Section C – Analysis of language use

This year students were presented with two pieces of writing to be analysed – an opinion piece that appeared in a daily newspaper and a response to that opinion piece, challenging its premise. There was no expected manner in which the pieces were to be analysed and most students began by analysing the first piece then analysing the second. The more successful responses made insightful analytical comparisons, focusing on such things as tone, structure and, most importantly, the language used by the two writers. For example, the piece by Yvette Yergon employed language that related to size, and words and phrases that attempted to evoke awe, such as ‘biggest thing we do’, ‘big dreamers’, ‘huge amount of money’, ‘trillion dollars’ and ‘unlimited’. Laikis, on the other hand, was dismissive of Yergon and sarcastic, referring to ‘little issues like hunger and disease and the environment’. He tended to challenge the idealistic nature of Yergon’s piece with ‘Off the planet’ and ‘Wake up, Yvette!’

While students were expected to respond to both pieces, they were free to determine the amount of response spent on each as appropriate. Some wrote a significant amount on the first piece and offered only a cursory comment on the second. Students should have decided which parts of the material they would use in order to demonstrate their understanding of how language was used by the writers to persuade. Successful responses were able to show the inherent connection between the general ideas of each piece and the language used to present those views.

Students needed to demonstrate understanding of how written and visual language is used to persuade. Students could achieve full marks yet select different parts of the material to exemplify and explore language use. The exception, however, is that students were expected to acknowledge and explore the way visual features were used in adding persuasiveness to the entire piece.

While few students resorted to simplistic technique identification, it was still evident. Some students offered topic sentences that suggested they were searching for particular ‘techniques’, with little regard to the instructions for this section: ‘How is written and visual language used in the newspaper article and the letter to attempt to persuade readers to share the points of view presented in them?’ Simply identifying techniques demonstrates a limited approach to this task.

It is also worth noting that the instructions focus on the intent, not the result. Students should be wary of making claims about the exact response from the reading audience but are expected to analyse the intention of the writer. The analysis in the more successful responses was insightful and sophisticated. Weaker responses showed an understanding of the task but tended to be generalised and lacked depth. For example, a weaker response might use phrases such as ‘makes the reader think’ or ‘inclusive language is used to make the reader feel included’. Demonstrating an understanding of subtle, persuasive approaches and the nuance of language used were characteristics of the more successful responses.

Many students who struggled with analysing the language were still able to make insightful comments about the visuals. It was evident that most students understand the implications of a visual, but some are not able to transfer that knowledge to written language. It is worth considering how to transfer those skills shown in analysing visuals to the language itself more effectively.
The following is an example of an upper-range response. This is a thorough and well-developed analysis of language. It is clear that the student understands the position of both writers and explores how each uses language to attempt to persuade the audience. There is sufficient analysis of specific words and phrases while maintaining an appropriate overview. It is not without its expression weaknesses but is generally fluent and well controlled. This script was assessed in the upper range.

There have been suggestions by a group known as Kolumbus21, urging governments to invest resource and time into further space exploration for the twenty-first Century. In her opinion piece, ‘Exploring our dreams’, Yvette Yergon contends in an emphatic tone that space exploration is fundamental in today’s world for the growth of technology and to find answers to societal problems. Conversely in his letter to the editor, ‘Off the planet’, Dr Peter Laikis contends in a critical tone that ideas in favour of space exploration are misguided and injudicious, given the far more significant world problems such as hunger and poverty.

Connecting the word ‘exploring’ a symbol of research and learning, with the word ‘dreams’, representing a fantasy and our strongest desire, in her headline, Yergon inspires readers to consider how space exploration can be highly advantageous to the future of ourselves and society. Yergon begins by referring to the closeness of space to our earth, ‘only about 160 kilometres’, and mentions the fact that we are ‘closer to space than to Canberra’, emphasising how integral and significant space exploration can be after visiting a space exhibition inviting readers to reflect on their preconceived views towards exploration and to consider its effect on their own attitudes of excitement and innovation. Lightening the atmosphere, Yergon refers to our ‘beautiful blue planet we call home,’ suggesting that such a perspective would not have occurred if not for the ‘bravery’ of astronauts in exploration, compelling readers to reflect on the fortune they have of such a beautiful planet which has been developed through exploration. This notion is portrayed in the accompanying image, depicting a ship bustling through the hardships of exploration, further positions readers to develop a greater sense of gratitude towards the early explorers, and to recognise the importance of discovery that has played a significant role in developing the conditions of our planet.

Adopting a more serious tone, Yergon postulates that there is more to exploration than simply the ‘thrill of discovery’, cultivating new perspectives on exploration that are not restricted to its excitement and moments of adrenaline. Likening an asteroid to a ‘lifeless rock’, Yergon intimates that asteroids are simplistic yet she notes the value of these asteroids that are to the value of approximately a ‘trillion dollars’, allaying readers’ potential fears as to the worthiness of governments investing in space exploration given the value that can come out of it, and its poetical to enrich society as a whole. Indeed, she states that such a statistic doesn’t seem to ‘dampen anyone’s enthusiasm’, highlighting the great benefits that can be achieved through space exploration.
In this light, Yergon employs the inclusive pronoun ‘we’ in reference to our need to ‘find the answers to our problems’, which includes ‘taking risks’ and ‘encountering the unexpected’, suggesting that a reformation of attitudes towards exploration and protecting life on earth is a societal duty. Indeed, she refers to the ‘benefits that nobody predicted at the time’, of past space explorations and the ‘valuable products available to us now, thus urging readers to concede the vast benefits of space exploration for society as a whole. This notion is supported by the accompanying image, showcasing the various outcomes that are achieved through space exploration, such as solar cells, medical imaging, and radial tyres, practices and tools that are fundamental to everyday society on earth. These resources are lined back to an image of an astronaut, representing space exploration and discovery and suggesting the astronaut’s powerful role in achieving amazing and integral sources for our world, thus stressing and reiterating the importance of space exploration to enrich and enhance our society.

In contrast, Dr Peter Laikis’ letter to the editor adopts a critical and unenthusiastic tone, disparaging Yergon’s views as insignificant and unworthy of investment. Laikis engages the attention of readers immediately by employing a pun in the headline, ‘off the planet’, intimating that Yergon’s ideas are misguided and foolish, utilising a categorical tone to inspire readers to consider the limitations of space exploration for the benefit of a society. Sardonically referring to ‘hunger and disease’ as ‘little issues’, Laikis stresses that Yergon’s claims to the importance of space exploration are far less significant in contrast to the aforementioned issues that are far more pressing and devastating. Indeed, Laikis forcefully demands Yergon to ‘wake up’, while utilising an exclamation mark carrying connotations of urgency and immediacy, compelling readers to consider the limitations of space exploration for a society’s benefit. Linking back to Yergon’s reference to asteroids as ‘lifeless rocks’, Laikis jestingly retorts that his hope that our ‘infinitely precious blue planet’ doesn’t ‘turn into one’, compelling readers to consider the potentially devastating and deleterious repercussions society can face if they are to follow Yergon’s ideas and invest too heavily in space exploration without dealing with more immediate problems on earth.

In closing, Laikis reiterates that focussing on ‘our real problems’ is a ‘dream worth pursuing’, accentuating the importance of solving problems such as hunger and disease as an unequivocal priority compared to space exploration. Consequently, readers are urged to engage in a paradigm shift, compelling them to understand that investment to global world issues that impact the lives of many are far more worthy than investment into space exploration.