

## How to analyse language

**Jean:** Hello, and welcome to the Bitesize English Language Exam Skills podcast. If you need techniques to tackle your upcoming GCSE exams and boost your confidence, we're here to help.

**Carl:** My name is Carl Anka and I'm a journalist, broadcaster and author.

**Jean:** And I'm Jean Menzies, an ancient historian, author and presenter.

**Carl:** And in this episode, we are doing one of my very favorite things in the world. We are going to show you how to analyse language.

**Jean:** Woo! And by language we mean the words and phrases that writers use to give meaning and cause a reaction in the reader.

**Carl:** We're going to look at common mistakes to avoid, to show you a clear way to analyse language, what to look for and how to approach it. We're going to show you how to export some sentence starters to help you kick off your answer. And we're going to share with you how to explain your ideas confidently

**Jean:** Before we start, remember, if you want to hear all the episodes in the Bitesize English Language Exam Skills podcast, make sure to download the BBC Sounds app.

**Carl:** Now you may want to make some notes, so now is a good time to grab a pen and paper. No seriously right now. Quick, pen and paper, go.

**Jean:** Let's start by thinking about the common mistakes we can avoid when answering questions about analysing language. We've got three to tell you about, so

you might want to make a note. The first of these pitfalls is just spotting the technique without analysing why it's being used.

**Carl:** That's right. If you just say the writer uses a metaphor or there's a simile, it's not enough on its own.

You have to explain what the impact of that metaphor or simile is on the reader. Ask yourself, why has the writer used this language technique?

**Jean:** Exactly. The second mistake to avoid is just retelling the story instead of analysing the words or phrases in it. In your analysis, you need to say how the writer uses the language, not just what is happening.

Focus on the words, techniques and choices and how those create meaning. Don't simply repeat what is happening in the extract.

**Carl:** And the next mistake to avoid making is overgeneralising. Try not to make vague comments like 'this makes the reader want to read on', or 'the writer uses this for effect' because these could pretty much apply to any text.

**Jean:** That's it. Three common mistakes to avoid when answering questions about analysing language.

**Carl:** Okay then, now we've covered the things that we don't want you to do., let's look at some of the things we do want you to do. Here's a step-by-step structure for analysing the language that a writer chooses to use.

**Jean:** A simple way to do this is to look at three things - 'what', 'how' and 'why'.

**Carl:** Let's start with 'what'. When you are reading a text, ask yourself what the writer is doing and I don't just mean what the writer is writing. Focus on what words the writer is using to create an effect or meaning.

**Jean:** What tone is the writer creating? Is it tense, angry, funny, excited or sad? What does the text show us about the character or characters, their personality or attitude? What are we being shown about the events in the extract?

**Carl:** Once you've worked out what the writer is doing, we also want to know how the writer is trying to do that. So think, how are they using words, how are the words that they're selecting impacting on the mood or hinting at a deeper meaning.

**Jean:** For example, instead of using the word 'walked', the writer might say, 'a character skipped, marched or crept along the street'. How do each of these specific word choices hint at a deeper meaning?

**Carl:** As well as word choice, how is the writer using language techniques like metaphors, similes or personification?

**Jean:** A useful question to ask yourself is, what picture does this create in my mind? See, when I think of someone skipping, they're happy. Right?

**Carl:** Unless they've done something particularly evil and then it's like, ooh, you are really happy you've done a bad thing.

**Jean:** They're still happy though, even if they're evil happy.

**Carl:** Good point. Very, very good point. Finally, always ask yourself why? Why has the writer chosen these words and these techniques?

**Jean:** Drawing from our example where a character skipped, marched or crept along a street, notice how each one of those words brings their own connotations or implied meaning to the sentence. 'Skipped' might be happy, 'marched' might be...

**Carl:** determined.

**Jean:** Ooh, I like that, and 'crept' could be suspicious...

**Carl:** ...and sneaky or sly.

So why does a writer do this? Because the choice of the words creates an effect on the reader. Think why the writer is trying to make you think or feel a certain way about the character or an event.

**Jean:** Likewise, the use of a language technique such as personification, like ‘the silence pressed against him’ creates a more vivid picture for the reader about the unbearable silence.

This helps you understand what the writer wants you to feel. When you explain the ‘why’ you’re showing that you understand the writer’s purpose, not just spotting a technique.

**Carl:** For this series, we’ve teamed up with the National Theatre because their actors spend a lot of time working with scripts. So they know what they’re doing when it comes to analysing a writer’s language and intentions.

**Nina:** Hi, I am Nina Cassells. I’m an actor. I’m currently working at the National Theatre. I’ve also worked at The Globe, at The Bridge and at Bristol Old Vic. So when I get a new scene, what helps me understand the character is looking at the stage directions because you can be given a lot of information through that. For instance, one of the scenes in *Ballet Shoes*, she enters into a room and despite her best efforts, can’t help but be awed.

For me, that says a lot about what she’s trying to hide. She’s really impressed by this room that she’s walking into. But Pauline, as a character, doesn’t like showing people that she’s impressed. She always wants to be in control, and that gave me a lot about how to play Pauline as a character.

**Jean:** Thanks so much to Nina Cassells. Some really great insight into how actors at the National Theatre analyse language.

**Carl:** So, to sum up on how to analyse language, ask yourself, what is the writer showing us in a text, then look at how do they show this to us and why have they made this choice or choices?

**Jean:** You can find more information on analysing fiction and non-fiction texts on the BBC Bitesize website.

Now we're going to explore high impact sentence starters and vocabulary, as well as practising when to use them effectively.

**Carl:** When you are writing about a text in your exam, the words you use at the start of your sentence can make a big difference. They signal your analysis is really considered and specific.

You want to sound confident, thoughtful and not like you're just repeating the same thing over and over and over again. The way you start a sentence is much like how you make a first impression when you meet someone. 'Hello!'

**Jean:** Let's be honest, if every sentence starts with 'the writer shows', it gets repetitive, overgeneralised and a bit boring. So you need to mix it up a bit. You can use sentence starters such as these - 'This could imply...'

**Carl:** 'It makes the reader feel...'

**Jean:** 'This creates a sense of...'

**Carl:** Okay, it's your turn now. Let's imagine that we want to say the writer is showing us something. I want you to get pen and paper and have a go at noting down a few different ways of saying the writer shows'.

This way we can make the sentence opener more specific. Now, while you're doing that, Jean and I are going to do the same.

15 seconds on the clock. Let's go.

Time's up. Okay. Let's see what we've come up with.

Jean, what you got?

**Jean:** Okay. 'The writer highlights...'

**Carl:** How about this? 'This sentence emphasises...'

**Jean:** Brilliant. 'What about this phrase reveals...'

**Carl:** How about 'The writer presents...'

**Jean:** Oh, well, only if I can suggest 'This word demonstrates...'

**Carl:** Ooh, good one. How about 'This sentence inspires...'?

**Jean:** Brilliant. Those are some really good options, and I'm positive you thought of some effective ones too, listeners.

**Carl:** And don't forget, the writer may not always be showing. Sometimes maybe they're contradicting or even mocking. Essentially, try to be as specific as possible when you state what the writer is doing.

I would also suggest if you're having trouble using the same sentence over and over and over again. Read back what you've written and see if you'd use the same phrase two or three times. It might be time to try something else in another sentence.

**Jean:** Very good advice to put this all into practice. Let's take a short sentence from writer Kate Atkinson about a house fire that began with an iron left unattended: 'Downstairs the abandoned, forgotten iron was demonstrating its faults.'

What high impact sentence starter could you use to analyse the language in that phrase, Carl?

**Carl:** Instead of 'the writer shows', you could start with something like 'the writer has hinted at the hazardous situation that has unfolded', and then quote that sentence. Also, that's just a really good sentence.

**Jean:** Well, that's also an excellent sentence for analysing it.

**Carl:** Thanks.

**Jean:** Actually, in episode two of our English Literature exam skill series, we take a look at how to embed quotes. It's essentially the same skill whether you're sitting in your English literature or your English language exam.

You can find the episode on BBC Sounds.

**Carl:** Perfect! So, Jean, what techniques used by the writer in our quote about the iron, can you pick out and explore with some good sentence starters?

**Jean:** You could try something along the lines of, 'the adjectives 'abandoned' and 'forgotten', personify this object as having negative feelings about its current situation. Furthermore, the verb demonstrating implies that this object itself is able to showcase its flaws like a person.'

**Carl:** Ooh, that's nice. Furthermore, that's a good sentence start-off for developing your ideas.

**Jean:** Thanks, and if you wanted to contrast ideas, you could use 'on the one hand' and 'on the other hand'.

For example:

'On the one hand, the adjective 'forgotten' suggests loneliness and neglect. On the other hand, the verb 'demonstrating' implies that the object still has some power or purpose as if it can reveal its own story.'

Back to you, Carl. Why is the writer doing this?

**Carl:** That's a real good question, Jean. Remember, we always need to think about the 'why' – why the writer has made those choices and what effect they want to create for the reader.

You could start your sentences like this - 'The writer may have chosen to...' or 'This suggests that the writer wanted to...'

Thirdly you could try this one - 'By describing it this way, the writer aims to...'

So an example here could be something like - 'The writer may have chosen this to make the reader feel uneasy, as though the everyday object has turned against its owner. This personification makes the iron seem alive and menacing.'

**Jean:** Amazing.

**Carl:** So to recap, when you are analysing, make sure you use strong sentence starters. Okay? Make sure you choose specific and thoughtful language to analyse what the writer is doing too.

So we've looked at what to avoid and shared some handy tools to help you tackle language analysis with confidence.

Thank you for tuning into the Bitesize English Language Exam Skills podcast.

**Jean:** And remember, you can find the rest of this podcast series right now on BBC Sounds.