

Describing the tone of language

When reading articles for analysis, students are expected to identify the tone of each piece of writing. In many instances the tone of the writing may change within the text of the article. Below is a collection of words which may be used to describe tone. Consider how you would justify using any of these words to denote tone in your analysis.

intellectual	self-righteous	sentimental
controlled	indignant	nostalgic
measured	dogmatic	regretful
neutral	aggressive	solemn
detached	antagonistic	sober
cautious	disrespectful	wistful
guarded	officious	conservative
indifferent	arrogant	serious

Often editorials will make an effort to retain a calm, logical and measured tone. They like to sound intelligent, knowledgeable and reasonable. Editorials mostly retain the same tone throughout, but some editors can falter into a more personal and emotional tone on occasion, and students need to be able to pick up on subtle changes if they happen in the piece of writing.

bitter	hopeful	amused
cynical	cheerful	humorous
satirical	optimistic	jocular
sarcastic	confident	witty
ironical	intimate	entertaining
embittered	enthusiastic	frivolous

Letters to the editor have widely disparate tones. They are written by members of the public and are published as part of an open, public debate on an issue. Letters to the editor frequently change in tone throughout each letter, and are often intensely personal. Letters to the editor may contain wild, biting attempts at making the audience feel angry, sad, amused or shocked. Tone helps create these moods.

anxious	appreciative	thoughtful
resentful	admiring	pensive
disappointed	ardent	ponderous
despondent	fervent	servile
disconsolate	passionate	obsequious
pessimistic	energetic	pleading
appalled	dramatic	insistent

Opinion pieces or feature articles are pieces written by professional journalists who usually have a regular column in the paper. They often have their photograph included in the piece. Some journalists (such as The Herald-Sun's Andrew Bolt) are newspaper 'celebrities' in their own right, and are known for having particular political views. Such writing is often lengthy and includes a combination of research and opinion. These pieces may also vary widely in tone and this may change throughout the article too. Such writing is often written in first person using anecdotes to provide readers with a 'personal' angle, yet they also attempt to seem reasonable and popular with the public in order to encourage regular readership of their column. To an extent, they are out to entertain their audience also.

earnest	critical	chauvinistic
sensitive	forceful	bombastic
Sincere	urgent	sensational
tolerant	didactic	respectful
moderate	superior	modest

The words listed are by no means exhaustive. Discuss other possible words to describe tone. Be as precise as possible, and be sensible. Don't just say a tone is 'persuasive' because this means nothing. Consider how it is being persuasive.

Words and phrases to describe language

Most students unfortunately manage to find examples of relevant language to analyse, but they don't know what to say about it. Frequently they will write 'this is persuasive', 'this is emotive' or 'this is biased'. This says nothing to the reader. *How* are these examples persuasive, emotional or biased? Some of the following words and phrases may assist students in formulating more precise analysis of language.

inflated	condemnatory	impartial
politicises	assertive	slanted
propagandist	cynical	extravagant
evocative	sophisticated	simplistic
superficial	ill-informed	antagonistic
coherent	distorted	low-key
stereotyped	penetrative	euphemistic
rational	ironic	ambiguous
equivocation	pervasive	accentuated
intensifies	down plays	undercuts
blatant	sustained	tangible evidence
humorous	insinuates	glowing prominence
implies	uses hyperbole	negative connotations
sensationalises	uses shock tactics	disparaging language
exaggerates	uses selective evidence	appeals to tradition
rationalises	exposes a diverse range	emotional atmosphere
unfolds	common sense appeal	long running dispute
reflects	widespread concern	ameliorates
discredits	utilises	generates
inspires	evokes	interlaces
compels	titillates	elicits
juxtaposes	conjures	reiterates
imbues	generalises	emphasises

Language analysis assessment depends greatly on the quality of precision and discussion of the language analysed, but also on the level of intellectual sophistication of a student's vocabulary. Learn to use as many diverse, interesting and complex words confidently as it will ultimately enhance your grades in the final exam.

Commenting on reader impact in language analysis tasks

Besides explaining why the writer has chosen a specific persuasive device, part of defining how it works includes considering how the reader is meant to react to it. Does it provoke shock, anger or sadness? Does it make the reader laugh, wince or groan? Are we being rallied into action or expected to act in any particular way? When a writer is being persuasive, you must ask the question: How is the reader meant to feel about this?

Consider using some of the following phrases to assist:

It reads rather like...
The power in this text stems from...
For the reader, the text produces...
The general pattern of language provokes...
A mood of... prevails in this article.
A reader's response might well be to...
Visual interest in this text is created by...
The influence of this text lies in...
The dominant trend in these texts is...
The writer has tailored the text in order to...
The text embodies the aspirations of...
This article generates feelings of...
The perceptions of the reader are sharpened by...
This text increases the momentum of the debate over...
This text intensifies the discussion by...
This accentuates the controversy by...
Incites/invites readers to...
Seeks to divide readers' opinions...
Arouses deep concern in...
Leaves the reader with a sense of...
Presents the reader with an ultimatum...
Affirms in the reader's mind...
Encourages the public to...
Manipulates the reader by...
Diverts responsibility away from...
Exacerbates the controversy by...
Oversimplifies the issue by...
Provokes sympathy by...
Challenges readers...
Invites support by...

Interpreting purpose and intention

A major aspect of language analysis moves beyond merely 'treasure hunting' for persuasive devices. Each example should be explained and discussed in an intelligent way. Below are a series of sentence starters and phrases which may assist students in developing more sustained analysis of elements found in the articles analysed.

The first series of 'starters' asks the analyser to consider what the article's writer believes is most important. This should flow directly after the student has identified the main contention of the article. Some of the phrases below improve upon the standard boring phrase of ; 'the main contention of this article is...'. Try varying that with one of the suggestions listed.

The text gives prominence to...
The text attempts to mobilise support by...
This language is designed to provoke...
The clearest illustration of the writer's purpose...
The writer has concentrated her effort on...
The article pinpoints...
The text provides a map...
The writer probes...
The writer's purpose emerges...
The text constructs an image of...
The writer tends...
Media attention is clearly focused on...
The argument advanced in the text is designed to...
The writer intends to fuel the debate on...
The position the reader is asked to share is...
The article attempts to enlist the support of...
This text provides a view that contradicts...
The writer opts for...
The writer stresses...
The appealing imagery of the text is aimed at...
The writer questions...
This text clearly reveals the writer's stance on...

Other analytical aspects of the article to consider may be:

Use of evocative and/or emotional imagery
Sustained attack
Use of cold, hard, statistics
Barrage of facts and statistics
Sinister connotations of...
Emphatic and/or convincing argument...
Derogatory labels
Powerfully emotional plea...
Belligerent opening paragraph
Clever and/or imaginative use of metaphor
Poetic turn of phrase
Clear and logically framed argument...
Unusual angle or perspective
Advocates the view that...
Refutes the notion that...
Rebuts allegations that...
Poses the idea that...
Provides an appraisal of...
Presents a critique of...
Champions the issue of...
Endorses the position of...
Raises questions about...
Establishes the view that...
Makes a vociferous protest...
Demonstrates the significance of...
Highlights aspects...
Shows partiality towards...
Dogmatically declares...
Expresses unease...
Focuses on...
Quashes speculation that...
Casts doubts on...
Retorts...
Is sympathetic towards...
Disputes the validity of...
Dismisses as irrelevant and untrue...
Ideologically nonsense...
Vigorously condemns...
Is diametrically opposed to...

Linking phrases to use in language analysis

When analysing more than one article, the pieces need to be linked in some way. The aim is to make your writing flow like one, cohesive piece. Linking phrases also help add depth by making comparative suggestions pointing out similarities and differences between articles.

Think about using any of the following:

At the other extreme...
Is best illustrated by...
Similarly...
Less obviously...
It is therefore clear...
Meanwhile...
Admittedly...
Overall...
Although...
Alternatively...
Hence...
As well as...
A common aspect of...
In addition...
Consequently...
As a result...
... is a common element...
Synonymously...
Nevertheless...
In contrast...
However...
Also...
Thus...