

## SECTION

## 1

## Basic requirements of the Critical Reading component

For this part of the course you will be required to answer usually three or four questions in the exam based on your close and critical reading of one or more unseen short texts. You will have 1½ hours to do this.

These texts could include newspaper and magazine articles, advertisements, web pages, short stories, poetry, travel writing, play scripts, cartoons and obituaries. So, expect the unexpected!

In the exam there will be questions that test your knowledge of **what** the author is saying. This is straightforward comprehension and most students have little trouble with this.

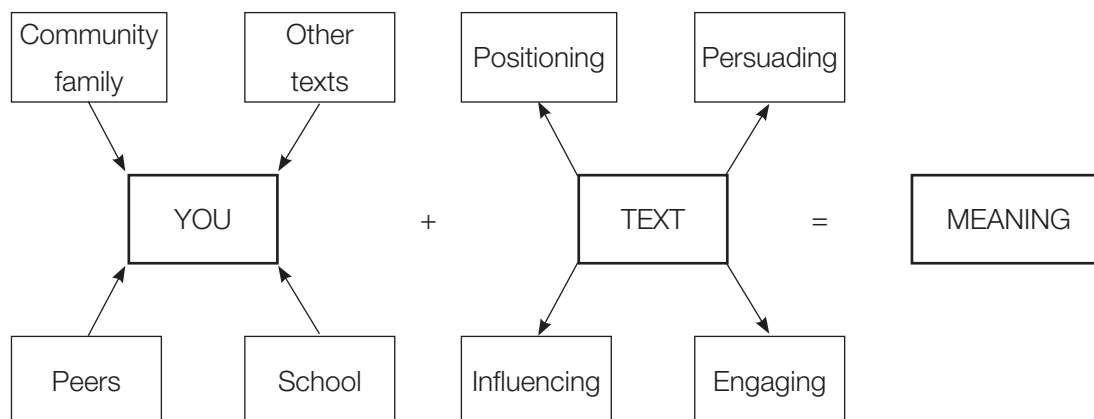
However, you will also be asked questions that relate to **context**. This means that you will need to consider **how** the texts function, by examining the way they are put together and the effect this has on the reader. This is the focus of this booklet.

Understanding the 'how' as opposed to 'what' can be very difficult.

- It involves explaining the way authors use language and visual elements to direct your understanding of the content of the text towards their point of view or perspective of the world.
- It involves recognising how your own assumptions, beliefs and experiences as a reader and member of a particular culture influence your understanding of the text.

This can be represented by the following diagram.

### Society



In short, you must step back and analyse the whole process of reading a particular text at a particular time. This is what is meant by context.

**Students who can write effectively about this process are rewarded by the examiners.**

**Examiners always say that this is what separates the good students from the ordinary students.**

But before you can begin to analyse context you need to know what you are up against. You need to know the nature of the beast.

## IMPORTANT

While you might be tempted to bypass the hard work of writing answers for the exercises in this book, be aware that you are passing up a good opportunity to prepare yourself for the exam.

The exam at the end of the year ultimately assesses your ability to write.

Time spent practising how to write is essential preparation for the English Literary Studies exam.

## SECTION

## 2

## The nature of the beast

Imagine that you are studying to be a vet. You have attended all the lectures and read all the books, but the first day that you go out on the job to help deliver a calf you get kicked by the frightened cow because you weren't paying attention.

Doing the Critical Reading section in the exam at the end of the year is a bit like this. You must be prepared (for example, knowing the main techniques that writers use), but every text has its own temperament. Be wary of this and give each text close attention, otherwise you might be thrown off guard.

Therefore, we're going to begin by encountering the beast face to face. If I showed you a snake and asked you to study it, you would be very focused. **Hands-on experience is the best teacher.** This is your first and most important lesson.

The more beasts you encounter, the more confident you will feel and the more prepared you will be for the exam. You want to approach the exam with the same amount of confidence as Bear Grylls has approaching the beasts he encounters.



## SECTION

## 3

## Confronting the beast

Let's begin with a little beast written by the travel writer, Tony Horwitz. Read it through and try to figure what it is on about, or what point it is making. In other words, what is the nature of the beast?

For several thousand miles, I've been struggling for un-superlatives to communicate the un-ness of outback scenery. The towns and people are easy enough; they have faces, buildings, features. But what can you say about a landscape that is utterly featureless? A landscape whose most distinguishing quality is that it has no distinguishing qualities whatsoever? Flat, bare, dry. Bleak, empty, arid. Barren, wretched, bleached. You can reshuffle the adjectives but the total is still the sum of its parts. And the total is zero. Zot. Nought. Ayers Rock has a lot of blank space to answer for.

To the early explorers, this arid region north of Adelaide was simply Australia's 'Ghastly Blank'. Charles Sturt set off into the desert east of here in 1844 to find the inland sea, and so sure was he of success that his party included two sailors and a boat (as well as eleven horses, two hundred sheep, thirty bullocks and four drays). 'I shall envy that man who shall first place the flag of our native country in the centre of our adopted land,' he declared. But after staggering for some months through the desert, Sturt reached neither sea nor centre – just the dry expanse of Lake Torrens. 'The desolate barrenness, the dreary monotony, the denuded aspect of this spot is beyond description,' he wrote in his journal, having described it rather well. Daniel Brock, a member of Sturt's party added, 'This scene is the climax of Desolation...Miserable! Horrible! Not long after, Sturt launched his boat on the Darling River and then retreated to Adelaide.

Looking out the back of the ute I am amazed that Sturt made it as far as he did. Desert to the right of me, desert to the left of me, a plume of car dust shooting down the middle, I claim this spot as the landing pad for the alien probe I imagined my first day in Australia. The alien probe that drops down, declares 'No life', and heads back to outer space. The probe people could sniff around here for a few hundred miles in every direction and come to the same conclusion. No life. No bloody way.

## Appeal to reason

Horwitz is trying to convince us that the outback is not a desirable tourist destination. He does this mainly through argument. With the **evidence** he provides, he tries to persuade us to accept his point of view.

What evidence does he provide? List examples here.

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Did you notice first-hand observation and the quotations from famous explorers?

He also poses a **question**, which engages the reader. Find it and recall your response.

When asked a question it is polite to answer, even though in this case the question does not need one because it is self-evident. We call this a **rhetorical question**.

Finally, Horwitz uses **repetition** to emphasise the monotony of the landscape.

Where are the examples of repetition? Write some here.

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Did you notice the repetition of the sentence structures ('Flat, bare, dry. Bleak, empty, arid. Barren, wretched, bleached') and phrase structures ('Desert to the right of me, desert to the left of me')?

Providing evidence, posing questions and strategically repeating key words and phrases are the principal devices of presenting a logical argument to the reader.

**Note:** If writers can mount a logical argument, it is hard to dispute what they say. Logic seems to stand alone, outside of language. This is because of a basic reasoning: if the universe seems to obey the logic of the laws of physics, by association, it follows that logic is universal. We forget, though, that we need to use language to construct our logic.

## How does appeal to reason persuade the reader?

**Evidence:** When writers provide evidence (facts, statistics, examples and quotations), their arguments seem more authoritative, especially when these support what the writers say (as is the case with Horwitz). We are reassured that writers have done the necessary research, which makes us more willing to accept their point of view.

**Questions** provoke a response in readers and stimulate their thinking. There are two main types of questions: reflective/investigative questions and rhetorical questions.

- **Reflective/investigative questions** are designed to stimulate the reader's thinking on the topic without necessarily expecting the reader to know the answer, e.g. Why and how and when did human beings start using those sounds which we call human language?
- **Rhetorical questions** do not require finding an answer because the answer is self-evident. When your parents say to you, 'How many times do I have to tell you to clean up your room?' they are not anticipating that you will answer them with a number. Writers use rhetorical questions for effect, as a means of summing up or emphasising their point. If they pose a question that suggests only one answer in the reader's mind then they have clinched their argument, e.g. But what can you say about a landscape that is utterly featureless?

**Repetition** can be an important strategy in summarising or reinforcing key points or ideas. The constant return to a phrase, statistic or fact makes any argument sound strong and firm, giving the impression that it is permanent or universal and, therefore, worthy of acceptance.

**Balance:** Finally, many writers include opposing arguments, which they set about discrediting. Not only does this make their argument look stronger, but it also makes writers appear reasonable, which persuades the reader to accept their point of view. This is called **balanced argument** and will be discussed in more detail below.

## Appeal to emotions

Horwitz mainly appeals to our sense of reason, but he also appeals to our emotions. Quite apart from what he says, you might have been struck by the **tone** of his 'voice'. He sounds flabbergasted and resorts to being flippant and mischievous as a way of coming to terms with what he witnessed.

In oral language, tone is mainly conveyed through voice inflection, which reflects the feeling of the speaker. However, in written language, this tone must be conveyed mainly through word choice. Either way, tone of voice can have an emotional effect on the reader (just as you might get upset when someone speaks to you in a sarcastic manner).

While tone results from the cumulative effect of word choice, certain words, phrases and sentences have the power to stir emotions when they suggest a vivid picture in the readers' mind. This is called **imagery**. You may have noticed that Horwitz uses imagery to enlist support for his point of view when he skilfully reconstructs the stark image of the outback that he witnessed ('flat', 'arid' and 'barren'). This, no doubt, would amaze the reader as much as it did Horwitz. Moreover, the starkness of the outback that Horwitz observes is reinforced by the humorous reference to the alien probe, which triggers associations with the barren landscape beamed back from planets such as Mars.

While Horwitz does not like what he sees, he dismisses the landscape in a light-hearted way, as I have indicated. This is signalled in the opening sentence where he begins his description with a negative: 'I've been struggling for un-superlatives to communicate the un-ness of the outback.' Starting with a non-description is **unexpected** and no doubt would amuse some readers.

He then uses **exaggeration** to enhance the light-hearted tone of this extract. He 'reshuffles' adjectives such as 'bare', 'empty' and 'barren' repetitively to emphasise the impression the landscape made on him. Moreover, to suggest that aliens would be scared away by the outback ('No bloody way') is somewhat **incongruous** (ridiculous) and prompts humour.

The unexpected ('un-superlatives'), exaggeration (in the adjectives) and the incongruous (something ridiculous or silly) are all aspects of **humour**. While there are no belly laughs, the reader is at least amused, which is an emotional response.

### How does an appeal to the emotions persuade the reader?

One of the best ways to get readers on side is to provoke some sort of physical or emotional response. When readers are moved in some way by the text – crying, laughing, empathy – they feel more personally involved with the subject material. The more personally involved readers become, the more attentive they are. Readers, therefore, are more likely to respond favourably to the writer's point of view.

**Tone** is a word used to describe how a text 'sounds' and results mainly from the sum effect of word choice (**vocabulary**) in the written component of texts. Punctuation and sentence structure, however, also contribute to the tone of texts (for example, lots of dashes or full stops can suggest abruptness). In the visual components of texts, the choice of colour, pictures and graphics all contribute to the overall tone (refer to section on visual elements).

Readers will often respond emotionally to the tone of a text. We can say that the tone creates a **mood** within readers, which influences how they will relate to the content.

Some **words that describe tone** include:

**confident, authoritative, aggressive, angry, contemptuous, serious, controlled, reasonable, indifferent, cold, passionate, critical, sad, depressive, regretful, humorous, comical, ironic and sarcastic.**

Supplement this or compile your own list.

**Imagery** often functions to provoke an emotional response in the reader, especially when it is vivid. A skilful writer can stimulate our senses so that we can almost touch, see, hear, taste and smell what is being described. With our attention captivated, we become less guarded and more open to accept the writer's point of view.

**Humour** is entertaining and evokes a positive response in the reader. It also produces consensus or general agreement. If everyone laughs together, they are all thinking the same thing. Humour relies mainly on **exaggeration**, the **unexpected** and the **incongruous**.

Additionally, writers may provide readers with some sort of concrete example (**analogy**) to demonstrate the point they are making. This often provokes emotional responses in the readers, which assists them in understanding the abstract ideas the writer presents. My analogy of the veterinary student could provoke apprehension, which might make my readers more attentive to the point I am making. Analogy is discussed in more detail further on.

## SECTION

## 4

## A slightly bigger beast

Read the 'Rights for the mites' article (on the following page), written by Catharine Lumby.

### Analogy

Writers will often provide an **analogy**, a moving **anecdote** (brief story) or **emotive example**, to reach the reader's feelings and help them understand, or identify with, what they are saying. A similarity is established between something recognisable, the analogy, and the abstract ideas or concepts the writer is trying to put across, making them more accessible.

If readers can relate to the concrete, then, chances are they can relate to the abstract. The analogy often proves to be more memorable or effective than the ideas, concepts or arguments that the writer presents.

Lumby does this at the beginning of her text. She arrests our attention with the 'unthinkable' scenario of a husband physically abusing his wife because she does not respond to his commands. While this might provoke humour, because it is so incongruous (ridiculous), it could also provoke horror and disgust in the reader who cares to imagine it in detail.

Once Lumby has aroused these emotions, they linger on as the reader finishes the article. They are ready to draw upon to enlist the reader's sympathy for the subject of her text: children in our society.

This sympathy is also reinforced through her choice of words. (Note as you are reading how the 'humour' and the choice of words contribute to the overall confrontational tone of her article.)

