style and appropriateness.

4. Finally, work out how the text has been **styled** to create certain **effects** on its **reader** and especially how these individual **effects** accumulate and work as a **structure**.

- Remember that **effects** have been created by the writer for a **purpose** - to **persuade** the reader towards a certain way of thinking (i.e. the writer's way!).
- Always try to identify and discuss a text's significant **effects**, comment on the **methods** used to create these effects and then identify the **purpose** intended.
- **Job done - high grade achieved!**

WHAT METHODS ARE USED...

Non-fiction writers can choose from a wide range of methods to create effects that will help them achieve their purpose.

Non-fiction writers use language effectively

- The use of the **personal pronoun** 'you' is called the **direct address pronoun**: it adds a personal touch and engages the reader, it sounds friendly, inviting and even confiding.
- When used as an **inclusive pronoun**, 'we' can make the reader seem to be a part of a special group of people; as an **exclusive pronoun** it can separate groups of people.
- The use of interesting, short **anecdotes** adds interest and engages the reader's attention.
- The use of **hyperbole** can create a persuasive impact.
- **Description** creates **imagery** that can be very engaging and involving, even **persuasive**. It can be made very vivid and used to create **mood** and **emotion**. Look for the use of effective **metaphors**, **similes** and **emotive language**.
- **Facts** and **opinions** are used to support a writer's point of view or argument but you must be able to separate worthwhile from biased facts and facts from factually stated opinions, always recognising how reasonable and effective they really are.
- **Rhetorical questions** imply their own answer engage and persuade the reader they help make a point in a more powerful and emotional way.
- **Repetition** and **lists of three** can be effective persuasive devices.
- **Personal viewpoint** or **direct address** (when I... / We... speaks to you...) can create a friendly **tone** and involve the reader.
- **Structure** allows an effective build up of a persuasive series of points.
- **Tone** - a formal tone can add authority and sound **authentic** or **sincere** a conversational tone can add warmth and fun - it can be very persuasive, too.
- **Quotations** and **evidence** from **expert sources** provide **support** and add **authority**.
- Sentence style can be varied to add interest - and a very short sentence can add real impact. Can't it?
- **Captions** add meaning and guide the reader to respond in a certain way to an **illustration** or a **photograph**.

Non-fiction writers use 'presentational devices'

- **Catchy titles** capture the reader's attention
- **Short paragraphs** and **sentences** are easier to follow and grasp.
- **Headlines**, **captions** and **subheadings** add impact and clarity.
- **White space** creates clarity and attractiveness.
- **Bulleted** or **numbered lists** aid clarity.
- **Layout** can be used to aid understanding and to make the piece more eye-catching.
- **Formatting**: bold, italic and underline can create impact and emphasis.
- **Type faces** - including handwriting style - add impact, trust and interest.
- **Colour** adds eye-appeal, impact and emphasis.
- **Spot colour** catches the eye.

Non-fiction writers use 'non-language devices'

- A **logo** can create a high level of trust in a product or service, e.g. McDonald's or Coke.
- **Illustrations** and **photographs** add interest, clarity and emotional impact.
- **Graphs** and **charts** ease understanding (but can be very selective in what they show).
- **Maps** may be helpful.
- **Cartoons** add **humour** and attract attention.