

### Style

When we choose **language** and **language features** to suit a particular **audience** and **purpose** we create a text – whether it be spoken or written – that has a certain **style**. Analysing features of the style of texts is at the heart of your course.

We tend to be proud of our right to freedom of speech but, at least at a linguistic level, none of us is as free as might be thought. This is an important recognition because it forces you as a student of language to consider several important aspects that act to constrain speakers or writers in various – sometimes important - ways. Some of the more obvious constraints apply because of age, ability, level of education and experience of the speaker or writer, for example - aspects that are to do with the individual qualities of the speaker or writer. There are, though, other important constraining aspects that are not related to the individual. These need careful consideration on an A-level course such as the one you are following. Two that are important to you are **genre** and **context**. Texts of a particular genre, or created *within* or *for* a particular context will share certain stylistic qualities with other similarly created texts.

**Genre** refers at the simplest level to the *kind* or *type* of text; however, at an analytical level, genre allows you to consider how certain **genre conventions** have been followed both consciously and sub-consciously and how these affect, in various – often subtle – ways, the interpretation of the text. Any text from a certain genre or sub-genre (e.g. recipes, computer instructions) will follow certain conventions concerning, for example, its form, content and style. As listeners or readers of such **generic texts**, we carry with us a set of learned but sub-conscious ‘genre expectations’ that allow us to identify quickly what kind of text we are being exposed to. For example, look at the two unreadable texts below, which genres are they from? Can you think how – even though no content is discernible from either – genre itself, to some degree, acts to shape your approach, expectations and even interpretation of such texts?

**She Walks in Beauty**  
 She walks in beauty like the night  
 Of cloudless clime and starry sky;  
 And all that's best of dark and bright  
 Sheds on her soul and forms her eyes.  
 Their outlines like that of the night  
 Which shows in black the starry sky.  
 Her shades the clouds, nor yet the sun,  
 Had best of beauty of the evening gown;  
 Her hair, like waves, like golden lines  
 Or curly ringlets, or her hair,  
 Where thoughts are seen, sweet organs  
 Her eyes, like stars, like stars, like stars,  
 And so that dark and light that have  
 No dark, no light, no light,  
 The moon that rises, the stars that give,  
 Her hair like waves, like golden lines,  
 A crowd of jewels, like all her hair,  
 A crowd of jewels, like all her hair,  
 A crowd of jewels, like all her hair,  
 George Gordon, Lord Byron



Another important influence on style concerns the **context** within which a text is created and will be interpreted. Both genre and context need to be considered carefully when analysing and commenting on a writer or speaker's choices of style.

An analysis of style aims to ‘break down’ or ‘deconstruct’ a text to uncover its important individually effective parts and work out how these form a **structure** that develops into an effective whole. Stylistic analysis looks at the effective language choices made by a writer or speaker (i.e. choices of form, language and structure) to enable a close commentary to be made on the *effect* of these individual choices and the *purpose* intended.

Consider a news article for the quality newspaper, ‘The Times’:

- Its **genre** constrains its writer's choices of style because it insists on the use of, for example, headings, sub-headings, by-lines, photographs, short paragraphs (because the writing will appear in narrow columns); news writing also requires quick and brief answers to the so-called ‘5W+H’ questions of news reporting (who, what, where, when, why and how). You can surely think of more genre conventions for yourself.
- 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 well educated.
- The **purpose** will be to inform or persuade – aspects that require the use of particular stylistic elements.

Professional writers, such as journalists, often agonise over features of style, checking and rechecking what they have written **as they write**. They know of course, **the writer's number one secret** – that the only way to write effectively is to read their writing **not as its writer** (who will always see what they think is there), but **as its future intended reader** (who is always far more discriminating and who will notice even the smallest error).

- 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 future reader would**.
- Poor writers think only of themselves – and create self-indulgent texts of little real value!

Now, imagine the following situation where an effective style is clearly very important: you need to convince your mother that you just *have* to go on that o-h s-o-o c-o-o-l US trip with your best friend. You will clearly be carefully selecting your **style** of language. 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**, **semantics** and **grammar** – see later for more on these);
- Tone – as this will help suggest *attitude* and *mood* (i.e. the **prosodic** or ‘**suprasegmental**’ features of language, i.e. those related to rhythm, intonation, stress, pace, etc.);
- Body and facial ‘language’ used (i.e. what are called the **paralinguistic features** of communication).
  - *There is also an important but much more subtle aspect of meaning that would become quickly apparent if you were to analyse such a conversation. This is the way the **social context** (place, time, relationships, etc.) in which the communication occurred acts to infer or suggest meaning beyond the literal content (i.e. the **denotation**) of the words chosen.*
  - *This secondary aspect of meaning and interpretation arises because the semantic value of certain words and phrases alters according to the context in which it is being used. Some meanings will be influenced because of who is speaking, where, why and when, also owing to the relationships involved, the shared knowledge each knows of similar situations, the expectations of each participant, and so on. How complex language can be!*
  - *This inferred level of meaning is called the **pragmatic level of meaning** – it can be thought of as **the force of an utterance** rather than its **sentence meaning**. Pragmatics comes to the fore whenever people are involved with using language.*

Imagine this part of the above imaginary conversation:

**You:** But if you won’t give me the money, mum, I’ll be forced to work extra hours to pay for it...’

The **pragmatic inference** intended here 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** that exists at the time the conversation occurs.

- *In this instance, the pragmatic meanings are being created by a relatively subtle use of **irony** contained within the utterance.*

## DISCOURSE

Now, think about this: if this conversation with mum was **transcribed** and used in an English Language lesson, it might well be analysed *not simply for its lexis or semantics*, etc. but probably much more profitably as *an example of ‘early 21<sup>st</sup> century, middle-class, parent-son/daughter social discourse’*.

- *Can you explain why? Try to work out what the term **discourse** means. (It is explained more fully below).*
- *Many people confuse **discourse** with ‘**discourse structure**’ – the latter is merely one aspect of discourse.*

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 probably much more?
- *If you looked at such an example of similar discourse in class today, as you analysed and considered it, certain words and phrases would probably seem to ‘stand out’ from the text – as if they had some sort of ‘linguistic glow’ to them. It would be these words and phrases, as well as aspects of the **structure** of the whole text that would reveal all of this rich detail.*

## STYLISTIC ANALYSIS

A stylistic analysis seeks to uncover the *effective* choices of **language elements** and **language features** a writer makes to create a text. Any such analysis will have to consider aspects of **audience**, **purpose**, **genre** and **context**; but to this must be added two further considerations that form an important part of any discussion on a text:

- the **effects** it creates
- the **methods** used to create these.

An effective stylistic analysis essay is best begun with an **overview** that provides a succinct sense of the text’s **big picture**. This gives your examiner a real sense that your analysis will be soundly based on the whole text:

- *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 as an example of some kind of **social discourse**.*

- An exam answer that opens with a succinct overview of this 'big picture' – focused, of course, through the requirements of the exam question – sets a natural, confident and impressive tone from which a detailed analysis can follow – and seem to follow quite naturally. It also provides you with a confident opening to your essay.
- A successful overview provides a 'springboard' for a more detailed analysis and commentary to follow.
- To summarise, this table shows those elements that should form part of any and every successful stylistic analysis:

<b>GENRE</b>	<b>CONTEXT</b>	<b>AUDIENCE</b>
<b>EFFECTS</b>	<b>METHODS</b>	<b>PURPOSE</b>

## GENRE

Genre means 'kind' or 'type'. We can easily recognise genre texts because their style reminds us of **aspects they share with other texts from the same genre**. These shared aspects are called **genre conventions**. Any analysis of style, therefore, will require some consideration of the text's genre conventions. *But genre influences not just the style of a text – it also influences and even shapes our approach to it and interpretation of it.*

- Theorists such as Louis Althusser suggest that the **genre** of a text is one aspect that acts to '**position**' or '**construct**' us as readers or listeners in important ways – that is, **genre acts to persuade us to adopt certain ways of thinking about a text**.
- For example, the genre of a news article, perhaps quite reasonably, creates a powerful sense of **authenticity, trustworthiness** and even **authority**; but somewhat surprisingly, so does the genre of a lifestyle magazine; indeed, the general conventions of publishing itself acts to create similar effects whatever the content of the publication. Somehow we have come to trust the printed word more highly than the hand-written word..
- Genre can build expectations that are very influential – because genre conventions seem so entirely normal, even natural, we cannot easily shake of the 'genre mind set' they create. Genre can create a powerful set of judgments about a text – it can create authority, for example, perhaps dangerously so.

## CONTEXT

This word derives from an ancient Latin word meaning 'to weave together' and, you can see that certain aspects of a writer or speaker's context will 'weave' themselves into the style of their texts; similarly, certain aspects of a reader or listener's context will 'weave' themselves into their interpretation of a text. An easy way to visualise this is to consider a letter written by a soldier from the World War One trenches to his sweetheart back home: both the language used by the writer and the interpretation of it by the reader will be strongly affected by their individual – and very different – contexts. It is not too hard to carry this analogy across to any other situation and recognise how context very often will 'insert' itself into a texts and the interpretation of that text.

- An analysis of the style of a text must take context into consideration – **both** the context of its creation and the context of its interpretation.

## AUDIENCE

Audience means the particular kind of reader or listener for which a text is intended (i.e. its **target audience**). An easy but dangerous pitfall is to fail to see that texts you are asked to analyse are unlikely to be aimed at *you* as their target audience. Always 'put on the audience's cap' when you judge a text in any way or you will find yourself making poor judgments of it.

## METHOD

Labelling a writer or speaker's methods is an important aspect of A-level exam technique. In conversation, for example, you need to identify and label such features as 'adjacency pairs', in persuasive or descriptive writing, the use of figurative language such as metaphor is often important and so on.

## EFFECTS

When we use language, we create effects on our audience. Important effects of language can be to engage, to surprise, to attract, to be pleasurable, to create trust, and so on.

## PURPOSE

When we use language we have a purpose in mind for our audience.

- Don't fall into the trap of being overly simplistic regarding purpose. A newspaper article's role might well be to inform, but many so-called 'informative' articles are really persuasive.
- Beware: in spoken texts there is rarely a single purpose.
- There are often two levels of 'purpose': a particular use of language **at a certain point** in a text will have a **specific purpose at that point**; but texts are normally **coherent** and **unified** things, so an individual local effect will also be contributing in some small way to the overall purpose of the text.