PART 3: Persuasive Language

Metalanguage and persuasive strategies

To analyse persuasive media texts, we need to use specific language to explain how the authors are attempting to achieve their purposes—a ‘language about language’, if you like. So in this area of study, the word metalanguage refers primarily to any key terms that help to explain the specific language choices or strategies used by authors to achieve their purpose. Any nouns used to identify language choices or persuasive strategies—such as exaggeration or euphemism—are metalanguage terms.

In this context, the word ‘language’ is being used in a very broad sense to include:

**Verbal language**: the use of words, in either written or spoken form.

**Non-verbal language**: language which communicates without the use of words, for example, body language (facial expressions, gestures), sound and music. This category also includes visual language. **Visual language**: for example, images, colours, symbols, framing and camera angles.

Clearly there is a huge range of ways in which we can persuade others to share a point of view, and those ways are dependent on the context, purpose, audience and form. Many of the terms you will need to know are listed in the metalanguage table on the following pages, and will be explained on the pages that follow. (Remember that you also have an extensive Glossary at the back of the book!) Try to familiarise yourself with them, to enable you to better analyse how authors use language to position and persuade. Remember that the aim is not simply to identify examples of these strategies, but to:

explain how they are helping to position and persuade in the context of the author’s overall point of view.

Note also that the right-hand column of the table offers only generalised examples of the potential purposes and impacts of each strategy—be sure to:

always consider the specific purpose and impact of each strategy, in the context of the point of view being presented.

**YOUR TURN**

Working with a partner, test your knowledge of the metalanguage terms in the table over the page by trying to provide each other with a definition, and then an example, of specific terms.

Try to classify each of the metalanguage terms as verbal, non-verbal or visual language.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Metalanguage</th>
<th>Examples</th>
<th>Possible purposes and impacts/effects</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>active and passive voice</strong></td>
<td>active: <em>they released the report</em></td>
<td>o active: direct, clear</td>
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<td></td>
<td>passive: <em>the report was released</em></td>
<td>o passive: indirect, detached</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>adjectives</strong></td>
<td>'A stirring speech'</td>
<td>o adds detail to make text more interesting—provides description</td>
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<td></td>
<td>'Her perplexing approach'</td>
<td>o can imply something positive/negative</td>
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<td></td>
<td>'Sydney's slippery slide' (alliteration)</td>
<td>o adds emphasis, reinforces meaning</td>
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<td></td>
<td>'The elite meet-and-greet' (assonance)</td>
<td>o draws attention to key words or ideas</td>
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<td></td>
<td>'long-range weapons don’t discriminate; we are all a target' (appeal to a sense of insecurity)</td>
<td>o can create an emotive image</td>
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<td></td>
<td>'Sadly, Aboriginal health and education are responsibilities we have still to address' (appeal to a sense of social justice)</td>
<td>o memorable</td>
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<td><strong>appeals</strong></td>
<td>'Her comments are little more than adolescent gibberish' (mudslinging, ridicule)</td>
<td>o triggers an emotional response.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>'teachers must be held accountable for these appalling literacy levels' (scapegoating)</td>
<td>o evokes feelings of guilt, shame, concern, fear, or conversely of pride, honour, satisfaction, etc.</td>
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<td><strong>attack</strong></td>
<td>'A gold medal performance by the athletes'</td>
<td>o belittles opponent's arguments, may lend weight to those of author</td>
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<td></td>
<td>'Take a bow, West Coast Eagles'</td>
<td>o can help author argue from position of authority</td>
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<td></td>
<td>'World-class city'</td>
<td>o can offend or alienate audience if overdone</td>
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<td><strong>bias</strong></td>
<td>an advertisement for the Federal Liberal Party announcing benefits of its changes to Australia's workplace legislation</td>
<td>o can strengthen argument if bias seems relevant and within context, and if author has some authority</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>an opinion piece critiquing Australia's involvement in Iraq written by an aid volunteer</td>
<td>o can undermine argument if disproportionate to context</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>cliché</strong></td>
<td>'They are certainly up the creek now'</td>
<td>o can sway audience by appealing to something with which they are familiar</td>
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<td></td>
<td>'Who gives a toss about the Queen anyway?'</td>
<td>o may make audience feel informed</td>
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<td></td>
<td>'The whole policy is a dog's breakfast'</td>
<td>o may alienate sophisticated audience</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>o can provide humour</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>o may offend a conservative audience</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>o establishes informal register (friendly, one of us, on the level)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
| **Connotation** | *The children were slaughtered as they slopped*  
*Her reckless behaviour was questioned*  
*The Anzac legend* | *Encourages audience (either subtly or overtly) to accept an implication*  
*Seeks to persuade audience to share particular view of person or event* |
|---|---|---|
| **Design, Structure** | *A letter from a principal on formal school letterhead paper*  
*A website's appearance; consideration of how presentation appeals to certain demographics* | *Persuades through association*  
*Establishes genre and context*  
*Can manipulate audience emotions* |
| **Evidence** | *The city's 1.5 million households used over 500 billion litres of water* (statistics)  
*Wind power generates fewer pollutants than the burning of fossil fuels* (fact) | *Can lend argument weight and author credibility if employed responsibly*  
*Can undermine argument if used inappropriately or if overused* |
| **Formal, Informal Language** | *Success can be facilitated only through the employment of sound educational principles in a supportive learning environment* (formal)  
*How do you like them apples?* (informal)  
*She'll be right, mate* (informal) | *Formal: creates sophisticated, often authoritative style, can lend weight to argument and command respect; can sound pretentious out of context*  
*Informal: conversational, establishes a rapport with audience, humorous, appeals to sense of identity; can alienate if overused or out of context* |
| **Generalisation** | *This poor behaviour was modelled by the parents, and it is therefore ultimately a parental responsibility*  
*It is clear from the evidence at this school that all girls benefit from single-sex VCE classes* | *Seeks to validate a theory or contention, sometimes dubiously*  
*Can be inferred to be evidence by a naive audience*  
*Can detract from or undermine an argument if unrealistic or illogical* |
| **Gesture** | *An interviewee folding his arms and crossing his legs to indicate dissatisfaction*  
*A speaker pointing to an idea on a slide* | *Helps to convey arguments and moods*  
*Can influence a subject by making them feel either welcome or intimidated* |
| **Humour** | *George Dubya Bush and his weapons of mass distraction*  
*Gillard and Rudd came out of the conference room licking their lips like a couple of lovestruck Cheshire cats* | *Often denigrates the subject*  
*Can provide a more engaging and friendly tone*  
*Can sway an audience by having them enter into the joke* |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language Strategies</th>
<th>Example sentences</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>hyperbole, exaggeration</td>
<td>'Every weekend the city's overrun by boggles'</td>
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<tr>
<td>imagery, figurative language</td>
<td>'Australia is a fabric woven of many colours' (metaphor)</td>
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<tr>
<td>inclusive and exclusive language</td>
<td>'We all have a role to play in the conservation of our precious resources' (inclusive—positive)</td>
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<td>irony</td>
<td>'The war on terror has produced a volatile environment more susceptible to terrorist forces'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>logic</td>
<td>'Research has proven that a prison term for a minor offence only hampers rehabilitation; therefore we must adopt a new approach, as locking people up simply does not work'</td>
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<tr>
<td>nouns</td>
<td>'An Australian legend'</td>
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<td>repetition</td>
<td>'We cannot imagine the horrors they faced; cannot imagine the strength of their spirit. And we cannot allow it to happen again' Martin Luther King's famous repetition of 'I have a dream' in his 1963 address</td>
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</table>
rhetorical question
question that does not require an answer

'Did anyone listen to the garbage he was spouting? Was anyone awake? And do I really have to wait another four years for this baboon to leave office?'
'And why do we do this? Because we are fair'

encourages audience to consider issue and accept author's answer
can imply that answer is obvious and that anyone who disagrees is foolish
can evoke emotional response

sarcasm
use of irony to mock or to show contempt, by implying the opposite of what is actually said

'Great—we can now look forward to longer ticket queues, sweltering rides and more train rage. I for one am excited beyond belief'
'Why stop at 30 students to a class when we can cram at least 15 more in?'

can provide humour
serves to mock or question the logic of a situation; undermines its validity
can backfire if used excessively or in the wrong context

satire
use of either exaggeration or caricature to expose, criticise or ridicule

television programs such as Real Stories, The Chaser's War on Everything and Summer Heights High are satirical in nature political cartoons

makes a point in a humorous fashion
serves to mock or question a situation
can engender hostility in a sensitive audience

sensationalism
use of provocative language and images, and exaggeration

'Overseas fee-paying students stealing our university places!'
'Juvenile joyriders terrorise community!'
'Paris Hilton ‘exposed’ again!'

appeals to an audience's curiosity and prejudices
reinforces stereotypes
can offend or alienate critical audiences

sound and sound effects
use of music, effects and other audio to enhance a multimodal text

background music during a current affairs report to create a particular mood
song playing on a website to associate a product with a particular mood or demographic

manipulates audience's emotions
persuades through association (e.g. classical music = 'sophisticated')
sound effects can make a text seem either more 'realistic' or more exciting

verbs
‘doing’ words or phrases

'She sprayed her response at the audience'
'As he staggered down the aisle it became clear—here was a man who had lost all control'

adds detail to make text more specific—provides the action
can imply something positive/negative

vocabulary choice
careful selection of particular words—nouns, verbs and adjectives—with a positive or negative connotation

'terrorist' versus 'freedom fighter'
'health issue' versus 'health crisis'

paints a subject in a flattering or unflattering light
subtly or overtly supports a particular point of view