

Section 10

Short Comprehending Tasks

To read without reflecting is like eating without digesting

Edmund Burke, author and orator [1729–1797]



Reading a book is like re-writing it for yourself. You bring to a novel, anything you read, all your experience of the world. You bring your history and you read it in your own terms.

Angela Carter, novelist and journalist
[1940–1992]

All attempts at reading are attempts to make meaning – *Leaving Certificate English Syllabus*

Interpretation is one of the key ways in which we make sense of our world. Seldom do we see, hear, taste – in short experience – things exactly the way others do. Similarly, when we read a text or view an image, we usually do so in a very personal way.

When we read a text, we try to make some meaning out of it. We want to discover what is humorous or entertaining or informative about a particular article or image. We may begin by searching for signposts, or facts, which can help us to make sense of what we read or see.

Gradually, we start to interpret what is before us. Or, as the writer Angela Carter suggested, we bring our experience of the world to what we read and see. And because our experience of the world, our history and our culture, and indeed our imagination, can vary considerably, our interpretations of a text can sometimes be quite unique.



Making meaning – the reader!

Look at each of the photographs above. Without consulting with any other student, select your favourite photograph from the collection.

Now, write down ...

- what you see in your favourite photograph
- what feelings you get when you view the photograph
- three reasons why you like that particular image.

Talk about it!

Here are some questions you could discuss on the most popular image selected by students in the class.

THE FAVOURITE IMAGE

- What was the favourite image in the class?
- Why was this image so popular?
- Did the photograph evoke a range of emotions? Explain.
- Did this image mean the same or different things to the students? Suggest why.
- Did the image connect with something in the students' recent past, their present lives, or their hopes for the future?

Write about it!

1. Can you suggest why the same image may mean different things to different students?
2. In your opinion, has the meaning come from the photograph or from the observer, the student? Could meaning have emerged from both? Explain your views.

Making meaning – the writer!

Of course readers are not the only people to interpret things in a personal way. Writers also see the world and their place in that world in a very unique way. They too bring elements of their life experience, their culture, their history and their imagination to bear on the act of composing.

Example

Below are two poems, each written on the subject of war. One of the poems adopts a very patriotic, even romantic attitude towards war, whereas the second underlines the pointlessness and pain of it all.

It is interesting to note that Rupert Brooke saw very little action on the battlefields of the First World War, while Siegfried Sassoon served in the British Army for four years and was wounded in action.

The Soldier

*If I should die, think only this of me:
That there's some corner of a foreign field
That is for ever England. There shall be
In that rich earth a richer dust concealed;
A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware,
Gave, once, her flowers to love, her ways to roam,
A body of England's, breathing English air,
Washed by the rivers, blessed by suns of home.*

*And think, this heart, all evil shed away,
A pulse in the eternal mind, no less
Gives somewhere back the thoughts by England given;
Her sights and sounds; dreams happy as her day;
And laughter, learnt of friends; and gentleness,
In hearts at peace, under an English heaven.*



Rupert Brooke [1887–1915]

[From *More Poetry Please!*,
Everyman, London, 2000, p.23]

Survivors

*No doubt they'll soon get well; the shock and strain
Have caused their stammering, disconnected talk.
Of course they're 'longing to go out again,'—
These boys with old, scared faces, learning to walk.
They'll soon forget their haunted nights; their cowed
Subjection to the ghosts of friends who died,—
Their dreams that drip with murder; and they'll be proud
Of glorious war that shatter'd all their pride ...
Men who went out to battle, grim and glad;
Children, with eyes that hate you, broken and mad.*



Siegfried Sassoon [1886–1967]

[From *Siegfried Sassoon, The War Poems*, arranged by Rupert Hart-Davis, Faber & Faber, London, 1983, p.86]

Write about it!

1. Describe Rupert Brooke's perspective on war.
2. Is Siegfried Sassoon's attitude towards war very different from Brooke's?
3. In 150 words or less, outline your personal views on war. Which poet expresses a viewpoint similar to your own?
4. Imagine that you were a journalist in 1914. Write out the text of a brief interview you conduct with either one of the above poets.

Making meaning – the songwriter!

Songwriters, like photographers and painters and writers, create their own particular 'text' to express their opinions and feelings on issues and events in their world. The song 'Bosnia', by the Irish band The Cranberries, expresses the sense of frustration, helplessness and powerlessness felt by many people in Europe as that conflict raged.

Bosnia

*I would like to state my vision
Life was so unfair
We live in our secure surroundings
And people die out there
Bosnia was so unkind
Sarajevo changed my mind
And we all call out in despair
All the love we need isn't there
And we all sing songs in our rooms
Sarajevo erects an undertone
Sarajevo, sarajevo, sarajevo
Bosnia was so unkind
Sarajevo, sarajevo, sarajevo
Bosnia was so unkind
Sure things would change if we really wanted them to
No fear for children anymore
There are babies in their hands, terror in their heads
For life, for life
When do the saints go marching in?
When do the saints go marching in?*



Compare and contrast

1. Do you think the song 'Bosnia' is as effective as the poem 'Survivors' in condemning war? Give two reasons for your answer.
2. What type of person or audience might prefer the lyrics of the song to the words of the poem? Can you suggest why?
3. Do you think the songwriter was very aware of her fan base/audience in writing the song?
4. Which of the three texts above had the greatest impact on you as a reader? Give one reason for your answer.
5. Compare and contrast the language used in the song with that used in the war poems. What are the main similarities and/or differences that you found between these two genres?

Study Card

... Genre

Explain . . . *Genre refers to the type or shape of a work created by a writer. Examples of different genres include an advertisement, a drama, a novel, a short story, a song, a speech, a poem, a legal document, a child's book, a film, a formal letter, a personal letter, an expository essay, a report, and a newspaper article.*

Each of these is a text, although it belongs to a different genre. A poem and a short story, for example, are both texts. However, they are shaped differently and use language in a unique way.

Why is it important to me? *In preparing for your Leaving Certificate English exam, you need to practise comprehending and composing in a range of genres, until you become competent at both assignments.*

If that punctuation is like the 'nuts and bolts' of writing, then genre might be thought of as the framework, the scaffold upon which you organise and give shape to your ideas.

Making meaning – different genres, different ways of making meaning

Here we have two texts, of different genres, both describing the opening scenes of William Shakespeare's play *Macbeth*. Read each extract carefully and then discuss the ways in which each text communicates with its reader. The information in the Help Menus may be of some assistance to you.

Text 1: Macbeth

Author: Geraldine McCaughrean

Genre: Dramatic narrative or story



This is the story of Macbeth, whose name is so unlucky that people avoid speaking it.

It began on the day the wars in Scotland ended – a strange day torn between sunshine and storm. Sudden bleak, black clouds blotted out the light. Two horsemen, heroes of the day's victory, rode towards their homes across a Scottish heath, their horses still bloody from battle. Their names were Macbeth and Banquo, and they were as fine a pair of noblemen as Scotland could lay claim to.

Suddenly they were confronted by moving shapes and the hoot of unearthly laughter. Gnarled, leafless trees catching the wind? No. Witches.

First witch:

*When shall we three meet again?
In thunder, lightning, or in rain?*

Second witch:

*When the hurly-burly's done,
When the battle's lost and won.*

Act 1, Scene 1

Three hags swayed to the music of their own chanting – the kind of women whose magic used to be blamed each time a pig died in the sty or a sailor drowned at sea.

'Hail Macbeth, Thane of Glamis!' called one.

'You know me?'

'Hail Macbeth, Thane of Cawdor!' called the second.

'Hail King Macbeth!' called the third.

Lord Macbeth drew his cloak closer round him. 'What do you mean, Thane of Cawdor? That's not me. I know the man who holds that title.'

The hags cackled and turned their attentions to the other rider.

'Banquo – you won't be king. But your children will be kings, and their children after them!' Then, like bubbles bursting, they were gone, leaving the two men shaken.

[From *Stories from Shakespeare*, by Geraldine McCaughrean, Dolphin paperbacks, London, 2001, pp 103-104]

Help Menu

The Children's Story

The language characteristics of this genre include the following:

- **Third person narrator sets the scene**
'It began on the day the wars in Scotland ended – a strange day torn between sunshine and storm.'
- **Simple vocabulary**
'This is the story of Macbeth . . .'
- **Straight forward syntax**
'The hags cackled and turned their attentions to the other rider.'
- **Short dialogue between characters**
*'What do you mean, Thane of Cawdor?
That's not me. I know the man who holds that title.'*
- **Use of imagery appropriate to children, to represent an action**
'Then, like bubbles bursting . . .'
- **Rhetorical questions that address the audience and draw children into the story**
*'Gnarled, leafless trees catching the wind?
No. Witches.'*
- **Rhyme to create atmosphere**
'Sudden bleak, black clouds blotted . . .'

Over to you!

Write one paragraph on the features of language that are used in the above genre.

Text 2 : Macbeth
Author: William Shakespeare
Genre: Drama



ACT ONE

Scene I. A desert place

Thunder and lightning. Enter three Witches.

First Witch When shall we three meet again
 In thunder, lightning, or in rain?

Second Witch When the hurlyburly's done,
 When the battle's lost and won.

Third Witch That will be ere the set of sun.

First Witch Where the place?

Second Witch Upon the heath.

Third Witch There to meet with Macbeth.

First Witch I come, Graymalkin!

Second Witch Paddock calls.

Third Witch Anon.

All Fair is foul, and foul is fair:
 Hover through the fog and filthy air.

Exeunt

Extract from **Scene III**. A heath near Forres
Thunder. Enter the three Witches

Macbeth So foul and fair a day I have not seen.

Banquo How far is't call'd to Forres? What are these
So wither'd and so wild in their attire,
That look not like the inhabitants o' the earth,
And yet are on't? Live you? Or are you aught
That men may question? You seem to understand me,
By each at once her choppy finger laying
Upon her skinny lips: you should be women,
And yet your beards forbid me to interpret
That you are so.

Macbeth Speak, if you can: what are you?

First Witch All hail, Macbeth! hail to thee, thane of Glamis!

Second Witch All hail, Macbeth! hail to thee, thane of Cawdor!

Third Witch All hail, Macbeth, that shalt be king hereafter!

Banquo Good sir, why do you start; and seem to fear
Things that do sound so fair? I' the name of truth,
Are ye fantastical, or that indeed
Which outwardly, ye show? My noble partner
You greet with present grace and great prediction
That he seems rapt withal: to me you speak not.
If you can look into the seeds of time,
And say which grain will grow and which will not,
Speak then to me, who neither beg nor fear
Your favours nor your hate.

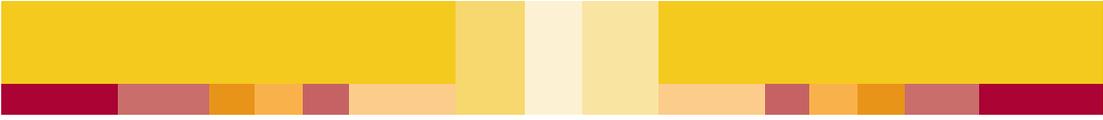
First Witch Hail!

Second Witch Hail!

Third Witch Hail!

First Witch Lesser than Macbeth, and greater.

Second Witch Not so happy, yet much happier.



Third Witch

Thou shalt get kings, though thou be none:
So all hail, Macbeth and Banquo!

Macbeth

Stay, you imperfect speakers, tell me more:
By Sinel's death I know I am thane of Glamis;
But how of Cawdor? The thane of Cawdor lives,
A prosperous gentleman; and to be king
Stands not within the prospect of belief,
No more than to be Cawdor. Say from whence
You owe this strange intelligence? Or why
Upon this blasted heath you stop our way
With such prophetic greeting? Speak, I charge you.

[Witches vanish]

Banquo

The earth hath bubbles, as the water has,
And these are of them. Whither are they vanish'd?

Help Menu

The Drama

The language characteristics of this genre include the following:

- Stage directions and characters set the scene

Scene I.

Thunder and lighting. Enter three Witches.

First Witch

'When shall we three meet again

In thunder, lightning, or in rain?' and . . .

Scene III.

A heath near Forres. Thunder. Enter the three Witches

Macbeth

'So foul and fair a day I have not seen.'

- More demanding vocabulary

'My noble partner

You greet with present grace and great prediction

That he seems rapt withal.'

- Complex syntax

'What are these

So wither'd and so wild in their attire,

That look not like the inhabitants o' the earth,

And yet are on't?'

- Long exchanges of dialogue between characters

'Stay, you imperfect speakers, tell me more:

By Sinel's death I know I am thane of Glamis;

But how of Cawdor? The thane of Cawdor lives,

A prosperous gentleman; and to be king

Stands not within the prospect of belief,

No more than to be Cawdor. Say from whence

You owe this strange intelligence? Or why

Upon this blasted heath you stop our way

With such prophetic greeting? Speak, I charge you.'

- Use of imagery to represent a concept

'If you can look into the seeds of time,

And say which grain will grow and which will not,

Speak then to me, who neither beg nor fear

Your favours nor your hate.'

Over to You!

Write one paragraph on the features of language that are used in the above genre.

Now, compare and contrast the two genres

Compare and contrast the features of language evident in the children's story and in the adult drama. You may, if it is helpful, address some of the issues outlined below. Write at least 250 words.

- What is the purpose of each text?
- Who is the audience of each text?
- How do the words used in the extracts differ?
- What words and phrases in particular suggest the kind of audience that might enjoy each text?
- Compare the structure, or layout, of both texts.
- Do you think each text communicates effectively with its particular audience? What features of language usage in the extracts give you that opinion?
- What conditions did the writer observe in the children's story genre that make this extract an effective piece of communication?
- Would you agree that the first extract shows a mixture of genres? Why did the writer do this? Is it effective?
- What has the writer decided to leave out of her version of Shakespeare's play? Make a list of things she has omitted from the original. Can you suggest why the writer omitted these particular aspects of the story?

Top Tips!

- A writer must decide on *appropriate language* but also on *appropriate content* for an audience.



Review

In this lesson, we have seen that . . .

- both reading and writing are acts of making meaning
- as readers we bring many of our own experiences and perhaps even prejudices to a text
- we interpret texts, therefore, in a personal way
- writers too, express their perspective of the world in a unique way
- writers may also shape language into a variety of different genres
- the language of each genre has a number of characteristics that make it appropriate to a specific audience.

Moving on

You should now be able to see that writers use language carefully and very deliberately when they try to make meaning. Writers are also very aware of the **audience** for whom they are writing. Now that you've seen that different genres exhibit specific language characteristics, it is time that you tried to compose your own paragraphs and shape your ideas into different genres.

Remember to keep in mind your **audience**, and use your **language** to make your communication as effective as possible. This will lead you into another key aspect of effective communication, which we will introduce in the next Lesson, namely, **clarity of purpose**.