Metalanguage

Metalanguage is the term given to the words and phrases we use to discuss language conventions and usage. The following list of persuasive techniques is metalanguage that can help to describe how language is being used to present a point of view.

Note: The right-hand column lists generalised examples. Be sure to consider the *specific* purpose and effect of each technique in the context of the point of view being presented.

Persuasive techniques

Technique	Examples	Possible purposes and effects
active and passive voice provides subjective or objective tone	active: "*They released* the report" passive: "The report *was released*"	• active: direct, clear • passive: indirect, detached
adjectives describing words	"a *stirring* speech" "her *diamond-studded* tiara"	• adds detail to make the text more interesting • can imply something positive or negative
alliteration and assonance repetition of initial consonants and repetition of vowel sounds	"Sydney's slippery side" "the elite meet-and-greet"	• adds emphasis, reinforces meaning • draws attention to key words or ideas • can elicit emotive response • memorable
allusion reference to a character or situation from a different context	"*Rusty the Clown*"(comparison of Russell Crowe and Krusty the Clown from *The Simpsons*) "*Lord of the Pies*" (reference to overweight English lord, by comparing to the William Golding novel *Lord of the Flies*)	• makes a comparison between two situations to illustrate parallels, in the hope that audience will draw conclusions • adds humour
attack means of criticising an individual or idea	"Her comments are little more than *adolescent gibberish.*" (ridicule, mudslinging) "Teachers *must be held accountable* for students' appalling literacy levels."	• belittles an opponent's arguments or actions and may lend weight to those of the writer • disparagement of subject may sway audience's opinions • can offend and alienate audience if overdone
bias overt preference or sympathy for a particular point of view	an advertisement for the Federal Liberal Party announcing the benefits of changes to Australia's workplace legislation an opinion piece by an aid volunteer criticising Australia's involvement in Iraq	• can strengthen an argument if the bias seems reasonable and within context, and if the author has some authority • can undermine an argument if disproportionate to the context
cliché an overused phrase or argument	"*in the final analysis*" "*world-class* city"	• can sway an audience by appealing to something with which they are familiar • may make audience feel informed • may alienate more sophisticated audience
colourful language vulgar or rude; particularly unusual or distinctive expression	"They are certainly *up the creek* now!" "Who *gives a toss* about the Queen anyway?" "The policy is *a dog's breakfast!*"	• can provide humour • may offend some of the intended audience • establishes an informal register (friendly, one-of-us)
connotative language ("loaded" language that evokes an idea or feeling, either positive or negative)	"The children were *slaughtered* as they slept." "Her *reckless* behaviour was questioned." "The ANZAC *legend*"	• encourages (either subtly or overtly) audience to accept a particular implication • seeks to persuade audience to accept a particular viewpoint of a person or event

Persuasive techniques (continued)

Technique	Examples	Possible purposes and effects
emotional appeal attempt to persuade through emotional manipulation	"Long-range nuclear weapons do not discriminate: *we are all a target.*" (appeal to sense of insecurity) "Sadly, Aboriginal health and education are *responsibilities we still have to address.*" (appeal to sense of social justice)	• triggers an emotional response in audience • evokes feelings of guilt, shame, horror, satisfaction, honour, etc.
emotive imagery language that "paints a picture" to arouse a particular emotional response	"This *barbaric practice* has been been extended to the children, and the *pain they suffer is evident on their faces.*" "Bodies were *piled up like trash* in makeshift roadside graves."	• targets an audience's emotional response (horror, excitement, disgust, outrage, etc.) • can alienate or offend some audiences (sensitive people, or those with different political views from the writer)
euphemism a mild, less direct word or phrase used to replace something offensive or unpleasant	"*collateral damage*" (unintended victims of war) "*unplanned landing*" (crash) "*in the family way*" (pregnant)	• avoids offending or disturbing some readers • can provide subtlety in an otherwise difficult situation • can undermine the argument if used inappropriately or overused
evidence material in support of an argument: statistics, facts, expert opinions, anecdotal	"*According to Melbourne Water, 1.5 million households used over 500 billion litres* of water in the year to 30 June." "Wind power *generates fewer pollutants* than the burning of fossil fuel."	• can lend an argument considerable weight, lends credibility • appeal to authority • can undermine an argument if used to confuse or flood with too much information
figurative language imagery through the use of visuals, metaphors, similies	"The *fabric* of Australia is multihued." "Social and racial difference are the *fault lines* in our communities."	• paints a vivid and easily understood picture for the audience • implies comparison to support a position
formal language use of more elaborate, precise or sophisticated language	"It is our firm belief that student success can be *facilitated through the employment of sound educational principles in a supportive learning environment.*" "I *look forward to* the opportunity of *discussing the position offered* at your *earliest convenience.*"	• creates a sophisticated, often authoritative style that can lend weight to an argument • commands respect • can alienate in a situation when informal language is more appropriate (pretentious)
generalisation broad statements implied from specific cases	"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 classes at VCE level.*"	• seeks to validate a theory or contention, sometimes dubiously • can be inferred to be evidence by naïve audience • can detract from or undermine an argument if examples are unrealistic or illogical
humour use of puns, irony, satire, sarcasm, etc.	"George *Dubbya* Bush and his weapons of mass *distraction*" "Gillard and Rudd came out of the conference *licking their lips like a couple of lovestruck Cheshire cats.*"	• often denigrates the subject • can provide a more engaging and friendly tone • audience can be swayed by having them enter into the joke

Technique	Examples	Possible purposes and effects
hyperbole exaggeration or overstatement used to imply something is more important, worse, better, etc.	"*Every* weekend the city is *overrun* by beggars and buskers." "Our parks are little more than *toxic rubbish dumps*." "We are all being *brainwashed* by *mind-numbing* reality shows."	• creates dramatic effects through dramatic imagery • argues through the employment of shock tactics and appeals to fear • argument can be less effective if overused or exaggerated
inclusive language and exclusive language the effective use of *us* and *we* to include, *them* and *they* to exclude	"*We* all have a role to play." "*They* bring *their* problems to Australia." "It is up to *us* to solve the problem *they* have created."	• targets or accuses particular groups • creates a sense of solidarity • can encourage a sense of responsibility • can create an "us and them" mentality
informal language colloquial, everyday language, slang	"How do you like *them* apples, Senator?" "*She'll be right, mate.*"	• creates a conversational mood • engenders support by establishing a rapport with the audience • appeals to audience's sense of humour, cultural identity • can alienate if overused
irony humour found in contradictory situations, often highlighted through the use of sarcasm	"The war on terror has produced a volatile environment more susceptible to terrorist forces." "In order to ensure our freedoms, more control is required."	• can engender support through the use of humour • can evoke strong emotional responses • encourages audience to see flimsy logic in a statement or event
jargon words and phrases used by a specific group of people	"Within the given parameters, the *incorporation of cultural constraints* adds explicit *performance contours*." "*Early adapters* are our *chief indicators of the viability of the product*."	• in correct context, allows professionals to communicate easily by using familiar words and terms • often used to confuse or impress • used to confer authority (sometimes undeserved) on the speaker or writer • can alienate those not part of the group
logic reason; the use of argument to assess a situation and sway an audience	"Research has shown that a *prison term for minor offences hampers rehabilitation*; we must, therefore, adopt a new approach to punishment, as locking up people who have committed such offences *has not worked*."	• appeal to reason rather than emotion lends credibility to an argument • offers proof and possible solutions • author's viewpoint supported by facts and common sense
omissions the deliberate or accidental leaving out of information	an opinion piece that condemns a group without considering causes	• seeks to present a particular point of view • can be either persuasive or offensive
pictorial support images to accompany written text and illustrate an issue or point	photograph of drunken teenager within an article about teen binge drinking graph indicating rising levels of childhood obesity diagram illustrating flow of information	• provides audience with visual text, which may aid understanding • can provide emotional response in reader • can provide quick factual reference for reader • statistical presentations can be misleading
praise expression of approval or admiration	"Her efforts are to be *commended*." "We *should feel proud* of our commitment to cultural diversity."	• evokes positive sentiments that can sway an audience • helps to paint the subject in a positive light

Technique	Examples	Possible purposes and effects
pun play on words; humorous use of synonyms or homonyms	"Water chief *damned* by local critics." "PM feels the *heat* over climate change." "Public transport: designing a *fare* system."	• humour used to engage audience • can be used to create a sense of irony
repetition reuse of words or phrases	"*We cannot imagine* the horrors they faced; *we cannot imagine* the strength of their spirit. And *we cannot* allow it to happen again."	• is memorable • highlights important or main points • creates a rhythm that can have a hypnotic effect
rhetorical question a question that does not require an answer	"*Must we wait for years* before this man leaves office?" "And *why do we do this*? Because we are fair and honest."	• encourages audience to critically consider the issue and perhaps accept the author's answer • can imply that the answer is obvious and that anyone who disagrees is foolish • can evoke emotional response
sarcasm the use of irony to mock or show contempt, by implying the opposite of what is actually said	"We can now look forward to longer ticket queues, sweatier rides and more train rage." "Why stop at 30 students to a classroom when we can cram at least 15 more in?"	• can provide humour • serves to mock or question a given situation • can alienate (and backfire) if used excessively
satire the use of humour or exaggeration to expose or criticise	television programs such as *Real Stories, The Chaser's War on Everything* and *Frontline* political cartoons	• provides humour to make a point • provides political commentary in an amusing format • can engender hostility in audience
sensationalism use of provocative language and images, and exaggeration	"Overseas fee-paying students are *stealing our university places!*" "Juvenile *joyriders terrorise* community!" "Paris Hilton *'exposed' again!*"	• appeals to audience's curiosity, prejudices • can reinforce stereotypes • can offend or alienate
sound effects sounds added to or enhanced in a text	the sound of a cash register in an advertisement to suggest a bargain	• appeal through association • create a mood
strong language use of forceful, unambiguous language	"*We refuse* to stand by and have this deplorable situation continue." "*We firmly believe* that responsibility lies with every Australian citizen; *we must* take a stand!"	• implies control, authority • presents a call to action • encourages participation, commitment of audience • can offend or alienate
subtext an underlying theme or message in a text, with an unstated meaning	a news article implying that Aboriginal health problems are of their own making an analysis of an election campaign that implies a flawed, cynical approach by the party	• can send a covert message to the audience • can be seen as underhanded or manipulative by those who do not agree • very persuasive if audience is unaware of the subtext
vocabulary choice the deliberate selection of words	a news article about a "health crisis" or a "health concern"	• seeks to support a point of view • can paint a subject in either a positive or negative light