The Essential List of Language Features for English

Persuasive Devices

A persuasive device is a type of language feature that expresses and supports an opinion, making it stand out. The following are some specific techniques.

Contrast

A situation or statement where two opposing things are presented, often to create favour for one or highlight their differences.

Example: In Despicable Me, Gru's house is black and angular, contrasted with the more rounded and lightly coloured houses of the neighbours.

Analogy

Like contrast, analogies are not always a persuasive device, but they can be used powerfully as one. The device contrasts two ideas to create an otherwise unstated relationship between them. It's often used to prove an already established argument.

Example: In Luka Lesson's poetry, he compares a sword and spoken word, implying the power of language.

Language Techniques

Allusion

This means a subtle reference to an event, person, text, place, you name it that readers may infer. Allusions are often made in passing, but reveal deeper meaning in the text.

Example: In Sylvia Plath's 'Daddy', Plath uses allusions to Hitler to emphasise the foul character of her father.

Ambiguity

Often in texts, the ending of a story or line is left for the reader to determine. This is particularly common in postmodern texts.

Authors who use ambiguity do not explicitly state what has happened to a character or plot. They may offer some clue for the reader to decipher, or they may keep it completely open-ended.

This encourages readers to think critically and engage more deeply with the text.

Example: At the end of Inception (Christopher Nolan), we do not know whether the main character is in reality or dreaming. This is shown through a camera cut just as audiences feel they are about to find out.

Assonance

A technique that you probably know, but don't realise it!

Assonance is like alliteration but emphasises vowel sounds being repeated. This is often at the start of words, but it can include repetition of vowels within words, too.

Example: "See ya later skater" repeats the 'e' and 'a' vowels, in this case creating a rhyming sequence. "'Zooper Dooper' (every Aussie kid's favourite ice block) repeats the 'o'.

Connotation

Some words or phrases evoke certain feelings for a reader. This can be because of how they sound or feel, historical context or pop culture.

Example: 'Beautiful' and 'cute', while both describing how something is visually appealing, have different connotations. 'Beautiful' creates a sense of

grace, elegance and maturity, while 'cute' is typically associated with youth and innocence.

Euphemism

When a mild or "polite" expression is used instead of a vulgar or blunt term, it is a euphemism.

Example: We often say "passed away" instead of referring to death directly.

Figurative Language

A little like connotation or euphemism, figurative language is a type of language feature used when certain words have meanings behind what is really being said. You can think of this like an extended metaphor. This type of language is particularly common in poetry.

Example: *"A handsome manor house grew out of darkness at the end of the straight drive."* (JK Rowling, Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows)

Hyperbole

The deliberate exaggeration of a topic for emphasis or humour. Often, hyperbole is used in already emotional situations to gain greater reaction.

Example: *"I was so exhausted that I slept for ten days."*

Imagery

Language that creates a mental picture of the topic it talks about, often to enhance the mood behind a text.

Example: *"The leaves created a blanket on the ground, with all kinds of red and gold hues to match my boots."*

Irony

When language is used to express somebody's meaning or situation, that generally means the opposite. Irony is often a tip-of-the-tongue kind of humour that points out awkward or funny situations.

Example: Saying "isn't this great weather?" right before storm hits.

Simile

Often, two things are compared to one another by describing one thing as being 'like' the other. This can create contrast or offer more power to a concept.

Usually similes are phrased with the words 'like' or 'as'.

Example: *"He roared like a lion."*

Juxtaposition

When two things that are generally very opposite are placed next to each other, creating a stark contrast.

Example: A brand new building standing next to an old, historical one.

Metaphor

Stating that something 'is' another thing to draw comparison or deeper understanding to a text. Often, figurative meanings can give the reader a greater appreciation of what is written.

Some metaphors appear continually throughout a text and help to shape the narrative arc. These are known as extended metaphors.

Example: "She had once been a great fortress, keeping secrets closely hidden.

Onomatopoeia

A word that sounds exactly like what it represents, allowing the reader to 'hear' the text.

Example: Pop, snap, simmer, bubble, slop.

Oxymoron

An oxymoron is a type of language feature where two words or concepts that contradict each otehr are used to create a complex idea, while maintaining some sense.

Example: "The dinner was awfully good."

Rhetorical Question

A question that has a very obvious answer, which the author does not expect to receive. Often rhetorical questions are used to make the audience think deeply about a topic. They can also provide humour and sarcasm.

Example: "Did you know that thousands of plastic bags wash up on beaches each year?"

Sibilance

Sibilance sort of sounds like what it is! This technique is like alliteration, but when all 's' sounds are used. It can add an air of mystery or danger to a character, or it can be soft and flowing.

Example: When the snake talks in The Jungle King movie, she often uses several 's' words in a row to highlight her hissing and sound more dangerous.

Sound Devices

This is a blanket term for techniques often used within a text to focus on the sounds words produce and how they relate to each other. This can be important for rhyming schemes and tempo.

You'll find many examples of this in poetry or songs.

Example: Rhythm, rhyme, resonance, etc.

Modality

The strength or force of a word, with low modality words being passive while high modality words are forceful.

Characters giving speeches or rallying crowds would use high modality words, as they raise the intensity and strength of the language and scene.

Exclamation

This is one form of showing modality within a text. Exclamation marks generally suggest high modality, or shock, excitement and anger. This can express the tone of dialogue being written.

Example: "This is the best day of my life!" elicits a response of elation.

Tone and Mood

Like the atmosphere, tone or mood is about creating certain feelings within a text. This time, it focusses more on the emotions the author has towards very specific subjects, rather than the scene as a whole.

Example: *The enemy? His sense of duty was no less that yours, I deem. You wonder what his name was, where he came from. And if he was really evil at heart. […] War will make corpses of us all."* (J. R. R. Tolkien, Lord of the Rings)

This dialogue expresses a mood of distaste for war and that it only leads to death, reflecting Tolkien's own views.

Syntax

Syntax is all about specific sentence structure and how the construction of words into a sentence creates meaning. This is a huge topic (in fact, people do entire degrees on it).

In a simple sense, syntax affects the readability and tone of a certain text. Short sentences create urgency, while compound sentences can create a more passive flow.

Example: "I could hear him behind me. Just one step off. I ran. I ran."

Grammatical and Story Structures

Allegory

This type of language feature is used when a story or narrative has two meanings that are presented. One is overt, or obvious. The other may be metaphoric and hidden. Often, this second meaning forms commentary around social or political aspects of the narrative.

Example: Narnia is often viewed as an allegory for the Bible, with Aslan as a symbol of Jesus. This creates religious understanding that runs alongside the main plot.

Antithesis

Putting two sentences, people or situations that are entirely different next to each other or in immediate succession.

This technique can increase tension, help audiences weigh up different scenarios or allow characters to balance one another out.

Example: *"If you fail to plan, you plan to fail."*

Archetype

Archetypes are incredibly important in shaping stories. These characters or objects have recognisable tropes, often progressed across different texts by various authors.

This technique can add an element of predictability or certainty to a piece, but it can also be subverted to create great plot twists.

Example: Cady in Mean Girls and Mia in The Princess Diaries fit the archetype of a nerdy girl who is transformed.

Atmosphere

Atmosphere, or mood, is vital in creating a compelling story. It refers to the feeling created by a scene, situation or text. It's often driven by careful word choice. You might think of it a little like mise en scène in a movie, but in written form.

Example: *"It was a cruel day, the bright orange blaze ripped through the treetops as I stood and watched it ravage homes, helpless."*

Characterisation

Characters are first introduced in a certain light, then formed through the arc of the story, often by their own actions or the actions of those around them.

You know the characterisation of a person is strong if you can imagine how they would react in a situation they are not already in.

Example: Sybil in Downton Abbey is characterised as being forthright and rebellious. Through her relationships, her empathetic side is drawn out.

Cliché

Overused expressions that create instant meaning. Sometimes cliches can be annoying, but when used effectively, they create humour and momentum.

Example: *"He ran like the wind."*

Context

The time, place and social setting in which a text was written or set. Often, this determines the values and perspectives within a certain text.

It's important to understand three kinds of contexts within text. First, we have **literary** (what was being written and created at the time of writing), **historical** (what was going on in the border world when the text was written), and **personal** (who the author was and what they had experienced).

On top of this, there's also the **internal context** of where the text is set, which may be different from the context of when it was written.

Example: Picasso's painting 'Guernica' was informed by the context of pre-WW2 Europe, so Picasso used blue and red in the work to symbolise anti-war sentiment.

Linear and Non-linear Narrative

Narratives in this context are about how a text is structured to create meaning.

Linear narratives follow the same time sequence as our usual days — always moving forward, in sequential order. A non-linear narrative jumps around in time to draw the audience's attention to different elements.

You will notice that it's quite rare for a novel or movie to be purely linear, as some non-linear elements break up pacing.

Example: The Age of Adeline is a film that follows a non-linear narrative.

Frame Narrative

Sometimes, texts present a 'story within a story', where the main narrative is being told by someone outside of the narrative itself. This can add suspense of an extra layer of context.

Example: In Little Women, Jo tells the story through her book by the same name.

Intertextuality

When a text references another text, it's known as intertextuality. This can be very overt, or it can be an allusion designed only for those who know both texts to pick up on it.

Example: Ten Things I Hate About You is based on and makes references to The Taming Of The Shrew.

Foreshadowing

When a situation is hinted at before it actually occurs. This is usually done by drawing audience attention to a particular subject or item that drops hints.

Example: In Juno, the main character by the same name starts displaying pregnancy symptoms before she actually takes a test.

Setting

The location that a narrative is placed in, like an internal context. This often affects the arc of the story.

Example: Abandoned castles and stormy moors are classic settings used in Gothic texts, while teen dramas are typically set in high schools and suburban towns.

Form

The structure of a text that comes from the text type, broader context and stylistic choices of the author. This may include the way language is structured or different sentence choices.

Example: Divergent and The Hunger Games are both survival young adult novels, yet the authors' choices and context of writing create differing themes.

Icons

An object or subject that symbolises a much larger element of the story. Hero characters often have a symbol attached as a way to enhance meaning and importance.

Example: Superman is symbolised by his cape, Katniss by a Mockingjay, etc.

Omission

Sometimes elements are intentionally left out of a text by the author. This is called omission, and it leaves a level of ambiguity for audiences to 'fill in the blank'. Sometimes, an ending scenario can be implied but this is not always the case.

Example: At the end of the book, [The Great Gatsby](), the audience isn't told explicitly what happens to each character, but they are given enough information to infer an ending.

Parallels

Like so many language features, parallels create a contrast between two characters or plot points, allowing links to be formed between them. This is often seen if two plots run next to each other, or two characters with similar features but differing stories are introduced.

Example: In the film, Fantastic Mr Fox, Ash follows his father and lives a younger version of his life. However, he makes different decisions that reveal Mr Fox's mistakes to himself.

Pathetic Fallacy

When you give a non-human object feelings or senses, you are using pathetic fallacy. This is most commonly associated with weather.

Example: "The wind was angry as it ran through the trees."

Dramatic Irony

When a story is structured to provide the audience with an 'inside scoop' that characters do not know about. This is often shown through different phrasing to create tension.

Example: In [Hamlet](), revolving scenes allow the audience to see who is plotting to kill, without it being given away to characters. This creates suspense and betrayals of trust.

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