

Reading non-fiction and media: 5. Language

This audio bite is about language.

ALIX: The reading section always has at least one question to do with language. Sometimes you are told what to write about – it could be how a passage uses questions. But you are more likely to be asked just about language, like this:

ELIOT: How is language used in a Greenpeace leaflet to inform its readers?

ALIX: A lot of people have trouble answering these sorts of questions - it's hard to know where to start. Let's start by working out the 'Gap' – it's a leaflet, with headings, sections, photos and diagrams. It's aimed at teenagers, and it seems to be a mixture of information and persuasion – they want you to join Greenpeace.

ELIOT: So now you've got that, you know how to answer the question. Just look at the text, and write about how the leaflet uses those things, like this:

ALIX: The leaflet makes the information easy to understand. It uses clear headings, like 'What are ancient forests?' which are easy to read. And the headings tell you at a glance what it's all about. The text is broken up into short sections, with one section under each heading. Again, this makes it clear and straightforward.

ELIOT: So Alix has already told us quite a lot, but she hasn't dealt with any of the words yet. See how she does that next:

ALIX: The passage uses quite simple ideas and words, such as the forests are disappearing so quickly. When there are more difficult words, there are examples to help. For example, when 'species' is mentioned, the passage tells us, 'from bears to beetles'. We all know what these are, so it's easy to understand, and it's easy to see how wide the range is.

ELIOT: This is getting really good, but is there anything else she could add?

ALIX: The leaflet also looks easy to follow. The difficult words, such as 'evolution', are printed in bold, so they stand out and are easy to look up. And there's a diagram which shows what happens to water – going from rivers to trees, to clouds and then falling back down as rain. Diagrams are much easier to look at than explain.

ELIOT: And that's an excellent example. This one shows how language is used to inform readers on a leaflet, but the question will

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basically be the same each time – how and why does the writer use language?

ALIX: This means write about what you can find in the text and how it fits in with the ‘Gap’ – the genre, the audience and the purpose.

ELIOT: As well as ‘Gap’, there’s another word that might help you to remember – it’s L – I – S – T, language, information, style and tone, or ‘List’. Language is the sort of things you find in the passage, but the ideas, the facts or opinions, is the information.

ALIX: The style is what it looks like – is it full of bright colours to make it eye-catching? Or is it serious, with lots of long paragraphs? And the tone is tied to the attitude of the writer – is it meant to be funny, or sad, or angry? The bits of ‘List’ all join together – after all, you wouldn’t get a Greenpeace leaflet about forests disappearing which was just meant to be funny.

There will be at least one question to do with language. You should show how ‘Gap’ and language fit together. You can also use ‘List’ - the language, information, style and tone, to help you remember how to deal with the question.

Writing about language isn’t easy, so there’s more about using ‘Gap’ and ‘List’ in a later section.