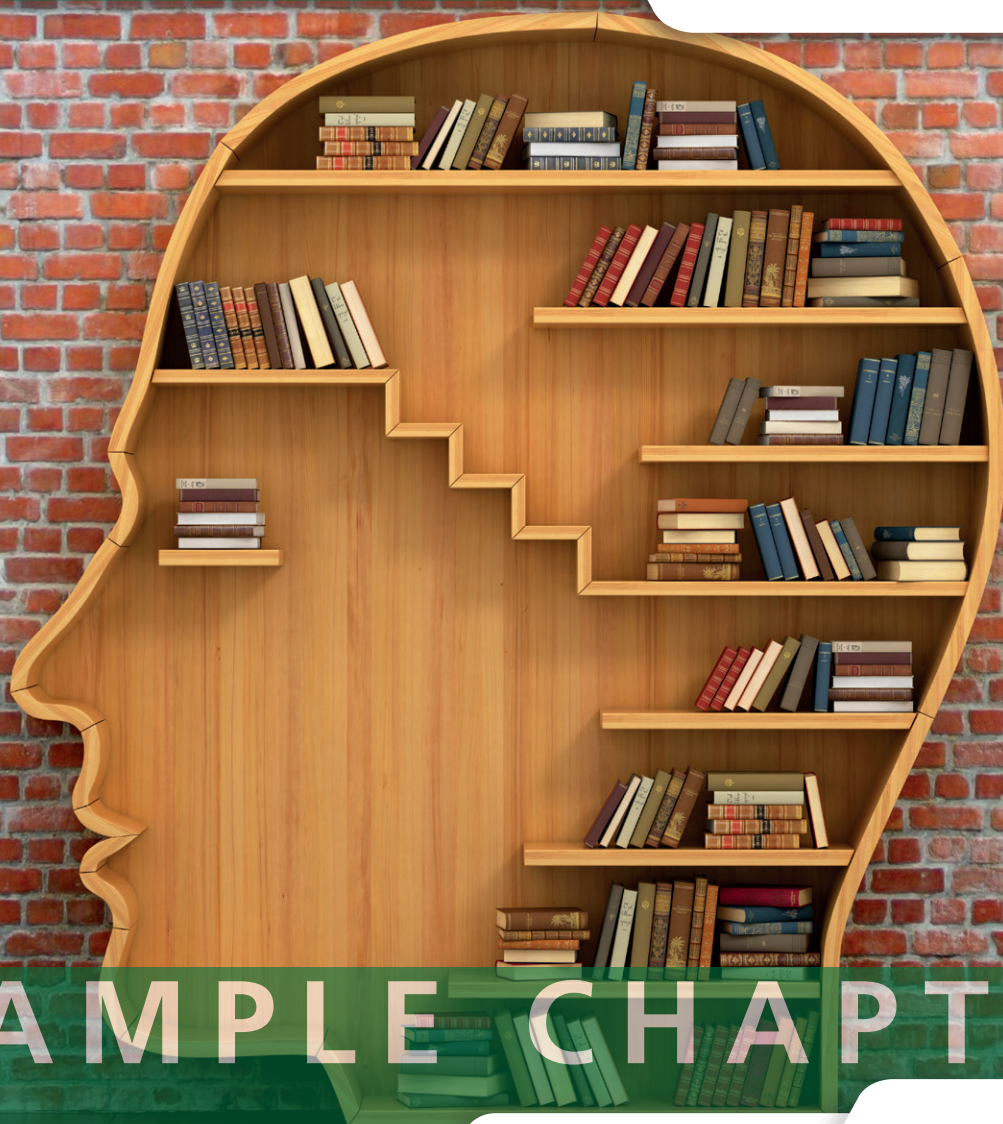


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Textual Analysis for English Language & Literature

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Carolyn P. Henly
Angela Stancar Johnson



SAMPLE CHAPTER



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Approaches to non-literary texts

You will examine a wide variety of texts, both literary and non-literary, throughout your English Language and Literature course of study. Literary texts can generally be grouped into the four main genres: poetry, prose fiction, prose non-fiction, and drama. Non-literary texts, however, are categorised by *text type*, of which there are a seemingly infinite number. If we think back to the definition of a text as presented in Chapter 1 (as “anything from which information can be extracted”), then we are encountering – and, arguably, creating – texts all the time in our daily lives.

Some texts can be considered literary forms, usually within the category of non-fiction (e.g., biography, diary, essay, memoir, travel writing etc.). You may indeed focus on a series of letters or a pastiche within your study of literature. However, when studied as a single work (and especially in the context of developing your skills in unseen textual analysis), these text types will be treated as non-literary.

You will not be expected to study a prescribed number or type of non-literary texts within the language component of your DP English course of study, nor will you be expected to learn the features or characteristics of all possible text types. The skills of analysing one text type can be transferable to another. The rest of this chapter will guide you through the analysis of many of the key aspects of non-literary texts. It is important not to view these elements in isolation but to consider how they work together to achieve a specific purpose. The exercises below will each focus on a specific element, but it is impossible to consider one element without taking into account others; therefore, it might be a good idea to skim the chapter before engaging in the activities. Additionally, we do not want to suggest that you should adopt a linear approach to analysing a text; you may find that tone is the first thing that jumps out at you, or you may be attuned to picking up on figurative language as you read. The purpose of these exercises is to give you the tools to analyse with more confidence, not suggest a one-size-fits-all approach.

Content

An initial reading of any text should focus on content. Only once you have grasped the literal meaning of the text can you begin to consider other layers of meaning. If you start by developing a solid understanding of the content of the text (the *what*), then you will be able to work towards a more nuanced understanding of style of the text (the *how* and *why*). Jumping in to an analysis of style first will only demonstrate a lack of foundational knowledge.

■ Author’s message

As you examine the content of a text, you need to ask yourself what the author’s message is. This is not necessarily the same thing as the purpose of the text, which will be explored in more detail later in the chapter. The central message is related to larger themes that the text reflects.

■ Example: *Eat Pray Love* by Elizabeth Gilbert (memoir/travel writing)

The following extract from Elizabeth Gilbert's travel memoir *Eat Pray Love* is a good example of a text with a central message that is distinct from its purpose.

I've never had less of a plan in my life than I do upon arrival in Bali. In all my history of careless travels, this is the most carelessly I've ever landed anyplace. I don't know where I'm going to live, I don't know what I'm going to do, I don't know what the exchange rate is, I don't know how to get a taxi at the airport or even where to ask that taxi to take me. Nobody is expecting my arrival. I have no friends in Indonesia, or even friends-of-friends. And here's the problem about traveling with an out-of-date guidebook, and then not reading it anyway: I didn't realize that I'm actually not allowed to stay in Indonesia for four months, even if I want to. I find this out only upon entry into the country. Turns out I'm allowed only a one-month tourist visa. It hadn't occurred to me that the Indonesian government would be anything less than delighted to host me in their country for just as long as I pleased to stay.

As the nice immigration official is stamping my passport with permission to stay in Bali for only and exactly thirty days, I ask him in my most friendly manner if I can please remain longer.

"No," he says, in his most friendly manner. The Balinese are most famously friendly.

"See, I'm supposed to stay here for three or four months," I tell him.

I don't mention that it is a prophecy that my staying here for three or four months was predicted by an elderly and quite possibly demented Balinese medicine man, during a ten-minute palm-reading. I'm not sure how to explain this.

But what did that medicine man tell me, now that I think of it? Did he actually say that I would come back to Bali and spend three or four months living with him? Did he really say "living with" him? Or did he just want me to drop by again sometime if I was in the neighborhood and give him another ten bucks for another palm-reading? Did he say I would come back, or that I should come back? Did he really say, "See you later, alligator"? Or was it, "In a while, crocodile"?

I haven't had any communication with the medicine man since that one evening. I wouldn't know how to contact him, anyway. What might his address be? "Medicine Man, On His Porch, Bali, Indonesia"? I don't know whether he's dead or alive. I remember that he seemed exceedingly old two years ago when we met; anything could have happened to him since then. All I have for sure is his name Ketut Liyer and the memory that he lives in a village just outside the town of Ubud. But I don't remember the name of the village.

Maybe I should have thought all this through better.

The purpose of this piece is primarily to entertain. This purpose is conveyed through the use of the following techniques, which are characteristic of travel writing.

ANNOTATION TIPS

- ✓ **First-person narration:** the author/narrator is an active participant in the experience that she is sharing, not a passive observer.
- ✓ **Focus on a key event/experience:** good travel writing is not a catalogue of every detail from the author's journey but, rather, a focused account of a specific moment or series of moments with a central message or theme.
- ✓ **Appealing to the senses:** travel writers will use sensory imagery to immerse the reader in the experience.
- ✓ **Use of humour and anecdotes:** travel writers will often use humour and quirky anecdotes to engage the audience.
- ✓ **A mix of narration and reflection:** a mixture of in-the-moment descriptions and retrospective reflection. Travel writing, especially of the literary kind, often ends with a lesson or message to the reader.
- ✓ **Use of descriptive details:** the setting is described in detail so that readers feel as if they are there. In more "literary" travel writing, writers will also include descriptions of people in the same way that novelists characterise people in their stories. Good travel writers will do this with sensitivity, avoiding stereotypes. (We do not really see this feature illustrated in this particular extract, but it is worth noting that it is present in the work as a whole.)
- ✓ Travel writing will also include literary elements such as dialogue, metaphor, hyperbole, etc.

The central message of the text, however, is perhaps more subjective. One possible interpretation of this particular extract could be that Gilbert wishes to express the idea that some of the most significant experiences in life happen spontaneously. This idea is reflected in the way she characterises herself as impulsive, or "careless"; she hasn't fully prepared for this part of her journey, having based her decision to go to Bali only on the Medicine Man's "prophecy". Or we could say that some events or experiences which may seem insignificant in the moment take on greater significance when we have the ability to reflect on them at a later time. There is nothing in the extract to directly suggest this theme; however, the fact that she has included it in her memoir (and in such detail) indicates that it was a significant moment in her journey.

■ Tone and mood

Another aspect of a text which you will notice on an initial reading is tone and mood. Tone is the attitude of the writer or speaker towards his or her subject. Mood is the feeling that is evoked in the reader (or audience) as a result of the tone that is set. In literature, mood is often referred to as atmosphere; in a non-literary text, we can consider mood more like a state of mind.

Tone and mood are conveyed through language, so as you move towards a deeper level of understanding you will need to consider what – and how – specific elements of style shape the tone and mood of a text.

When describing tone and mood, it is important to use specific, precise adjectives. A text may appear to have a casual style, but you would not necessarily say that it has a casual tone; casual is a bit too vague. Below are some examples of words that you could use to characterise tone and mood. These lists are by no means exhaustive; you may indeed be able to think of many more words to add to this list. Some words may also be applicable to both tone and mood.

Tone words		Mood words	
Aggressive	Mysterious	Bittersweet	Idyllic
Angry	Nonchalant	Bleak	Indolent
Attached/ detached	Playful	Cheerful	Inspired
Bitter	Poignant	Confident	Motivated
Compassionate	Serious	Content	Relaxed
Encouraging	Suspenseful	Disappointed	Relieved
Friendly	Sympathetic	Eerie	Satisfied
Gory	Tasteful/ distasteful	Enraged	Tense
Haunting	Tender	Furious	Uncertain
Humourous	Witty	Gloomy	
Innocent		Hopeless	

KEY TERMS

Diction – the words chosen in a text

Syntax – the arrangement of words in a sentence or text



■ Example: The tone of a tweet

Social media texts, such as blogs and tweets, are useful for exploring tone and mood. With immediate, unfiltered access to a global audience, these text types are often characterised by a casual, conversational style; their interactive nature almost encourages this style, with fellow users replying and re-tweeting to voice their approval or disapproval or simply to carry on the conversation.

Tweets, in particular, reflect a very distinctive tone; with only a limited number of characters at one's disposal, the author of a tweet must pay careful consideration to word choice (**diction**), sentence structure and punctuation, and **syntax** to convey the intended attitude. President Donald Trump is one of the most famous Twitter users to date since the platform's release in 2006. Trump's tweets are often designed to provoke an emotional response in the audience – in both his followers and his critics – like the one you can access in the QR code.

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About the authors

Carolyn and **Angela** also authored *Literary Analysis for English Literature for the IB Diploma: Skills for Success* (Hodder, 2019).

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