

AS and A-level English Language and Literature (7706/7707): An introduction to stylistics and further reading

Stylistics: some guidance for teachers

The AQA English Language and Literature specification offers and encourages an integrated approach to the study of English that draws on the academic field of stylistics, sometimes also known as literary linguistics. This specification promotes a language-focused way of exploring all kinds of texts to account for the ways in which producers and receivers create meaning.

What is stylistics?

Stylistics can be thought of both as an approach to study, and as a kind of mind-set that guides the analysis of texts. A key principle of stylistics is that interpretations should always be framed within an established and commonly understood set of terms and analytical frameworks so they can be shared and discussed by other readers. In particular, a stylistics mind-set:

- argues that text analysis should always be grounded in language study (as exemplified by and using the language levels in the AQA specification, and other frameworks) and should avoid simply intuitive or impressionistic comments about meanings
- views language as a system of choice where every language user makes significant decisions when writing or speaking
- includes both precise linguistic description and sustained interpretation, highlighting the interpretative significance of every language choice
- emphasises the importance of contextual factors in exploring texts and moving beyond simply commenting on the 'words on the page'
- develops skills and a set of analytical tools that can be used across all types of discourses, genres and texts rather than advocating an approach for 'language' and a different one for 'literature'.

These principles underpin AQA's vision for the subject and support students in exploring the key concepts on this specification:

- genre
- narrative
- point of view
- register
- representation
- literariness.

The specification also promotes the idea that good stylistics can be undertaken by all students of any age, regardless of how much they know or what level they are working at. The fundamental principles of good textual analysis remain the same.

What does good stylistics look like?

The following extracts are taken from AQA exemplar scripts on AS Paper 1, Section A (Views and voices: Imagined worlds) and A level Paper 1, Section C (Telling Stories: Poetic Voices). Together, these show what good student responses might look like on this specification.

AS level question:

Read the extract printed below. Examine how Shelley presents Frankenstein in this extract.

Part of student response:

Through the use of structural deviation, Shelly crafts the extract to engage with an ominous and foreboding tone. The use of shorter sentences such as 'I was now free' and 'But that could not be' amid more complex syntax arrangements offers a blatant contrast and in turn strengthens their thematic significance. These dramatic sentences suggest that Frankenstein is hopeless and without guidance within his situation. The use of the discourse marker 'But' emphasises this further, indicating negative connotations and attitudes towards Frankenstein's description of 'consolation and happiness'. Shelley seems to present Frankenstein as largely dejected and pessimistic to the point of depression, highlighted by the general events of the extract as Frankenstein debates drowning himself in the lake and goes on to describe his yearning to destroy the creature that arguably is destroying Frankenstein mentally.

A level question:

Examine how Browning presents speakers' attitudes towards others in 'The Lost Leader' and one other poem of your choice.

Part of student response:

Both of Browning's speakers present strong views about the individuals in their poems. In 'The Lost Leader', the use of repeated syntax and phrases such as 'Just for...' and then 'loved him so, followed him, honoured him' project a voice that promotes a passionate and angry persona. The use of the possessive determiner in the noun phrase 'our pattern', followed by the string of literary influences highlights that the speaker feels let down by the actions of the subject of the poem (widely believed to be Wordsworth). In fact the pronoun system is used throughout to set up a string of oppositions: 'he' v 'we', 'us' and 'they' that present the 'him' as an object to be criticised and downgraded. In 'My Last Duchess', this sense of idea of objectification is shown through Browning's presentation of a particular point of view. The speaker focuses on the body using lexis 'glance', 'wrist', 'throat'. His focus on her physical characteristics dismisses her thoughts and emotions – instead she is seen as a beautiful object, captured in a portrait, for the speaker and his guest to possess.

Comments on student responses:

In both of these responses, students have used language levels systematically and are able to refer to features precisely, using accurate terminology. In the AS response, the student refers to 'syntax', 'sentence' and 'discourse marker' showing how being precise and systematic doesn't necessarily require an over-extensive or over-technical metalanguage. However, the second response is more wide-ranging as would be expected at A level, with the student being able to comment on a number of different textual features such as the effects of syntax and phrase patterns, the determiner and pronoun systems, and specific lexical choices.

Equally, both students pay close attention to specific language choices through precise quotation **and** make comments on the interpretative effects of those choices. In both cases, students do not simply label, nor do they make impressionistic claims that are not based on the language of the text. In both answers, there is a very good balance between **describing** and **interpreting**.

Further resources that teachers might find useful

The title below is the recommended student textbook for AQA's specification, and the only resource that is endorsed by AQA. It provides comprehensive coverage of the entire specification, and is also supported by Cambridge University Press' Elevate platform, which contains further resources and reading materials for teachers and students.

- Giovanelli, M., Macrae, A., Titjen, F., and Cushing, I. (2015) *A/AS level English Language and Literature for AQA*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

The following are introductory books and readers in stylistics that teachers might find useful both for their own reading and for ideas for teaching. They provide an outline of the history and evolution of stylistics as a discipline, and explain its principles in detail. Giovanelli and Mason (2018) and Gregoriou (2012) are good introductions while Jeffries and McIntyre (2010) offers more advanced discussion. The chapters in Carter and Stockwell (2008) give examples of early and seminal work in stylistics, while more recent ideas are covered in McIntyre and Busse (2010), and in Stockwell and Whiteley (2014). Ahmed et al. (2020) is a collection of chapters written by practicing teachers and researchers on post-16 English language and literature. Each chapter provides a case study of work that teachers have been undertaking in classrooms.

- Ahmed, F., Giovanelli, M., Mansworth, M., and Titjen, F. (2020) *Teaching English Language and Literature 16-19*, London: Routledge.
- Carter, R., and Stockwell, P. (eds) (2008) *The Language and Literature Reader*, London: Routledge.
- Giovanelli, M., and Mason, J. (2018) *The Language of Literature: An Introduction to Stylistics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gregoriou, C. (2012) *English Literary Stylistics*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Jeffries, L. (2010) *Critical Stylistics: The Power of English*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Jeffries, L., and McIntyre, D. (2010) *Stylistics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Leech, G., and Short, M. (2007) *Style in Fiction: A Linguistic Introduction to English Fictional Prose*, 2nd edn, London: Longman.
- McIntyre, D., and Busse, B. (eds) (2010) *Language and Style*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Short, M. (1996) *Exploring the Language of Poems, Plays and Prose*, London: Longman.
- Simpson, P. (2014) *Stylistics: A Resource Book for Students*, 2nd edn., London: Routledge.
- Stockwell, P. and Whiteley, S. (eds) (2014) *The Cambridge Handbook of Stylistics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Toolan, M. (1996) *Language in Literature: An Introduction to Stylistics*, London: Routledge.

The following websites are aimed at teachers of A-level English Language and Literature and contain examples of research digests (summaries of work in language and literature), teaching ideas and further reading.

The Definite Article

<https://thedefinitearticle.aqa.org.uk/>

The Lang-Lit Lab

<https://www.integratingenglish.com/langlitlab>

The following report is a recently published and very useful overview that explores and compares the nature of integrated language & literature work at Post-16 and in higher education.

- Clark, B., Giovanelli, M., and Macrae, A. (2015) *Language & Literature – From A Level to BA: Student Backgrounds and First Year Content* (research carried out for the Higher Education Academy), available at https://5bc2d0d1-6f05-4506-8b9a084d55bb4ce1.filesusr.com/ugd/2686af_43afcc2aeef14e3fbe250196b4ab919a.pdf

Further research articles and reports on integrating English language and literature can be found in the publications section of the *Integrating English* website.

<https://www.integratingenglish.com/publications>

The Poetics and Linguistics Association (PALA) is the association for those working in stylistics in higher education <http://www.pala.ac.uk>

The English and Media's subscription-only publication for A-level students, *e magazine*, has some articles that take a stylistics approach to literary and non-literary texts that would be useful for A-level students. Some of these include:

- Evans, J. (2012) 'The unreliable narrator – How unreliable is unreliable?', *emagazine* 59, 65-68.
- Giovanelli, M. (2012) 'Doing stylistics: point of view in literary prose', *emagazine* 57, 65-7.
- Giovanelli, M. (2012) 'Investigating the language of literature', *emagazine* 55, 26-8.
- Giovanelli, M. (2018) 'Working with a text: From initial impressions to tools for analysis', *emagazine* XX, x-y.
- Mullan, J. (2013) 'Narrative uses of dialogue', *emagazine* 62, 41-3.
- Norton, G. (2014) 'The power of narrative voice and point of view in key texts', *emagazine* 64, 36-9.
- Tapp, C. (2013) 'Gendered language and cultural identity in *A Streetcar Named Desire*', *emagazine* 62, 47-9.
- Trousdale, G. (2013) 'Metaphor – a figure of thought?', *emagazine* 61, 28-31.

Details of *e magazine* and how to subscribe are available at:

<https://www.englishandmedia.co.uk/e-magazine/>

Two more advanced journals that publish research in stylistics are:

- *Language and Literature*: <http://lal.sagepub.com>
- *Journal of Literary Semantics*: <http://www.degruyter.com/view/j/jlse>

Reading on specification topics

Remembered places, Imagined worlds and Poetic voices

The following books cover various aspects of narrative, point of view, and genre in considerable detail. Particularly useful as an overview is Abbott (2008). Page (2013) offers a good overview of how new technologies influence the ways in which people construct narratives. Equally, Farman (2014) discusses the affordances and constraints of a range of mobile communicative apps and tools.

- Abbott, H. P. (2008) *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, 2nd edn, New York: NY; Cambridge University Press.
- Farman, J. (ed.) (2014) *The Mobile Story: Narrative Practices with Locative Technologies*, London: Routledge.
- Giovanelli, M. (2018) *Narrative*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Page, R. (2013) *Stories and Social Media: Identities and Interaction*, London: Routledge.
- Simpson, P. (1993) *Language, Ideology and Point of View*, London: Routledge.
- Stockwell, P. (2002) *Cognitive Poetics: An Introduction*, London: Routledge.
- Toolan, M. (2001) *Narrative: A Critical Linguistic Introduction*, 2nd edn, London; Routledge.

These books all provide useful introductions to travel writing:

- George, D. (2013) *Lonely Planet's Guide to Travel Writing*, 3rd edn. London: Lonely Planet.
- Hulme, P. and Youngs, T. (eds) (2002) *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Thompson, C. (2011) *Travel Writing*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Youngs, T. (2013) *Cambridge Introduction to Travel Writing*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Writing about society and Dramatic encounters

Of the list below, Culpeper (2001) is a thorough investigation of characterisation that emphasises the roles of language and schematic knowledge in creating and constructing characters. Black (2005), and Clark and Chapman (2014) provide valuable background reading for a pragmatically-oriented approach to textual study.

- Black, E. (2005) *Pragmatic Stylistics*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Clark, B., and Chapman, S. (eds) (2014) *Pragmatic Literary Stylistics*, London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Culpeper, J. (2001) *Language and Characterisation: People in Plays and other Texts*, London: Longman.

In addition, the following provide explanations of the principles of creative reading and writing strategies, and have exercises and plenty of practical advice on how to set up classroom activities. Pope (1995) is the most important work in this field and underpins the textual intervention tasks on AS Paper 2 (*People and places*) and A-level Paper 2 (*Writing about society*).

- Knights, B. and Thurgar-Dawson, C. (2008) *Active Reading: Transformative Writing in Literary Studies*, London: Continuum.
- Pope, R. (1995) *Textual Intervention: Critical and Creative Strategies for Literary Studies*, Abingdon: Routledge.
- Scott, J. (2013) *Creative Writing and Stylistics: Creative and Critical Approaches*, Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Making Connections

The following books are simple, short and clear with lots of examples and illustrations. They provide useful tools to support development in critical reading and written communication.

- Copus, J., (2009) *Brilliant Writing Tips for Students*, Houndsmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Godwin, J., (2009) *Planning Your Essay*, Houndsmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Williams, K., (2009) *Getting Critical*, Houndsmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Wray and Bloomer (2012) is a very useful book on designing, undertaking and writing up investigations and offers a great deal of useful advice on potential projects, research methodologies and academic writing.

- Wray, A., and Bloomer, A. (2012) *Projects in Language and Linguistics: A Practical Guide to Researching Language*, 3rd edn., London: Routledge.

Pope (2012) is a comprehensive study of English in its broadest sense and provides some stimulating material for thinking about the nature of 'literariness' and making connections between different types of texts and discourses.

- Pope, R. (2012) *Studying English Language and Literature*, 3rd edn, London: Routledge.

The *Routledge English Language Introductions* series (ed. Peter Stockwell) is a range of titles related to language study that would be useful for teachers both as background reading and to support students in preparing for non-exam assessment.

Version 1.0

First published (01/04/2015)

Last updated (28/10/2020)