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# Part 1: AS Level



# Unit 1: Reading non-fiction

Reading is a core skill which underpins both AS and A2 English Language. It helps you to understand a range of different types of writing and also helps you to shape your own written responses in the light of the effects and techniques that you encounter.

In this unit you will explore different forms and genres of non-fiction writing. You will have opportunities to:

- analyse and interpret texts in a range of ways
- explore the techniques writers use and the effects they create
- plan and develop the skills needed to write your own extended commentaries on language and style
- link what you have learned to the requirements of the ‘Writing non-fiction’ aspect of the course.



The techniques, effects and forms of writing you will meet in this unit will inform and help you with your own writing in **Unit 2: Writing non-fiction**.

## READING AND WRITING SKILLS

### Types of question, language and style

In this section you will:

- consider what *non-fiction* is and the sorts of texts you might encounter
- look at a range of commentary-style questions
- explore what *language* and *style* are.

#### What is non-fiction?

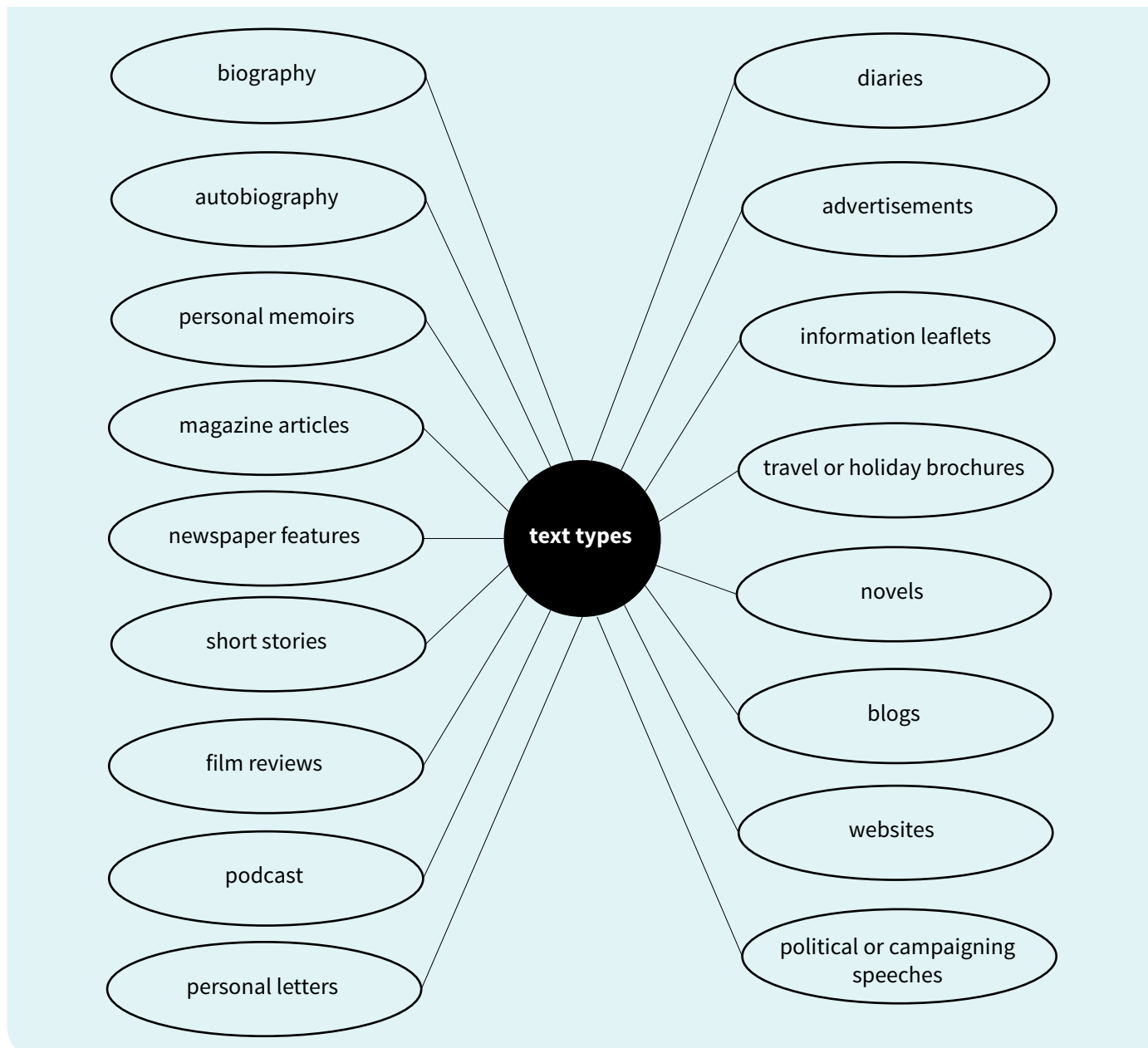
When we talk about non-fiction, we generally mean writing which is rooted in real experiences and which draws on factual information for its core content. Fiction generally refers to writing that is largely imaginative or invented. Yet non-fiction writing can share many of the same features as fiction writing, for example a description of a real-life trip to a vibrant city might share many of the same vivid style features as the depiction of an imagined city in a novel.

However, most of the extracts you are likely to encounter for examination would be largely categorised as ‘non-fiction’ though they will be drawn from a wide range of sources.

#### ACTIVITY 1.1

With a partner, look at the diagram opposite.

- 1 Which of these would you generally consider to be ‘non-fiction’ – that is, largely based on real-life events, people or places?
- 2 Which of the non-fiction texts you have identified do you think would be *closest* in style to fictional writing? Why?



### Types of question

This section of the book deals mainly with your understanding of and commentary on non-fiction passages you read, but bear in mind that what you take from these passages will also inform your 'Directed writing' tasks. More importantly, though, you need to understand what it is you are being asked to do.

Passage-based questions may ask you to:

*Comment on the style and language of the set extract.*

In this case, the questions are fairly open and would expect you to range widely in your response, covering a number of factors.

Or these questions may go further and ask you to address your analysis towards a particular angle, for example:

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- *Comment on the ways in which language and style are used to present the relationship between ...*
- *Comment on the ways in which language and style are used to persuade the audience to ...*
- *Comment on the ways in which language and style are used to present the writer's attitude towards ...*

In the latter examples, you are given more guidance with references, perhaps to comment on:

- *the writer's purpose or attitude* (i.e. to present, to persuade, etc.)
- *particular aspects or focuses* (i.e. a relationship, a place, an event).

### ACTIVITY 1.2

On your own, look at this question about a passage taken from a travel account:

*Comment on the ways in which style and language are used by Paul Theroux to present his attitude towards the people he meets in the stadium.*

With a partner discuss:

- Whose style and language should you focus on?
- What particular **purpose** of the writer should you address?
- What or who in the passage must you consider?

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#### TIP

Aspects such as purpose, audience and context will not always be apparent, or even relevant, when you read passages for analysis, but keeping them in mind is useful and can help you focus your analysis.



#### KEY TERMS

**register** the type of language used for a particular purpose, or in a particular setting

**context** the background, setting, form or culture in which the text was written or is set

### What are style and language?

Understanding what *style* and *language* are may seem obvious, but it is important you understand the sort of areas you are being expected to comment on.

#### Style

Style might be considered as everything that gives a particular text its unique and individual 'flavour'. The ingredients that make up style will include:

- **form**: the shape, organisation and overall structure of the text
- **language**: the vocabulary, grammar, syntax, variety of sentences, choice of tense, **register** and so on.

To understand the particular style and language of a text, or that a writer employs, it is also helpful for you to explore:

- the **purpose** of texts (which may be explicit or implied), for example to persuade, inform, or describe
- the **audience** or reader at whom the text is aimed (which can be specific or general)
- the **context** of the text, for example when, where and how it was produced.

To get yourself thinking about style and language, begin by reading these three different paragraphs from texts.

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**A** I had never felt so alone. The wide sweep of the Andes stretched in front of me, a seemingly infinite expanse of ice and rock. The air cut into my cheeks, and blinded me, as I stood unsteadily looking down on the valley below. Then, for a moment, the skies cleared above me, and I saw a single, solitary condor rise on the breeze, effortless and free. I would be that condor. I would rise above my despair.

**B** Do not be put off by the noise and smell of the city as you arrive. This is one of its charms, and just part of the heady brew that makes it such a wonderful and magical place to visit. The narrow streets, the Old City with its minarets, the street-

vendors who shout out their wares – these simply add to the intoxicating recipe. You will soon be hooked!

**C** All I can say is that the décor was more tasteful than the food ... and more colourful. My starter was brown paté on brown toast ... the effect was, how shall I put it ... er, brown and, if it is possible for a colour to be a taste, it tasted brown, or perhaps beige, which is even less powerful. The starter's lack of taste was only beaten by the gloopy slop that came with my steak. The menu said 'Celeriac purée', my plate said, 'Wallpaper paste'.



### KEY TERMS

**voice** the distinctive tone and perspective of the writer

**tone** the 'feel', mood or emotion present in a text

**formality** language which observes agreed conventions, which would be used in business or professional contexts, particularly in less personal contexts

**informality** language best suited to close or personal contexts, in which accepted rules or conventions can be adapted, abbreviated or otherwise altered, for example, in writing that sounds more like speaking

**symbol** a word or phrase that can represent an idea; for example, in paragraph A above the condor represents freedom

**imagery** language that draws on visual depictions to suggest ideas, for example, *The road through the mountains was a necklace of lights that shimmered and twinkled*

### ACTIVITY 1.3

- With a partner, talk about each text in turn. Consider:
  - the **voice** of the writer (Who is speaking? Do we know? What form of address do they use? What tense? Is the **tone** humorous, reflective, angry?)
  - the **formality** or **informality** (How 'close' to the reader is the tone? Is it chatty? Does it use speech-like language or punctuation?)
  - other language choices (e.g. use of particular vocabulary)
  - the **types** or **variety of sentence** used (Short? Long? Simple? Complex?)
  - symbols** or **imagery**
  - the **order** or **structure** of the text (Does it matter? What can we learn from it?).
- Share your ideas with another pair and then feed back responses to the rest of the class or group.
  - Did you find a way of describing the style and language for each of these texts?
  - Did any of the texts share similar elements of style and language? Which? How?

### Summary

Remember these key points from this section:

- Questions can be general and focus broadly on style and language, or can be more specific and direct you towards key aspects.
- Understanding what style and language consist of will help you focus on the key elements you need to comment on.

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### Key reading skills for responding to passages

In this section you will:

- understand key success criteria for commenting on passages
- explore how to interpret selected words and phrases from texts
- evaluate commentary skills.

#### How to approach passage-based questions

Having a system for approaching passage-based questions is key to a successful commentary on them. But what kind of things should you do in the reading and writing stages?

Here are some key success criteria:

##### Do:

- read the text at least twice
- list or highlight key words and phrases from the text before you begin to write
- start your commentary with a clear, brief introduction in which you offer an overview or framework for your interpretation of, or commentary on, the set passage
- focus on what the writer **does** (the techniques he or she uses) and the **features** presented
- describe the **effects** of those techniques and features on the reader
- support what you say with well-chosen, **selective evidence** and **apt quotation**
- write in a **coherent, fluent** way which **links** rather than lists ideas
- keep your focus on style and language
- check your work as you write and tweak or adapt carefully to make sure your expression is succinct, yet sufficiently detailed.

##### Don't:

- start writing before you have read the text properly
- simply list or highlight everything in the text (!) – be selective
- **assert** an idea or opinion without supporting evidence
- simply 'feature-spot' – that is, point out a technique or a language device without explaining its effect or purpose (for example, mention that the writer has used alliteration without saying what its effect is)
- just summarise what happens or paraphrase without offering any commentary or interpretation
- list points or ideas in an unconnected way
- drift off into discussing aspects outside the question set.

Read these two short paragraphs from students' commentaries. You do not need to have read the original passage but they are based on the extract from *Shooting an Elephant* by George Orwell on page 9 of this unit.



#### KEY TERMS

**assert** state something as a fact with no real support or proof

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### SAMPLE RESPONSE

- A** On the whole, this is an easy-to-read passage in which the writer uses short and long sentences to good effect. It is a direct and descriptive account of how an animal was shot. The writer lets the readers get acquainted with the scene and the atmosphere. The writer uses *if* clauses which add variety.
- B** Orwell gives a direct, straightforward account in broadly chronological order, establishing the setting and then the events that ensue. He demonstrates the thought-processes he went through at the time, using *if* clauses to consider the consequences of what he might do, for example, saying *If he charged, I could shoot ...* to explain how the situation would be taken out of his hands.

### ACTIVITY 1.4

- On your own, based on the relevant success criteria on page 6:
  - note down which of the success criteria are evident
  - decide which of the responses is more effective
  - decide what is wrong with, or could be improved in, the other response.
- Once you have done this, compare your ideas with a partner.
  - Did you agree on which extract was better and why?
  - What two important things, in particular, should have been done?

### Highlighting or listing key words or phrases

Passages of writing contain an enormous variety of possibilities which you can choose to comment on. In fact, you could probably comment on every single word or phrase! However, this is not practical, nor desirable. By highlighting or listing key words and phrases you will be able to interact with the text, however dense and complex it might first appear, and focus on key patterns or features that create the tone or mood.

You will be looking at how to plan and structure responses to texts later in this unit but first, read the extract below. The annotations in the first four paragraphs provide an idea of the sorts of aspects you might draw from a text.

Short, simple sentence introduces the focus for the piece.

Metaphor captures the sense of mental imprisonment.

The writer's appetite to find out as much as he can.

I never met my grandfather. He died nine years to the day before I was born. What I knew of him was pieced together from conversations with my grandmother...

We gathered in her garden on the day of her funeral, steeling ourselves against the encroaching sadness of final farewell. I left the stilted conversation that caged in our grief and walked through her house, drinking in every detail of a place I would never see again. I paused in front of an old cedar-wood bookcase where my grandmother had arranged her most prized photos. Amid all the weddings, Christmas dinners, birthdays, graduations, grandchildren



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Withholds the name of the grandfather till the end of the sentence; he comes alive at this point, following the list of items viewed.

The repeating structure mimics the sense of the writer's eyes moving from one image to the next, as if we are seeing them too.

Long, extended noun phrase captures Bryan's charisma and achievements.

Return to the first person, *I*, relocates the text as being as much about the writer as the subject.

Final clause creates a sense of drama; suggests something mysterious or interesting is to be revealed.

and great-grandchildren were pictures of Bryan. They were sundry keepsakes of a life of staggering high achievement.

Here was Bryan at the foot of a satellite whose construction he oversaw, moments before a rocket launched it into outer space; here he was in a park in Leningrad at the height of the Cold War, the delegate representing Australia at an international space conference; here he was in Maralinga, the distinguished scientist observing the atomic-bomb tests; here he posed for his official photograph as director of Australia's Antarctic Division; and here he was looking like Errol Flynn<sup>1</sup>, the decorated squadron leader with moustache neatly clipped and hat rakishly angled.

I had never felt as remote from my grandfather as I did at that moment. There were no photos of him holding a baby or laughing with his children or smiling with his bride on his wedding day. He was on his own in all of them, but for one exception.

The photo was smaller than the others, discreetly placed at the edge of the bookcase. It captured my grandfather later in his life standing shoulder-to-shoulder with a man of similar age and proportions, both of them dressed in dark suits and ties. A wintry background of leafless trees and cloudy sky scarcely dimmed the quiet enthusiasm each man exuded in the other's company. I picked it up in the hope that closer inspection might put a name to the man whose life was sufficiently exalted to share space with my grandfather. I took it out of the frame and flipped it around. On the back, my grandmother had scrawled a name in pencil: Hiram Cassedy.

Cassedy. The very sight of the name called forth images formed in my youth. In my mind's eye, I could see a party of emaciated castaways covered in tropical ulcers gathered on a beach, a full moon lighting up the crashing surf. A bare-chested Timorese man moves among the group clutching a fistful of Dutch guilders. A radioman, malaria-ravaged and undernourished, crouches alongside an enormous transceiver, frantically scribbling an encoded message on the back of a corn leaf. Nearby, a crucifix fashioned from palm branches tilts at an angle above a freshly dug grave. And, standing slightly apart – his face bearded and gaunt, his clothes torn and filthy – is my grandfather. In one hand, he clasps a letter sent from the Japanese Army demanding surrender; in the other, he holds a torch. Later that night, my grandfather would meet Hiram Cassedy, the lynchpin in an event that most believed defined my grandfather's life and some thought ended it prematurely.

The photo I held was taken years later, on the occasion of his second encounter with Cassedy. It was a rare souvenir honouring a rescue mission of such implausibility that the Allies covered it up in the hope of using it again. When the press eventually reported the event, the story was lost in a war filled with like tales of bravery, heroism and despair.

I placed the photo back in its frame and drew it close. The key to understanding my grandfather lay at the heart of this photo and in understanding the event it commemorated. I placed it back on the bookcase and returned to my grieving family. That was when I decided to go to Timor.

From *Rescue at 21.00 Hours* by Tom Trumble.

<sup>1</sup> **Errol Flynn** swashbuckling actor from the 1930s to 1950s



### TIP

It is vital that you refer to the **effect** of particular language features, devices or patterns when you comment on a text otherwise your comments will reveal little of the mood or tone.

### ACTIVITY 1.5

- 1 Basing your answer solely on the annotations to the text, what do you feel you have learned about the writer and his style and language?  
 With a partner, discuss how useful the annotations were.



## KEY TERMS

**juxtapose** to place ideas or words/phrases in close proximity to each other to convey an idea, or to balance contrasting points

**figurative language** language such as imagery, in which the literal meaning is less relevant than what the word/phrase suggests or symbolises. For example, *My heart was stone* does not mean that the writer's heart was literally made of stone, but perhaps that it was unfeeling

- 2 Now have a go yourself. Read the extract again including the second, unannotated part. Using the **first four paragraphs as a model**, list key words or phrases that stand out to you.
 

These might include any of the following:

  - particularly vivid descriptions (perhaps adjectives and nouns)
  - repetitions of words/phrases or patterns of language
  - groups of similar or related words
  - contrasting or **juxtaposed** ideas or phrases
  - imagery, symbols or other forms of **figurative language**
  - changes in tone or focus.
- 3 Once you have done this, choose one or two of these aspects and make your own notes about what they reveal about the writer and his tone. Make sure you are able to:
  - relate what you say to the words or phrases you have listed
  - refer to the **effect** of these words or phrases on the reader and the mood conveyed.

## Evaluating commentary skills

What makes a good commentary? While no two commentaries on a text should be the same and while each should reflect the student's own interpretation and 'take' on the text, there are key skills that everyone should apply, as indicated by the success criteria on page 6.

Now read this task and the passage that follows it:

- 1 *The passage below describes the writer's experience in Burma when he was serving as a police officer at a time when the British ruled the country. He has been ordered to deal with a possible threat posed by an elephant.*
  - (a) *Comment on the style and language of the passage.*

Cambridge International AS and A Level English Language 8693 Paper 1 (May/June 2009), Q1a.

But I did not want to shoot the elephant. I watched him beating his bunch of grass against his knees, with that preoccupied grandmotherly air that elephants have. It seemed to me that it would be murder to shoot him. At that age I was not squeamish about killing animals, but I had never shot an elephant and never wanted to. (Somehow it always seems worse to kill a large animal). Besides, there was the beast's owner to be considered. Alive, the elephant was worth at least a hundred pounds; dead, he would only be worth the value of his tusks, five pounds, possibly. But I had got to act quickly. I turned to some experienced-looking Burmans who had been there when we arrived, and asked them how the elephant had been behaving. They all said the same thing: he took no notice of you if you left him alone, but he might charge if you went too close to him.

It was perfectly clear to me what I ought to do. I ought to walk up to within, say, twenty-five yards of the elephant and test his behaviour. If he charged, I could shoot; if he took no notice of me, it would be safe to leave him until the **mahout**<sup>1</sup> came back. But also I knew that I was going to do no such thing. I was a poor shot with a rifle and the ground was soft mud into which one would sink at every step. If the elephant charged and I missed him, I should have about as much chance as a toad under a steam-roller.

There was only one alternative. I shoved the cartridges into the magazine and lay down on the road to get a better aim. The crowd grew very still, and a deep, low, happy sigh, as of people who see the theatre curtain go up at last, breathed from innumerable throats. They were going to have their bit of fun after all. The rifle was a beautiful German thing with cross-

## TIP

Being aware of things to avoid can be as useful as remembering what you should do when answering passage-based questions.

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hair sights. I did not then know that in shooting an elephant one would shoot to cut an imaginary bar running from ear-hole to ear-hole. I ought, therefore, as the elephant was sideways on, to have aimed straight at his ear-hole; actually I aimed several inches in front of this, thinking the brain would be further forward.

When I pulled the trigger I did not hear the bang or feel the kick – one never does when a shot goes home – but I heard the devilish roar of glee that went up from the crowd. In that instant, in too short a time, one would have thought, even for the bullet to get there, a mysterious, terrible change had come over the elephant. He neither stirred nor fell, but every line of his body had altered. He looked suddenly stricken, shrunken, immensely old, as though the frightful impact of the bullet had paralysed him without knocking him down. At last, after what seemed a long time – it might have been five seconds, I dare say – he sagged flabbily to his knees. His mouth slobbered. An enormous senility seemed to have settled upon him. One could have imagined him thousands of years old. I fired again into the same spot. At the second shot he did not collapse but climbed with desperate slowness to his feet and stood weakly upright, with legs sagging and head drooping. I fired a third time. That was the shot that did for him. You could see the agony of it jolt his whole body and knock the last remnant of strength from his legs. But in falling he seemed for a moment to rise, for as his hind legs collapsed beneath him he seemed to tower upward like a huge

rock toppling, his trunk reaching skyward like a tree. He trumpeted, for the first and only time. And then down he came, his belly towards me, with a crash that seemed to shake the ground even where I lay.

I got up. The Burmans were already racing past me across the mud. It was obvious that the elephant would never rise again, but he was not dead. He was breathing very rhythmically with long rattling gasps, his great mound of a side painfully rising and falling. His mouth was wide open – I could see far down into caverns of pale pink throat. I waited a long time for him to die, but his breathing did not weaken. Finally I fired my two remaining shots into the spot where I thought his heart must be. The thick blood welled out of him like red velvet, but still he did not die. His body did not even jerk when the shots hit him, the tortured breathing continued without a pause. He was dying, very slowly and in great agony, but in some world remote from me where not even a bullet could damage him further. I felt that I had got to put an end to that dreadful noise. It seemed dreadful to see the great beast lying there, powerless to move and yet powerless to die, and not even to be able to finish him. I sent back for my small rifle and poured shot after shot into his heart and down his throat. They seemed to make no impression. The tortured gasps continued as steadily as the ticking of a clock.

In the end I could not stand it any longer and went away.

*From Shooting an Elephant by George Orwell.*

<sup>1</sup> **mahout** an elephant owner or keeper



### ACTIVITY 1.6

- 1 Discuss with a partner:
  - What happens in the passage?
  - What do you find particularly effective or striking about the account?
  - What kinds of things might you write about if commenting on the style and language?
- 2 Now read this sample response to the task. As you read it, consider to what extent it meets the success criteria for such a response.