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|  | Australian Curriculum Year 8 English Year 8 sample assessment ׀ Assessment resource  Unlocking the power in poetry |

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# Evaluative language

Australian Curriculum: English requires students to learn about the ways ‘evaluative language’ is used. For example, the Year 7 and Year 9 content descriptions from the *Language* strand and *Language for interaction* sub-strand. The Year 7 content description states:

Understand how language is used to evaluate [texts](http://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/Glossary?a=E&t=text) and how evaluations about a [text](http://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/Glossary?a=E&t=text) can be substantiated by reference to the [text](http://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/Glossary?a=E&t=text) and other sources ([ACELA1782](http://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/curriculum/ContentDescription/ACELA1782))

*Content elaboration: building a knowledge base about words of evaluation, including words to express emotional responses to texts, judgment of characters and their actions, and appreciation of the aesthetic qualities of text.*

The Year 9 content description states:

Investigate how evaluation can be expressed directly and indirectly using devices, for example allusion, evocative vocabulary and metaphor ([ACELA1552](http://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/curriculum/ContentDescription/ACELA1552))

*Content elaboration: comparing texts that use evaluative language in different ways — print advertisements, editorials, talkback radio and poetry — and identifying wordings that appraise things indirectly, through evocative language, similes and metaphors that direct the views of the readers in particular ways.*

This resource is designed for teachers to help students develop the capability to evaluate (appraise or assess) the ways speakers/writers/creators use language, directly or indirectly, to evaluate the ‘goings-on’ in the world. It also can be used to develop students’ own use of evaluative language. This resource draws on a range of approaches to analysis of evaluative language, in particular appraisal.

While evaluative language is present in varying degrees in a wide range of texts, this resource has a particular focus on poetry.

### Appraisal in English — evaluative language analysis

Appraisal embraces the kinds of evaluations present in a text and the attitudinal positioning that results. Writers/speakers/creators will potentially position the attitudes of readers/listeners/viewers either positively or negatively, directly or indirectly, as they use feelings or **emotions** (**affect**), make **judgments** about people’s character, **appreciate** the worth/beauty of things (people’s appearance, people’s abilities, people’s relationships, made objects, places, nature and natural objects) and **graduate** or scale meaning. All four aspects deal withemotion in some way. For example:

* The poem fascinated me. (affect)
* She has proven to be a fascinating poet. (judgment)
* It was a fascinating poem. (appreciation)
* It was a really fascinating poem. (graduation)

Appraisal theory appears in the work of a number of systemic linguists. The following references are examples of where more information can be found:

* Droga, L and Humphrey, S 2003, *Grammar and Meaning: An Introduction for Primary Teachers*, Target Texts, NSW (contains a useful introduction pp. 64–76)
* Droga L, Humphrey S & Love K 2011, *Working Grammar: An Introduction for Secondary English Teachers*, Pearson, Australia(Chapter 6, ‘Resources for expressing and grading attitudes: Evaluative language’ is a highly effective reference)
* Martin, JR & White, PRR 2007, *The Language of Evaluation: Appraisal in English,* Palgrave Macmillan, London & New York (includes descriptions and tables useful in introducing students to the use of evaluative vocabulary; these descriptions and tables have been drawn on in developing this resource).

Appendix 1 *Powerful questions* contains examples of questions that have proven to be effective in unlocking:

* the WHAT (a poem’s meaning)
* the HOW (the emotional and persuasive effects of the evaluative language the writer has used).

Teachers could select appropriate questions from each of the categories and help students use them to analyse and respond to particular poems.

#### *Affect*[[1]](#footnote-1)

Writers/speakers/creators use language that evokes explicit (direct) or implicit (indirect), positive or negative feelings. Table 1 shows how ‘affect’ may relate to feelings of (un)happiness, (in)security and (dis)satisfaction. Table 1 could be used to stimulate classroom discussion about the use of **affect** or emotion in a particular poem.

Table 1: Affect

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| Positive feelings | Negative feelings |
| **HAPPINESS and JOY**  cheerful, jubilant, contented, fulfilled, well-being, exhilaration, pleasure, bliss, awe, ecstasy  **LOVE and AFFECTION**  kindness, understanding, empathy, compassion  **ATTRACTION**  desire, yearning, longing, infatuation | **UNHAPPINESS**  sad, despondent, heavy-hearted, dejected, cheerless, gloomy, downcast, depressed, anguished, grief-stricken, distressed, pessimistic, alienated, rejected, isolated, empty |
| **SECURITY**  together, confident, comfortable, trusting, assured | **INSECURITY**  uneasy, anxious, expectant, restless, nervous, stressed, startled, fearful, terrified, horrified, disquieted |
| **SATISFACTION**  satisfied, interested, involved, absorbed, engrossed, pleased, impressed, thrilled | **DISSATISFACTION**  flat, jaded, bored, frustrated, discontented, disillusioned, annoyed, irritated, jealous, angry, disgusted, envious, spiteful, furious, resentful, embittered, vengeful |

Source: Adapted from Martin and White, 2007, p. 51.

Questions such as the following (from Appendix 1) could be used to involve students in analysing how a poem is able to appeal to their emotions and to direct their views:

* What elements of feeling and emotion that have been selected and strategically used in the poem connect with your emotions as a reader?
* What words in the poem, directly or indirectly, evoke negative or positive feelings of un/happiness?

#### *Judgment (ethics)*[[2]](#footnote-2)

Since an important aim of a writer is to position readers into admiring, respecting or disliking people/characters, we might expect explicit or implicit, positive or negative **judgments** to be made about them based on their behaviour, what they say and do, and what is said about them (and perhaps done to them) by others.

At one level, the behaviour of people/characters might rate highly in terms of social admiration, regard or esteem, and be assessed as socially acceptable and praiseworthy (e.g. *normal, capable, dependable*) or socially unacceptable (e.g. *eccentric*, *incapable, unreliable*).

At another level, people’s/characters’ behaviour might be assessed as being against society’s moral codes, rules, regulations or laws as being *honest, proper* (*moral*) or *law abiding,* or *dishonest, improper or law breaking*.

Table 2 could be used to raise questions related to ethical behaviour represented in a poem.

Table 2: Judgment (ethics)

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| Attitudes towards behaviour | | |
| **POSITIVE NEGATIVE** | | |
| In terms of social admiration, regard, or esteem, is the person’s behaviour or character represented as being: | | |
| * normal?\* * fortunate? | usual, average, everyday, stable, predictable,  lucky, privileged, charmed, celebrated | odd, weird, erratic, unpredictable  unfortunate, unlucky, hapless, tragic |
| * capable? | strong, sensible, experienced, clever, accomplished, competent, heroic | incapable, weak, stupid, naïve, ignorant, inept |
| * tenacious? | dependable, reliable, resolute, focused, persevering, constant | unreliable, rash, impetuous, reckless, inconstant, distracted |
| **POSITIVE NEGATIVE** | | |
| In terms of **social sanction** (adherence tosocial moral codes, rules, regulations, laws), is the person’s **behaviour or character** represented as being: | | |
| * honest? | honest, truthful, candid, credible, genuine | dishonest, deceitful, deceptive, devious, scheming, manipulative |
| * proper (above reproach)? | good, moral, just | bad, immoral, unjust, selfish, unfair, insensitive, mean, corrupt, evil |
| * lawful (within the law)? | law abiding | criminal, unlawful |
| \*It is likely that different people will have different perceptions of what is ‘normal’. Not being normal (e.g. eccentric) is not necessarily a negative quality. Positive and negative categories are probably better viewed as being on a continuum. | | |

Questions such as the following (from Appendix 1) could be used to involve students in discussions about how ethical behaviour is represented in a poem:

* Identify the positive or negative judgments the poem makes about the way people/characters behave.
* How do these judgments measure up against what you, as reader, think is right and wrong?

***Appreciation (aesthetics)***

Writers/speakers/creators directly or indirectly express positive or negative **appreciation or valuation** of the worth of certain aspects such as: people’s/characters’ attributes (their abilities or appearance, as opposed to how they behave); relationships; made objects; nature and natural objects.

Questions such as the following (from Appendix 1) could be used to involve students in discussions about a poem:

* Has the writer effectively used particular words and/or word groups that capture the positive or negative worth of: people’s/character’s appearance, their abilities, their relationships; made objects; places, nature and natural objects?
* Identify these and explain.

Appreciations may be divided into:

* our emotional **reactions** to things (Did it grab my attention? Did I like it?)
* the **composition** of things (Does it hang together? Was it easy to follow?)
* the **worth** of things (Was it worthwhile?).

Table 3 provides a summary.

Table 3: Appreciation (aesthetics)

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| Attitudes towards behaviour | | Positive | Negative |
| **Reaction** | | | |
| Impact  Quality | Did it grab my attention?  Did I like it? | arresting, captivating, fascinating, engaging …  appealing, beautiful … | dull, boring, tedious, predictable …  plain, revolting … |
| **Composition** | | | |
| Balance  Complexity | Did it hang together?  Was it hard to follow? | balanced, unified …  lucid, precise, rich … | uneven, flawed …  ornate, extravagant … |
| **Valuation** | | | |
|  | Was it worthwhile? | penetrating, profound, deep, valuable, illuminating, original … | dated, ineffective, fake… |

Source: Adapted from Martin and White, 2007, p. 56.

#### *Graduation*

Graduation is concerned with **gradability**, that is, the scaling of the **force** of meaning upwards or downwards or sharpening or softening its **focus**. Table 4 summarises ways this can occur.

Table 4: Graduation

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| The feeling, emotion and meaning of the text is graded:   * upwards or downwards (force) * sharpened or softened (focus) | | |
| Force:  the degree of intensity of a word or expression.  **Force:**   * carries the idea of more-or-less (more positive, less intense, more definite, more emphatic) * usually, though not always, associated with gradable words (words that can be intensified) and words with positive or negative alternatives. | **Graders** such as *quite, very, really, extremely, utterly* intensify meaning, while others, e.g. *fairly, somewhat*, tone down the feeling, emotion or meaning.  These words need to be combined with other word classes, such as:   * adjectives: *slightly/extremely* foolish*; somewhat/utterly* appalling; *fairly/rather/very/extremely/utterly* miserable * adverbs: *somewhat/quite/rather/very* abruptly * verbs: *slightly/greatly* hindered * nouns*: happier/happiest* person (comparatives and superlatives) * modals*: just/somewhat/quite/very* possible; *highly* probable; *extremely* capable; *only* rarely; *fairly, quite, very* often. | |
| **Quantifiers express**   * number:*few, some, several, many* * amount/size: *miniscule, tiny, huge, gigantic* * extent*:**short, widespread, long lasting*. | |
| **Maximisers express the highest possible intensity:** *utterly/totally/ thoroughly/absolutely/completely* miserable; *perfectly* happy | |
| **Words may be infused with varying degrees of intensity:** *like/ love/adore; happy/joyous/ ecstatic*; *trickled, flowed, poured, flooded*; *possible, probable, certain* | |
| **Words may be infused with intense attitude:** She is an *angel*; her brother is a *rascal*. I *loathe* him.  They can be intensified further by adding graders (see above). | |
| **Poetic or figurative language**  Words used in a non-literal way evoke and strengthen emotion:   * metaphor *(Juliet is the sun)* * simile *(soft as velvet)* * personification *(sighing trees)*. | |
| **Repetition and synonymy scale** intensity up**🡭.**   * *He tried and tried.* * *The floods were terrible; just awful.* | |
| **Focus:**  membership of a class of things | **Sharper focus** (strengthen membership of that class):   * *true* friend; *pure* evil; a *real* man | **Softer/blurred focus** (weaken membership of that class):   * kind of stupid; sort of scary |
| **Humour** | Depending on the context:   * irony — making a statement, but implying the opposite * hyperbole — exaggerating or overstating something (*hopping mad*; *died laughing*) | * parody — imitating or sending up something * understatement: making something appear less serious than it really is |

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| **Allusion:**  brief, usually indirect reference to a person, place, or event — real or fictional | Depending on their content, often:   * historical * cultural | * mythological * literary * political |

Source: adapted from Martin and White, 2007, pp.135–147.

#### References

Droga, L & Humphrey, S 2003*, Grammar and Meaning: An Introduction for Primary Teachers*, Target Texts, NSW.

Droga, L, Humphrey, S & Love, K 2011, *Working Grammar: An Introduction for Secondary English Teachers*, Pearson, Australia.

Martin, JR & White, PRR 2007, *The Language of Evaluation: Appraisal in English*, Palgrave Macmillan, London & New York.

### Appendix 1: Powerful questions for unlocking the WHAT and the HOW of a poem

The following questions, which can be adapted to suit most texts, have proven to be effective in unlocking the WHAT (a poem’s meaning) and the HOW (the emotional and persuasive effects of the evaluative language the writer has used). Teachers could select appropriate questions from each of the categories and help students use them to analyse and respond to particular poems.

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| **TheWHAT of a poem — questions about a poem’s meaning and messages** |
| 1. Identify and evaluate the situation within which people/characters move. |
| 1. What cultural aspects such as age, gender, and race are depicted in the poem? |
| 1. What people/characters are included/excluded? Why? |
| 1. Whose interests does the poem serve? |
| 1. What particular view of the world is foregrounded in the poem? |
| 1. What beliefs and values are expressed in the poem? |
| 1. What is the poem valuing, and what does it leave a reader thinking and believing? |
| 1. Is there anything in particular that you took from your reading of the poem? |
| 1. Do these messages make up powerful knowledge? |
| 1. Do you think the poem is capable of changing readers’ feelings, attitudes and values? Or might it just reinforce what is already there in people’s minds? |

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| **The HOW of a poem — questions about the ways a poem builds feeling and emotion**  **The sets of questions below make readers aware of the ways writers tap into human feelings and needs and explicitly or implicitly use language to evoke strong positive or negative feelings. In analysing evaluative language, students will often be required to make inferences.** |
| **AFFECT (feeling, emotion)** |
| 1. What elements of feeling and emotion that have been selected and strategically used in the poem connect with your emotions as a reader? Consider the following:  * What words in the poem evoke positive feelings of: happiness (e.g. surprise, excitement, wellbeing); security (e.g. trust, reassurance); satisfaction (e.g. pleasure, interest, absorption)? What effects are these likely to have on the way a reader feels? * What words in the poem evoke negative feelings? What effects are these likely to have on the way a reader feels? |
| 1. How might the language of the poem make readers feel — amazed, confused, unsure, nervous, guilty, interested, angry, sad, happy, reassured …? |
| 1. What emotions (e.g. intrigue, awe, sympathy, anger, happiness) in the poem might play a part in positioning readers’ feelings? |
| 1. What shifts in emotions (e.g. happiness to sadness, security to insecurity, satisfaction to dissatisfaction) occur throughout the poem? Explain. |
| 1. Can you find words in some parts of the poem that have more intensity of feeling than in other parts? Explain. |
| **Judgment of people’s character (usually through their actions)** |
| 1. Do you agree that the evaluative language used by writers can have either negative or positive connotations and that it can potentially help or hurt people? |
| 1. a. Identify any positive or negative judgments the poem makes about the way people behave.   b. How do these judgments measure up against what you, as a reader, think is right and wrong? |
| 1. Do you think writers expect readers to evaluate whether people’s/characters’ actions are good or bad? Explain. |
| 1. Judging by what people do and say in the poem, which of the following words might be used to describe them: talented, capable, confident, competent, honest, moral, law-abiding, genuine…? What other words might be appropriate? |
| 1. Ideally how might the writer want readers to judge people’s behaviour in the poem? |
| 1. As reader of a poem, you may be invited to a position of empathy — of emotional solidarity — with people/characters or, at least, an understanding of their motives. Were you easily able to accept the poem’s invitation to adopt a position of empathy? Why?/Why not? |
| **Appreciation of worth and beauty** |
| 1. a. Has the writer effectively used particular words or word groups that capture the positive or negative worth of ‘things’, such as people’s appearance, their abilities, their relationships; made objects, places, nature and natural objects?   b. Underline these words or word groups and explain. How do they compare with your own ideas of worth/beauty? |
| 1. Can you find really good examples of words/word groups (e.g. adjectives, similes, metaphors, personification) that create strong images in your mind? |

1. Adapted from Martin and White, 2007, p. 51. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Adapted from Martin and White, 2007, p. 53. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)