

Persuasive language techniques



The **persuasive language techniques** that writers and speakers use to influence their readers and listeners are just like the **large bag of tricks** that a magician may have.

The magician tries to persuade us to believe what we see. A writer or speaker uses 'tricks' (called 'techniques' or 'ploys') to persuade readers or listeners to believe what he/she is writing or saying.

1 Puns are plays upon words that can have more than one meaning. They attract our attention and make us consider what the writer/speaker is trying to emphasise.

Example

'The Games people played' (a newspaper headline at the time of the 2004 Olympic Games)

The straightforward meaning suggests it is about the Ancient Olympic Games. The more subtle meaning is that even in the past people did not play the game fairly. Hence it is a **pun** upon the words 'games' and 'played'. It aims to suggest that unfair means of winning, such as drugs today, are not new.

2 Repetition, of words, phrases or ideas, emphasises and thus seeks to make us believe whatever is being repeated.

Example

'Drugs are a serious problem ... drugs are a very serious matter.'

3 Imagery involves using words to create a picture in our minds. This involves us and makes us feel certain emotions.

Example

'Silent cars will glide around city streets, rooftop panels harnessing the sun's energy.'

This positive picture aims to make us feel that solar power will cut noise and air pollution and hence support such initiatives.

4 Rhetorical questions have the idea of agreement built into to them and thus make it difficult to disagree.

Example

That isn't the message we want to send our children about drugs, is it?

HINT

Persuasive language is closely related to bias – the techniques tend to be clustered around all good or all bad impressions of the topic.

- 5 **Comparisons** of similar things or **contrasts** between different things can be used to influence us to agree with or condemn certain proposals or actions.

Example

'We lock chimpanzees in small metal cages in experimental laboratories; imagine locking a two- or three-year-old child in a metal box and then leaving him or her there for months.'

- 6 **Alliteration** means using words that begin with the same consonant. It is often used to catch our attention or to emphasise.

Example

'Snow's melting moment a dam disappointment.'

This example is also a play upon words as 'melting moments' are also biscuits that dissolve easily and 'dam disappointment' sounds like a curse even though it relates to water storages not being filled by melting snow. Advertisers often use this ploy.

- 7 **Anecdotes** are brief stories. They are often used to make an appeal more personal or to emphasise that real people are involved and that they are not just statistics.

Example

'I have lived in Port Lachlan all my life. In all that time I have been a keen fisherman and have spent many pleasant hours on the jetty, the rocks and the beaches pursuing my favourite pastime.'

- 8 **Emotional appeals** to people's sense of fairness, fears about health and safety, their children, pride or vanity, patriotism etc. are used to compel agreement.

Example

'Would you like a toxic dump just over your back fence?'

This seeks to play upon people's fears about health and safety. It is also a rhetorical question.

- 9 **Positively or negatively loaded language** (that is, words with either positive or negative connotations that make us think well or badly about something) is intended to make us share the negative or positive view.

Example

'I am not a conman, I am setting up a valid commercial enterprise.'

- 10 **Inclusive** or **unifying** words and **exclusive** or **divisive** words (that is, words that count you in, such as '*we, our, us, all Australians*', or those that count you out, such as '*they, them, you, you people*') are intended to make us believe we are on the same side as the writer or speaker, or against them.

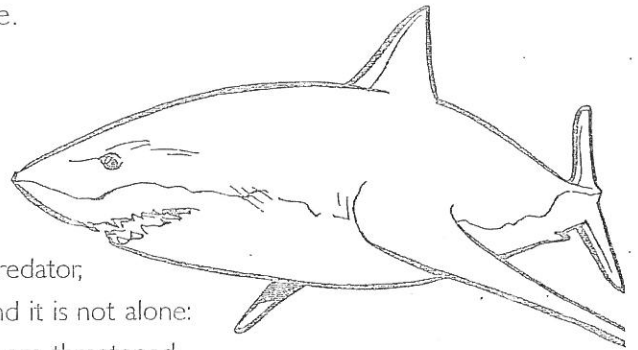
As no-one likes to be excluded, inclusive words become strongly persuasive.

Here are some samples of persuasive language.

Sample 1

Shark tooth trade threatens great whites

They lurk deep within the grey-green depths of the ocean; are called Jaws, man-eaters and mementoes; but in reality the great white shark, the apex marine predator, is in deep trouble and in need of a little protection. And it is not alone: more than 5000 species – from insects to elephants – are threatened with extinction. For the great white, the combination of trade in their teeth, fins and jaws, recreational fishing, caged diving with sharks and the encroachments of coastal fisheries have all contributed to diminishing populations. Human or shark; which is the predator?



Sample 2

Graffiti can't kill

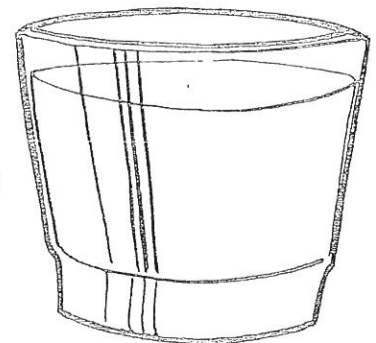
So graffiti's worse than drink-driving, is it? It has been proposed that minors found guilty of graffiti be punished by prohibition from gaining a car licence when they reach adulthood. What a ridiculous idea! Is it fair to punish adults for crimes committed in childhood? If so, should a child convicted of shop stealing be ineligible for a car loan in adulthood? Or should students who do not do their homework be prevented from receiving unemployment benefits if they cannot find work after leaving school? Children do not think like adults. If this proposal is adopted, graffiti would have the same punishment as serious levels of drink-driving. Surely a ludicrous situation! Graffiti can't kill!

Sample 3

Waste water!

Can we Australians afford to be so careless? Instead of recycling grey-water, we use drinkable water on our gardens, while thousands in refugee camps in parched areas of Sudan do not have any clean drinking water. Politicians argue about an enclosed pipeline in north-western Victoria and so millions of litres of water that could be used for irrigation and to replenish dams evaporate. Are they acting wisely? And how many of us stay in the shower for more than five minutes? When my grandmother was a child on a farm, all members of her family only bathed once a week, and Monday was washing day! They had to rely on rain to fill their tanks. They could not waste water. Yet Australia has more than enough water for everyone's needs. It's just that between 80 and 90 per cent of it falls north of the Tropic of Capricorn, in the largely uninhabited areas of Western Australia, the Northern Territory and Queensland. Fifty per cent evaporates and the rest runs off into the sea. The flow to the sea from the Ord River in Western Australia is second only to the Amazon River in South America. Visionary people have talked of diverting this water south. As little as 3 per cent of it would save Australia's sick, depleted rivers. We must not be daunted by the task.

We must call for action to use our water wisely now!



Match the language techniques in the box to the statements. You may use some of these terms more than once. (The first letters have been provided in some of the harder examples.)

<p>pun</p> <p>imagery</p> <p>comparison/contrast</p> <p>anecdote</p> <p>negative/positive</p> <p>inclusive/exclusive words</p>	<p>repetition</p> <p>rhetorical question</p> <p>alliteration</p> <p>emotional appeal</p> <p>language</p>
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- 1 They lurk deep within the grey-green depths of the ocean.
i _____
- 2 What a ridiculous idea! Surely a ludicrous situation!
r _____
- 3 If so should a child convicted of shop stealing be ineligible for a car loan in adulthood?
c _____ and r _____
- 4 'Shark tooth trade threatens the great white' a _____
- 5 When my grandmother was a child on a farm, all members of her family only bathed once a week, and Monday was washing day! They had to rely on rain to fill their tanks a _____
- 6 Is it fair to punish adults for crimes committed in childhood?
r _____ and em _____
- 7 Waste water p _____ and a _____
- 8 Visionary people po _____
- 9 'We use drinkable water on our gardens ... thousands in refugee camps ... do not have clean drinking water' em _____ and
c _____
- 10 Australia's sick, depleted rivers n _____
- 11 Are they acting wisely? r _____ and ex _____



WRITING CHALLENGE

Make up five advertisements that use alliteration and/or rhetorical questions. Illustrate them.

1 Select examples of the following devices from the samples provided. Do not use the same answer for two questions. *Note:* some sentences have more than one language device in them.

(a) Give two examples of *negatively loaded language* from samples 1 and 3 and say what negative qualities they suggest to readers.

(b) Give one example of a *rhetorical question* from any sample and say what it is trying to make readers think.

(c) Give one example of *inclusive language* and one of *exclusive language* from Sample 3. Say what they are trying to make readers feel.

(d) State one sentence or question that is an *emotional appeal* that makes us feel guilty. _____

(e) Give one example of a *comparison* from Sample 2. Say what is being compared. _____

2 Complete these statements.

(a) A pun is a play _____.

(b) Repetition, of words, phrases or ideas, is used to _____.

(c) Imagery both makes us _____ and _____.

(d) 'crimes committed in childhood' is an example of _____ because _____.

(e) An anecdote is a _____ that _____.



WRITING CHALLENGE

Write three short anecdotes and state to what sort of issue they could relate. Hint: Consider issues such as schoolyard bullying and the dangers of smoking.

Select an example of each of the following and state how they aim to make readers feel and thus persuade them to share the view of the writer.

- 1 A contrast (Sample 1) _____

- 2 A comparison (Sample 2) _____

- 3 A pun (Sample 3) _____

- 4 Imagery (Sample 1) _____

- 5 Repetition (Sample 3) _____

- 6 A rhetorical question (Sample 1, 2 or 3) _____

- 7 Alliteration (Sample 1, 2 or 3) _____

- 8 An emotional appeal (Sample 1, 2 or 3) _____

- 9 One example of negative language and one of positive language.
(Sample 1, 2 or 3) _____

- 10 One example of inclusive language and one of exclusive language.
(Sample 2 or 3) _____



WRITING CHALLENGE

Write a paragraph showing how you would persuade your friend (without hurting his/her feelings) that some of the latest fashion trends are not worth following. Include an illustration if you wish.