

Features of Style

Transition Year

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Discursive Writing

Note: Rather than say "he or she" the whole way through the notes, I will say "he" when referring to the writer.

- The writer presents a viewpoint and tries to win the reader over to his or her opinion. This can be done by appealing to the reader's logic and/or the reader's emotion. If the writer wishes to appeal to the reader's logic, he does not use emotionally charged language. Instead, the tone is quite calm and reasonable. The evidence is presented and the reader is encouraged to make up his or her own mind.

Both argument (appealing to the person's logic) and persuasion (appealing to the reader's emotion) share many features, but for the purposes of these notes, I have divided them into two sections. Be aware that, while you may use features of the language of argument when writing a persuasive piece, you should not do the reverse. Persuasive writing is often used in advertising, political speeches and tabloid newspaper or articles.

ARGUMENT

- **Analogy** is a useful tool here, (a comparison between two things which are otherwise dissimilar).
- **Rhetorical questions** (questions to which an answer is not expected or an argument phrased in the form of a question to which there is only one possible answer) are commonly used to engage the reader and to try to make him or her believe that there is a conversation taking place between the writer and the reader. Using rhetorical questions cleverly avoids giving the reader the impression that he or she is on the receiving end of a lecture. If people feel they are being lectured to, they may decide that the writer is arrogant, and the writer may lose their support. "Why should we allow our parents to rule every aspect of our lives?" (Answer expected – we shouldn't.)

- **Facts and figures are given**, but they are carefully chosen to support the point the writer is making. Using statistics can make the writer's case seem well-researched and therefore more credible.

- **Acknowledging that there are other viewpoints can be helpful**, if it is done correctly. The writer may anticipate and briefly respond to the reader's possible objections to the argument, but he does not weaken his case by giving both sides of the argument equal weight. This can be an effective technique, as it makes the writer appear rational and fair-minded. It implies the the writer has approached this argument in a balanced way.

"What about all the important breakthroughs, as a result of animal research, that have aided human health? The animal research industry cites many examples of treatments or cures for illness that have been found using animals. They claim that if animal research is discontinued, it will be at the expense of human health and life. Industry groups, such as Americans for Medical Progress credit animal research with advances such as the development of the polio vaccine, anaesthesia, and the discovery of insulin. But a close examination of medical history clearly disputes these claims."

The writer of this piece went on to argue strongly against animal testing, giving statistics and quotes to support his point.

- **Quotations** can give the impression that the writer is just one of many people who feels this way. Quoting can prove that the writer's opinion is shared by independent, learned individuals. A quote can be a good way to begin or end a piece of discursive writing.

- **The word 'We'** is often used instead of 'I' to draw the reader in and make him or her feel on the same side as the writer.

- **'Persuader'** words and phrases can be used to good effect:
 - *Clearly*
 - *Plainly*
 - *Surely*

- *Undoubtedly*
- *Obviously*
- *As we all know...*
- *Everybody is fully aware that...*

These words and phrases make the reader feel that they, and everybody else, has always agreed with the statement being made. The information now takes on the appearance of being an well-known, established fact. The reader feels that if he or she does not agree with the statement, then he or she is in a minority.

- **Distancing phrases** can be used to make the writing seem more formal and less personal. "There are those who claim that..." "It is often said that..."
- **Repetition** can add emphasis.
- **Antithesis** can be an elegant way to contrast ideas using parallel arrangements of words or phrases. It might sound complicated, but all it means is using the same words in a slightly different order to create a completely contrasting idea. Look at this example from John F. Kennedy's inaugural speech: "Let us never negotiate out of fear, but let us never fear to negotiate." Or think of Benjamin Franklin's "By failing to prepare, you are preparing to fail." And, of course, there is the famous, "Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country." Such sentences are memorable, which is exactly what you want when you are trying to win someone over to your point of view.

PERSUASION

- **Manipulation** can be a major part of the language of persuasion. It often plays on the reader's conscience, making him or her feel guilty or pressurised into agreeing with the case being made. It can also flatter the reader into agreeing and it is a common technique in advertising, "As a discerning customer, we know you want nothing but the best."

- **Strong, emotive** language can be used to win the reader over.

"Animal experimentation involves the incarceration of animals - which itself causes intense psychological distress - who are then poisoned, mutilated, given diseases and killed. It is arguably the most severe form of systematic violence in the modern world. Other terms for animal experimentation include 'vivisection', 'animal testing', and 'animal research'."

- **Adjectives and adverbs** are used freely and they are often quite extreme, clearly showing the writer's opinion of the topic under discussion. "This vile, despicable act has sickened all right-thinking people."

- **Facts and figures may be given but they may be vague or exaggerated:** "The vast majority of people", "Almost every student in the country", etc. This can aid the manipulative effect of persuasive writing as the implication is often there that if you don't agree, you are going against popular opinion and you don't fit in. Obviously, this is very useful in advertising. Generalisations are used without the support of a source – watch out for "All" or "Every".

- **Personal opinion and anecdotes** are often used to support the point being made. If the tone of the writing is informal, this is appropriate.

Descriptive Writing

While it is more usually associated with fiction, descriptive language can be used in non-fiction also. Good examples of descriptive language may be found in books and magazines on travel or nature.

- **The language can be musically pleasing**, as in a poem. This is achieved by the use of assonance, alliteration and onomatopoeia.
- **Personification** (giving human qualities to inanimate objects) can be used to add dramatic effect.

"The operation is over. On the table, the knife lies spent, on its side, the bloody meal smear-dried upon its flanks. The knife rests."

Richard Selzer: *The Knife*

- Descriptive writing **appeals to the senses**. If a reader can imagine the sights and sounds, then he or she will be engaged by the writing.
- Think of the terminology you learnt for your poetry section. **Metaphors and similes** are used to good effect in descriptive writing.
- Events and places are **described in detail**.
- **Adjectives and adverbs** are used to make the writing more vivid.
- The writer may **repeat words or phrases**, to add emphasis.
- **Personification** (giving human qualities to inanimate objects) can make the writing more interesting and can add drama. "Flowers danced on the lawn." "The wind howled angrily around me and tugged at my clothes."

The following example of aesthetic language is from James Joyce's 'The Dead'.

A few light taps upon the pane made him turn to the window. It had begun to snow again. He watched sleepily the flakes, silver and dark, falling obliquely against the lamplight. The time had come for him to set out on his journey westward. Yes, the newspapers were right: snow was general all over Ireland. It was falling on every part of the dark central plain, on the treeless hills, falling softly upon the Bog of Allen and, farther westward, softly falling into the dark mutinous Shannon waves. It was falling, too, upon every part of the lonely churchyard on the hill where Michael Furey lay buried. It lay thickly drifted on the crooked crosses and headstones, on the spears of the little gate, on the barren thorns. His soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead.



Writing to Inform

- The information should generally be given in as straightforward a way as possible. Occasionally, when a writer wants to present information, he will do it in a narrative style, to hold the reader's interest. This can be an effective technique, but would not be appropriate for an instruction manual, for example.
- You may be familiar with David Attenborough's series of nature programmes on the television. He has also written a number of books, and although they are informative, they are written in an engaging style. Look at this example, in which he talks about an animal that few of us might find attractive initially: the hairless mole-rat. In this extract from his book "The Trials of Life" he explains the jobs done by the various members of the mole-rat community.

"A few of these workers, as they get older, graduate to the next more senior group. They are slightly bigger and work only half as hard, spending most of their time lounging in the central nest chamber.

A third group is bigger still, and even more idle. They do very little indeed for most of the time except slumber in the nest chamber. But they do have one particular duty. They are the colony's soldiers. Although the workers block off the exits except when soil is being thrown out, sometimes a snake does manage to slither into the tunnels. The workers squeak in fear and scuttle down to the nest chamber to take refuge. The soldiers, however, rush to meet the enemy and attack it fearlessly, biting it so severely with their pincer teeth that they are quite capable of killing it."

If we look at the verbs used in this piece of writing, we can see that David Attenborough brings the animals to life for us. He says that they lounge around in the nest chamber, giving us a clear picture of the mole-rats lying about, relaxing. The adjectives, such as "idle" add to this impression. By using such vivid language, the writer succeeds in interesting us in a topic that could otherwise have been a little dull.

- Writing for the purposes of a report or an instruction manual should not be written in the style shown above, however. It should be clear, with facts and figures and no vague descriptions. Adjectives and adverbs are used with care as they can make the writing subjective. While it is fine to state the colour of something, for example, there should be no adjectives such as "awful" or "horrible"..

- Informative writing of this type is not long winded; the facts are presented without embellishment.
- Events are given in chronological order
- This type of writing is as objective as possible.
- Personal opinions and anecdotes are not included.
- It is difficult to make a piece written solely in the language of information really gripping, particularly if the subject matter is one in which your reader has very little interest. Remember this if you choose to write an informative piece about your favourite sport, for example. Don't assume that the hobby you enjoy will be equally riveting to others.
- The language of information is used in objective media reports, memos, summaries and instructions.
- Look at this example of purely informative writing, taken from the National Geographic website. Again, the subject is the naked mole-rat, but the style of writing is very different to the example I gave earlier from David Attenborough's book.

"Naked mole rats are rodents, but they live in communities like those of many insects. Several dozen rats live together in colonies led by one dominant rat—the queen. As in some insect species, the queen is the only naked mole rat female to breed and bear young.

Worker animals dig the burrows that the whole clan inhabits, using their prominent teeth and snouts. They also gather the roots and bulbs for the colony to eat. Other rats tend to the queen.

Most other types of mole rats live on their own or in small families. Blind mole rats do have tiny eyes, but they are located beneath their skin and fur. These animals rely on sensitive hairs to feel their way through their underground burrows. Though mole rats spend most of their time excavating and foraging in their burrows, they occasionally emerge to search for seeds or other plants.

Language of Narration

- This is almost certainly the first type of language most people used in their compositions when they were younger.
- In the language of narration, the writer simply tells a story.
- The story can be fact or fiction. Autobiographies are written in a narrative style: they generally present us with the events of the subject's life in chronological order.
- The set novels on your course are examples of narrative language.
- The language of narration often contains an element of aesthetic language.

The following example of narrative writing is taken from Peter Mayle's 'A Year In Provence'.

The whole furtive business began with a phone call from London. It was my friend Frank, who had once been described in a glossy magazine as a reclusive magnate. I knew him better as a gourmet of championship standard, a man who takes dinner as seriously as other people take politics. Frank in the kitchen is like a hound on the scent, sniffing, peering into bubbling saucepans, quivering with expectation. The smell of a rich cassoulet puts him in a trance. My wife says that he is one of the most rewarding eaters she has ever cooked for.

There was a hint of alarm in his voice when he explained why he was calling.

'It's March,' he said, 'and I'm worried about the truffles. Are there still some left?'

March is the end of the truffle season, and in the markets around us, as close as we were to the truffle country in the foothills of Mont Ventoux, the dealers seemed to have disappeared. I told Frank that he may have left it too late.

There was a horrified silence while he considered the gastronomic deprivation that stared him in the face – no truffle omelettes, no truffles en croûte, no truffle-studded roast pork. The telephone line was heavy with disappointment.

Writing to Amuse or Entertain

- The writer may deliberately exaggerate the facts of a story for comic effect.
- There may be humorous misunderstandings, where the reader knows all the facts, but the characters don't.
- The writer may present things to us in a way we would not expect.
- Comparisons can be used to good effect here, also.
- The writer may reverse our expectations and make us laugh at the unexpected.
- There may be black humour – where suffering is viewed as absurd.
- There may be satire, where a writer holds a person or institution up to ridicule.
- If we can relate to the situation, we are likely to enjoy it more.

Look at this extract from Bill Bryson's *The Lost Continent*, in which he reminisces about family trips in the car when he was a young boy.

My father, when behind the wheel, was more or less permanently lost. Most of the time he was just kind of lost, but whenever we got near something we were intent on seeing he would become seriously lost. Generally it would take him about an hour to realise that he had gone from the first stage to the second. All during that time, as he blundered through some unfamiliar city, making sudden and unpredictable turns, getting honked at for going the wrong way down one-way streets or for hesitating in the middle of busy intersections, my mother would mildly suggest that perhaps we should pull over and ask directions. But my father would pretend not to hear her and would press on in that semi-obsessional state that tends to overcome fathers when things aren't going well.

Eventually, after driving the wrong way down the same one way street so many times that merchants were beginning to come and watch from their doorways, Dad would stop the car and gravely announce, "Well, *I think we should ask for directions*", in a tone suggesting that this had been his desire all along.

Autobiographical Writing

- An autobiography is a story of a person's life, written by that person.
- It is written in the first person: "I remember the first time I saw..."
- It is a personal account of that person's life. We will usually get a good sense of the writer's personality from reading their autobiography.
- It usually gives us insights and information that we would not otherwise have. For example, we might read a celebrity's feelings on winning an Oscar, or a sports person's emotions on winning the Olympics.
- The writing will be subjective. The person writing the autobiography will naturally want to give their perspective on the events described. Some famous people write autobiographies as a way to offer a defence for behaviour that may have been badly received by the public. This is their chance to tell their side of the story.
- Autobiographies can be nostalgic. The writer may look back fondly to days long gone.
- We usually get a good sense of the writer's personality from reading their autobiography.

Key Terms

Adjectives and adverbs

These are used to make a piece more lively, interesting and colourful.

Alliteration and assonance

Just as in poetry, alliteration and assonance can be used in prose to create a sense of atmosphere. Look at the following sentence from James Joyce's "The Dead":

"His soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead." The repeated "s" sounds add to the sense of peace and silence and the repetition of the alliterative words "faintly" and "falling" mimic the relentless snowfall.

Anecdotes

A short account of an amusing or humorous incident can add human interest to the writing and can help to illustrate the writer's point.

Exclamation marks

These can be used to create a sense of excitement and drama.

Facts

The writer may use facts and figures to support the case being put forward.

Imagery

Think of your poetry section here. Images (pictures created by words) can be used to make a piece more evocative, colourful, atmospheric or dramatic.

Irony

The writer may say one thing but mean another.

Personification

This can make the writing more interesting and can add drama. "Flowers danced on the lawn." "The wind howled angrily around me and tugged at my clothes."

Questions

Rhetorical questions create a sense of intimacy between the writer and the reader and make the reader think about the topic under discussion.

Reference

The writer may refer to other sources, literary, biblical or historical, for example, to support his or her point. This can give the impression that the writer is learned and well-read and that the piece is well-researched and thought-out.

Repetition

This can focus the reader's attention and add emphasis to a certain point.

Similes and metaphors

These can make the writing more vivid and interesting. A good simile or metaphor will conjure up a powerful image in the reader's mind.

Syntax

Long sentences can engage the readers and make them more inclined to agree with the point the writer is making. Short sentences can have a dramatic effect, particularly if used after a few long sentences. Varied sentence length can stop the piece from becoming monotonous and can keep the reader's attention.

Note: It is not enough to simply identify features of style; you need to be able to say what you thought of the writer's style. To do this, you must use a verb to explain what each feature does. For example:

- Factual information informs, supports, clarifies, shows.
- Rhetorical questions provoke, engage, interest.
- Emotional language moves, provokes, persuades.
- Anecdotes amuse, interest, engage.
- Descriptive language creates, captures, suggests.