BBC BITESIZE

How to analyse structure

Carl: Hello and welcome to the Bitesize English Language Exam Skills podcast. If you want some tips and support to feel more confident in your GCSE exams, we are here to help.

Jean: Whether we're breaking down how to analyse language, or helping you to write with confidence, we are here to share practical tools you can use to boost your performance in the exam.

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

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

Carl: And in this episode, we are going to be exploring how writers use structure.

So to start, why do we need to think about structure?

Jean: When we read a text, we often focus on the language a writer uses, but it's not just about words themselves, there's also the structure - the way the writer organises the ideas and the story.

Carl: Right, because how the text is organised and laid out alters and moulds the text too.

Jean: So, in this episode, we'll break down what structure is, how writers use it to shape meaning, and how to write about structure in an exam.

Carl: Okay, listener, it's time for you to grab a pen and paper because we're going to be taking some notes. Are you ready? Let's get into it.

Jean: First up, let's look at what structure is in a text.

Carl: One way to explain structure is, if a text or a story tells us 'what' happens, the structure of it tells us 'when' and 'how' the events are organised and eventually revealed.

Jean: And it's worth saying here, when we talk about structure, we mean both the big picture narrative structure, like how a text or story is organised overall, and the sentence level structure, like whether a writer uses long flowing sentences or short ones.

Carl: Exactly, Jean. In the exam, you are going to be working with extracts from texts so looking at both levels is really useful.

Jean: The order and way in which events are revealed have a significant effect on how you, the reader, understand the characters and events and how you respond to the storytelling or the building of an argument.

Carl: Precisely. Start by thinking about the order in which events happen.

Some texts start at the beginning and move in chronological order, meaning the events are described in the order that they happened. That choice will create specific effects and consequences because it'll form how the reader experiences the story.

Jean: We can also look at how some writers start in the middle of the action, often called 'in medias res'.

This can pull the reader straight into the moment before any background information is given. For example, in *Romeo and Juliet*, scenes often open during arguments or high tension, which helps create pace and urgency right from the first line.

Carl: Other stories jump around in time. These are called a nonlinear narrative, and they can use flashbacks to show events from the past or even flash forwards to reveal possible events in the future.

These are secretly some of my favourite stories.

Jean: Oh, I love a nonlinear narrative. Very compelling, and you sort of feel like you're piecing it all together like a puzzle.

Carl: Yes, they’re so much fun.

Jean: Charles Dickens uses this to great effect in *A Christmas Carol*. The flashbacks and flash forwards give us insight into the character of Scrooge. They allow us to see how his current actions may affect his future.

Carl: Now, just a quick note here to say that don't worry if you're not studying any of the texts that we're going to mention in this episode. We are just using them as examples to practice your analysis skills. Remember, it's about the analysis skills here, not about the text specifically.

Jean: If you are studying *Romeo and Juliet* or *A Christmas Carol*, you can find out more by searching GCSE Bitesize *Romeo and Juliet* or *A Christmas Carol* on the Bitesize website or the BBC Sounds app.

Now, let's investigate how to spot structural shifts and the effects they create. And the first thing to understand is what is a structural shift?

Carl: Now, a structural shift is when the writer changes how they present ideas, settings or emotions. These shifts are deliberate and they guide the reader's response. You'll usually spot them from paragraph to paragraph. Or even within a single sentence.

Jean: Some of the most common structural shifts we might see are shifts in focus, shifts in tone or mood, and shifts in setting.

A focus shift could be from a whole crowd to one individual within it, drawing the reader's attention straight to that person.

Carl: Then there are structural shifts in tone or mood. The writing might start out light and cheerful, and then suddenly become tense, angry or fearful.

Jean: For example, George Orwell's dark novel *1984*, is full of structural shifts like this. It's set in a world where the government watches everything you do and even controls what you think. A scene can begin with an ordinary calm tone, and then the terrifying ‘Thought Police’ appear and the whole mood shifts into tension and fear.

Carl: And finally, a shift in setting. This could be moving from a grand house to a cramped flat or from a battlefield to a peaceful home.

Jean: So, how do you spot structural shifts? Paragraph breaks can be a clue. They often mark a new idea, a change of scene or a switch in focus.

Carl: You can also look for words and phrases that signal time passing. Think of things like ‘several hours later’.

Jean: And sometimes it’s in the sentence structure. Long flowing sentences suddenly followed by short, punchy ones.

Carl: So we've been talking to you on this podcast as your hosts so far, but I also think we can share some practical advice as two authors as well.

Jean: All of this, um, conversation we're having makes me wonder about your own writing, Carl. When you're planning, do you ever structure a scene around a turning point or reveal?

Carl: Oh, yeah, all the time. If you are writing a crime story or a mystery, then you very often have the ‘before the crime’ or the ‘after the crime’. So, a good example of this is if you do any story about like a bank robbery, you have how the story is structured before they break into the bank, and then there's the story of how they get out of the bank after they've got it.

And you can't just repeat the same thing over and over again. So sometimes it can be really fun to set up problems that a character doesn't even realise is a problem, but it's something they've walked into themself. So that can be quite hard to do. So very often when I'm planning, I will plan the middle bit or the change before I write the beginning or the, or the end.

I'll just write that middle section of the story first. Once I tried writing a story that had loads of different perspectives, but I wanted to have a scene where they all were in, they'd all eventually meet up once in the same room.

And I wrote that scene first because I knew if I wrote everything else, I wouldn't actually get to the most important scene in the book until maybe three or four months and everything will change. But I thought if I just wrote that first, that'd be really, really important. So sometimes I at least sketch out how I want something to end at the very, very least, and then I'll go back and write the beginning.

Jean: Because so often a story doesn't fully emerge in your head, does it? You envision this moment, you envision two characters meeting or a climax, and you feel attached to that. When I was writing recently about two characters, I thought a lot about how their relationship would develop, and where it was going, and that big climactic moment for them as characters, was really easy, and it was the first thing I pictured, but then you had to build out from that and think, but how would that start? Why did they get there? How did they get there? And to what end?

Carl: Mm-hmm. I hope that was useful to hear us chat a little bit more as authors about how we use structure in our own writing.

Now, while you might not be thinking about writing your own novel just yet, although one day I hope you do write a novel, the same idea also applies to your English exams.

When you analyse structure, you are really looking at how the writer directs your attention or your emotions. Now, that can be through a shift in a scene or any sort of structural choice made by the writer.

Jean: You can find more information on analysing text structure by searching language and structure on Bitesize.

Carl: So, you can definitely talk about analysing structure, now, let's look a simple method to help you write effectively about structuring your exam.

Let's keep these three words in mind. Shift, focus, and reveal. When you analyse a piece of text, read it through and notice the shift. How it moves from one idea to the next. Does it begin in a room full of people and then switch to the inner voice of one person in the room? Does it shift from short, repetitive sentences to lengthy and descriptive ones?

Jean: Once you've spotted a shift, think about what the writer wants you to focus on at different points. Is it a particular person in this story? Is it a different time or period in the story, or has the action become faster or the atmosphere more tense?

Carl: Thirdly, consider what does the writer choose to reveal or possibly what does the writer choose not to reveal. A sudden revelation or framing the action from a different character's perspective could alter the reader's understanding of the story in the same way, purposely not revealing information could mean the text ends on a cliffhanger.

Jean: Rather than a cliffhanger in this case, let's end with a very quick quiz. Are you up for answering some structure questions, Carl?

Carl: Absolutely. You can join in too, listener.

Jean: First one, what is structure in a text?

Carl: Structure is how a writer organises ideas, events and shifts in order to guide the reader's response.

Jean: Exactly. Now, what does ‘in medias res’ mean?

Carl: It means starting the story in the middle of the action,

Jean: Correct. Third question. Flashbacks are an example of what type of structural technique?

Carl: Flashbacks are an example of a shift, specifically a shift in time.

Jean: You got it. And last but not least, why might a writer end a paragraph on a cliffhanger?

Carl: Because… they want to create suspense. You see what I did there? And make the reader want to continue.

Jean: You got it. Nice work and nice example.

Carl: Thank you Jean, and thank you, listener. I hope you have some tools now to analyse structure in texts in your GCSE exam. And thank you again for listening to the Bitesize English Language Exam Skills podcast.

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