

English Language

Language Levels targeting AO1, AO2 and AO3:
guidance to support the teaching of language levels
across A level English Language

Applying the Language Levels to Support Interpretation and Evaluation

Writing an Overview

The ability to write an overview which draws texts together in a meaningful way is an essential skill. Practising picking out some key features from a group of texts or a set of data is crucial in moving away from feature-spotting. It forces learners to engage with the meaning and to think about what a writer or speaker is trying to communicate.

A short overview in the introduction can frame the analysis by focusing immediately on meaning. It sets the stage for an analytical exploration of the effects created by lexical and grammatical features. This is a difficult skill, particularly in an examination situation, so learners need to practise.

There are many ways of tackling an overview, and each reader's response is likely to be different. It gives learners the opportunity to highlight what they think is particularly interesting about a set of data or linked texts in the light of an essay question.

Below is a sample overview of the 'Three Bears' texts in the **Grammar Teaching and Learning Activities**:

Typical of a story with its origins in the oral tradition, both Extract 1 and Extract 2 are very patterned, with repeated narrative sequences and predictable lexical choices. The repetition of concrete nouns such as "porridge" and "chair" define the key events of the plot; and terms of address such as the noun phrase "the little old Woman", the proper noun "Goldilocks" and repeated references to the bears define the participants. Where Text 1 distinguishes between the bears according to their size with defining attributive adjectives ("Great, Huge", "Middle" and the asyndetic list of synonyms "Little, Small, Wee"), Text 2 uses pre-modifying nouns reflecting family relationships ("Daddy", "Mummy", "Baby"). This humanises the animal characters, making them more accessible for the target audience (young readers). Both texts use the same basic narrative structure, but create a different tenor through the characterisation. The representation of the main protagonist as either a nasty old woman or as a nosy young girl changes our response to the events which take place and this is reflected in the language and style of each writer.

AO3

- context set (oral tradition)
- understanding of genre (narrative structure, characterisation)
- some sense of audience introduced for Text 2

AO4

- connections created
- similarities: narrative structure, predictable lexical choices
- differences: tenor, characterisation

In this example, both texts are set in context and some initial points are made about their similarities and differences. This sets up a broad base for discussion which can be developed in the body of the essay. The terminology underpins points linked to interpretative discussion, identifying word classes, word position and function.

An equally valid approach is to provide an overview of one text, with links created later in overviews of the other texts. The overview below is based on the travel writing texts in the Component 2 sample assessment material, 'Language Change Over Time'.

Hariot seems very enthusiastic about his subject and this is typical of travel writing. He uses the common noun "Tobacco" and the Spanish noun "vppówoc" along with the hypernym "herbe" to focus attention on the plant. In fact, almost eighteen lines of the extract are dedicated to describing tobacco. The use of an existential sentence creates emphasis by putting the post-modified noun phrase in an emphatic position after the dummy subject "There". His response is in contrast to the attitudes we hold today and draws attention to the period in which the text was written.

One major difference between Text A and Text B is seen in the attitude of the writers. Where Hariot is excited by his travelling, Smollet seems disappointed. His style is much more descriptive and his disapproving mood is clear from the connotations of attributive adjectives such as "musty" and "miserable" and predicative adjectives such as "dismal" and "filthy". Hariot's description of his travels is report-like, but Smollet's response is very personal. Travel writing seems to have become a more entertaining genre where the personality of the writer is an important part of the text.

AO3

- sense of genre and how it shapes language choices
- awareness of the focus of Text A

AO4

- awareness of language change over time e.g. attitudes
- differences between texts explicitly linked to changes in genre

Using linguistic knowledge to underpin an exploration of meaning

Terminology should always be used to support discussion of form, meaning and contextual factors. If you consider the sample overview on the travel writing extracts, you will see from the underlined terms that a number of language levels are addressed and that each term is tied to a comment on meaning or genre. There is no feature-spotting because language knowledge is underpinning critical comment. This is what learners must aim for—to demonstrate their personal interpretation and evaluation of a text, using associated terminology and language concepts to provide evidence for their point of view.

The sample analysis below (based on the travel writing extracts in the Component 2 specimen paper) uses terminology, but the result is undeveloped because there is no engagement with the meaning:

Text A is set in the first person providing Hariot's personal opinions on the new land, using the first person pronoun "I" to provide information and Hariot's positive attitude and opinion towards Virginia. Hariot uses mainly declarative sentences and the definite article "The" is used frequently to provide information to the text and provide the reader with Hariot's positive attitude.

AO3

- limited reference to context ('new land'), but undeveloped

This analysis uses a few basic terms (mainly word class), but fails to engage with the text. The points made are little more than feature-spotting because the comment is so broad (e.g. 'provide information'). There is the opportunity for some interesting discussion about Hariot's 'personal opinions' following from the point about first person pronouns, but this is not developed. Reading the sample, we would have no idea that the extract is about Hariot's discovery of tobacco—something he sees as a cure for all British ailments. The use of the declarative mood is rarely worthy of comment because it is the default mode of all spoken and written discourse, and determiners provide a very limited kind of information. In addition, the examples cited are not context specific so once again opportunities for exploring meaning are missed.

The sample analysis below is based on the spoken transcripts in Section A of the Component 1 specimen paper, 'Language Concepts and Issues':

Verb contractions are used by the presenters (e.g. "we're", "it's", "can't") and the contributors (e.g. "you're", "we've", "haven't"). This elision is typical of spoken language—even when it is prescribed for the professional Radio 1 news team. Colloquial lexis, on the other hand, is more evident in the words spoken by the members of the public. Vague idiomatic expressions such as the indefinite noun phrase "some guy" and the filler "like" (l.39) show that their speech is informal and spontaneous. Since the target audience is younger than for Text B, listeners are more likely to identify with the experiences of people who sound like them. One speaker, MAN, uses a dialect form. There is non-standard agreement between a third person plural subject and third person singular verb (e.g. "if people wasn't ...") and in the replacement of an initial position fricative /ð/ with the plosive /d/ in the pronunciation of /dæ/ for the determiner 'the'. This is perhaps a form of AAVE, or may be typical of an East London dialect since the report is focusing on the Olympics and its effect on Newham. The different voices provide variety in the newsreport and help the audience to engage when there are no visual cues to support their understanding.

AO1

- using a range of language levels (e.g. phonology, lexis, grammar, pragmatics)
- providing well-chosen examples to demonstrate understanding of terms
- relevant analysis
- coherent style

AO3

- awareness of genre (newsreporting)
- understanding of language and its relationship with the target audience
- tentative exploration of the link between geographical location and dialect forms

This sample analysis demonstrates how the use of terminology should be linked to a discussion of meaning and the effects created. There is a clear sense of the contextual factors and accurate identification of relevant language features.

The importance of engaging with unseen texts

It is crucial for learners to feel confident with selecting terminology that is relevant for the point they wish to make. There is no need to write a paragraph on each 'level' of the 'Language Levels', nor is there any need for learners to draw tree diagrams or annotate examples with function and form labels. These are useful tools as part of building confidence in recognising and describing key language features, but in writing extended responses the focus should be on using terminology to explore meaning in the light of a focused question.