Non-Fiction and Media Texts

- **Non-fiction** texts are a part of everyday life. They are a **genre** of writing that is worth studying because such texts can be very influential, for instance by using highly persuasive techniques **that are carefully designed to appear like unbiased information**. Being able to recognise this **rhetoric** for what it is and to understand how such a text works on its audience is a genuinely useful life skill.

- Nonfiction includes biographical and autobiographical writing, travel writing, journalistic writing and reportage such as found in newspapers and magazines, letters, signs, menus, even cereal packets and much, much more. For school exams, you won't be studying cereal packets however! Unlike the imaginary worlds and characters of fiction, non-fiction texts are based on real people, real things and real events. **A key understanding is that this doesn't necessarily make them factual or true.**

- *While nonfiction is based on the real world and fiction is based on an imagined world, there are important overlaps **with each genre borrowing elements and techniques from the other.***

- *Fiction often borrows from nonfiction to help create a sense of realism and believability, for example by using real place names in which to set its stories; non-fiction borrows, most especially, the story form called* **narrative** *to create absorbing and interesting writing. For example a newspaper story might well separate people, just like a fictional story, into 'heroes' and 'villains' and create suspense and tension to make it more interesting to read.*

Media texts include writing such as newspaper and magazine articles. Such texts are mostly a subcategory of nonfiction but are treated separately in some exam syllabuses. An important aspect of media texts concerns the **audience** for which they are written which, because it is always a **mass audience**, will be composed of individuals completely unknown to the writer.

- *Media texts often include **images**. Remember that the exam is testing your abilities to analyse and discuss the use and effects of **language** so avoid prolonged discussion of images.*

In your exams you will be tested on your ability to analyse and discuss non-fiction or media texts. Usually you will also be asked to **compare** two different texts that share a similar **theme** but which have either a different **genre or form** or which approach their theme from different angles.

WHAT DOES THE EXAMINER LOOK FOR?

While exam questions vary, the skills you need *do not*. You will be asked to **analyse**, **consider** and **discuss** a non fiction or media text at four levels:

What is the text about
- its subject matter

- You need to show you have understood the text's **subject matter** and **content.**
- You will also need to be able to **locate details and discuss aspects of these** (this requires an understanding of the text's **big picture**).

Who has the text been written for
- its audience

- This is v-e-r-y important - you need to consider audience with care as it will help you recognise features of style that you can discuss in your answers.
- Writing about **audience** means recognising and showing **how** a text has been created to suit a particular kind of **reader**.
  - *When a writer is asked to write a text, one of the key questions asked is who the text is aimed at. With knowledge of the text's audience, only then will the writer be able to consider the most suitable **style** of writing to choose - its **content**, its **vocabulary choices** and its **tone**.*

How has the text been made to 'work'
- the writer's methods and their effects

- You need to be able to identify the **methods** a writer has used to create the text. This includes considering aspects of the text's **genre**, **style**, language and **structure**.
- You will also need to be able to discuss the **effects** of these methods on the **audience** - and, of course, the **purpose** behind these effects.
- It most especially means looking closely at the **language** and **layout** used in the text.
  - How is **language** being used - what **effects** are being created and for what **purpose**?
  - How is the **layout** helping the text achieve its **purpose** for its audience?

Why was the text written

- its writer's purpose

- This means recognising the **messages** contained within the text, both on the surface and - although this is not so important compared to literary texts - if there are different **layers of meaning**.

WHAT KIND OF EXAM QUESTIONS MIGHT YOU MEET?

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

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 specific named 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** - a numbered list would make a good answer.*

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**.*
- *Marks are awarded more for depth of answers than breadth - you need to show an understanding of **how language choices work**.*

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 to show how these work for a specific audience and purpose.*
- *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 YOU NEED TO DO 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**
- **to instruct**

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

HOW TO TACKLE NON-FICTION AND MEDIA TEXTS

- **It's important that you work out and mentally summarise the big picture of the text.**
- **Ask yourself how the text's layout and presentation help it in various ways.**
  - **The layout and presentation of a text is a part of its form. Form refers to the way a text looks (or sounds).**
  - **In many non-fiction texts, layout and presentation are always carefully chosen to aid the audience in following and understanding the text.**
- **Work out how the text's structure allows its detail and information to unfold - and often persuasive - in useful ways.**
- **How are facts being used? Are they presented in a way that is biased? Or is the information balanced? Are facts being chosen *selectively*?**
- **How are opinions presented? In persuasion, opinions are *never* balanced and are given a sense of authority and influence. Work out how this is being done.**
- **Look closely to see if the text sets out to create an emotional response, though the use of emotive language.**
- **For the highest grades, see if you can work out if the text's genre conventions create some kind of important response in the audience. Some genres can be quite powerful in this way. They act to create a mind-set or guide a response from their audience. The formal headlining and columns of influential newspapers such as The Guardian, The Daily Telegraph and The Times, for example, are instantly recognisable and suggest truthfulness and trust. Some formal business letters use layouts and letter headings that instantly seem authoritative and important. Leaflet genres vary - an information leaflet is easily recognised and instils trust whereas many sales or promotional leaflets ('flyers') have the opposite effect and end up quickly in the bin!**

REVISING

From today, look out for and read a selection of non-fiction and media texts to practise your close-reading skills by...

1. Thinking about how their **genre conventions** and **form** act to 'condition' the way you are responding to them.

2. Summarising their **subject matter**, **content**, **circumstance** and their **'story'** to gain a sense of the **'big picture'**.

3. Considering **who** the texts are intended for and all that this implies - their **target audience**.

- *Audience is a far more important consideration than most people appreciate.*
- *Your aim should be to work out how a writer chooses effective language and 'non-language devices' - often used subtly - to create a style that is suited to a certain type of reader so that purpose of the the text 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.

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Non-fiction writers use language effectively

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- They use language that **sounds convincing** - this is called **rhetorical language**.

- They use language that **affects your emotions** - this is called **emotive language**.

- The use of the **personal pronoun** 'you' is called the **direct address pronoun**: it can be used to add a personal touch and engages the reader; it sounds friendly, inviting and even confiding (e.g. 'Have faith in us; you just know it makes sense').

- When used as an **inclusive pronoun**, 'we' can make the reader seem to be a part of a special group of people (e.g. 'We're all in this together, aren't we?') ; as an **exclusive pronoun** it can separate groups of people (e.g. 'We're working for a better world. Will you help?').

- The use of interesting, short **anecdotes** adds interest and engages the reader's attention (e.g. 'Let me tell you about John, a poor beggar in Ethiopia...')..

- The use of **hyperbole** can create a persuasive impact (e.g. 'This earth-shattering event will blow your mind away!').

- **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** (e.g. 'Like a sliver of shiny steel, the white crescent moon cut a gash in the heavens'). 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 the evidence really is.

- **Rhetorical questions** imply their own answer engage and help to 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**; an **informal**, or even **conversational** tone can add warmth and fun - it can be very persuasive, too.

- **Quotations** and **evidence** from **expert sources** are used to provide **support** and create added **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**.

- **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.

- 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.

EXTRA! EXTRA! READ ALL ABOUT IT!

Analysing a Magazine or Newspaper Advertisement

Magazine and newspaper advertisements are one kind of media text that deserve a few extra words, even though all that is said on the rest of this web page is valid.

These days, only a very few ads exist purely to give information; those that do are perhaps ads for a product recall owing to a fault or such like. Most advertisements are produced to try to **sell a product** or to **create an emotional response to a brand name** ("Are you a Nike person...?"). Yet only a few do this in an obvious way.

- *Advertising agencies and their copywriters know that modern audiences are very sophisticated and aware of modern media methods.*

SO JUST HOW DO ADS WORK?

There was a time when advertisements were more informative - they informed the public about a product being available, at what price and where. Those days have long gone. Now ads work at a more subtle level of association. **The ad works by trying to create an emotional link between a consumer product and an attractive lifestyle**. It does this in such a way that members of the target audience are made to feel that if they purchase the product, they will 'buy a way into' an attractive lifestyle.

'CUEING'

Ads are short and have a lot of work to do if they are to succeed to be persuasive. If they achieve success, it is because they rely on a process called **cueing**. The **cue** is usually an image or some language that triggers a pleasant memory, most often of a desired lifestyle.

MESSAGE AND CODE

Ads can be broken down into two parts: a **message** and a **code**. The **message** is simply the offer of a product (or service). The point about the message is that *it can be rejected* - you don't have to buy the product! So how does an advertiser make it more difficult to reject the message? By associating the message of the product with a **code.** The code within an ad is far more subtle and persuasive. **The code is the highly persuasive 'cued' idea that triggers thoughts of a desirable lifestyle -** one that buying the product or service will provide.

- *Codes operate through the creation of fear.*
- *It might be fear of being old, fear of not being 'cool' , fear of being odd or different, or of being an outsider.*
- *It is this emotional lifestyle code that is so difficult to reject.*
- *The success of the ad depends on how well its creator manages to associate the product's message with the emotionally encoded lifestyle.*

You might be able to see that codes operate because they are culturally and ideologically determined. What does this mean? Well, we all share particular ideas called **dominant ideologies** in our culture or society about what we would most like to be - **or, more accurately fear not being;** and we have come to believe in our consumer society that a product might help us achieve this more easily. Advertising codes operate insidiously

by reminding us of what we absolutely don't want to be: odd, different, 'uncool'. This is the power of the **code**.

Always remember that ads are rarely intended to work alone; an ad is usually a part of a larger 'advertising campaign' using a mixture of different media forms such as TV, radio, posters and magazine ads.

- **Each part of the campaign will be coherent and unified: all working together towards a single aim of convincing the potential customer that the product (or service) offered can help achieve a certain attractive lifestyle.**