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Watching a visual text

When you go to watch a visual text (e.g. watch a film or TV series on television, DVD or online; or view the performance of a play) you expect a number of things:

- to enjoy the visual text
- to 'buy into' or accept a fair number of incredible characters, events and settings
- to see elements of the visual text put together in an effective and professional way.

As well as hoping you enjoy a visual text, the producers and director may also hope:

- that you get involved in, and care for, the characters and what happens to them
- that you get a surprise or two
- that you understand some ideas or messages that the director wants to get across to you
- that you believe what you see on screen makes sense, even if it is set in a magical or unrealistic place and involves strange and fantastic events and characters.

Study profile

Aspects of visual and oral texts	Studied	Study needed
The director's/producer's purpose The author's/creator's intended audience Visual/oral text language features Ambient sound/silence Body language Cinematography Colour Composition Costumes/props Design Dialogue / voice / body language Editing Font Illustration Imagery/symbolism (visual and/or verbal)		

Layout Lighting Music Narration/voice-over Rhetorical devices Sound effects Special effects Use of voice		
Character Character's/individual's appearance Character's/individual's development Character's/individual's challenges, difficulties Character's/individual's surprising qualities or actions		
Setting Setting (time and place, social context) Description of setting(s) Memorable settings		
Structure The organisation of the text (story/plot) Beginnings and endings Conflict Surprising and/or powerful events or moments		
Themes / key ideas Interesting ideas Ideas worth learning about The author's/creator's 'message' or 'lesson'		

Pre-observation

You will have been guided in your choice of visual text because it will be deemed appropriate for study at Level 1. It is likely that you already know some information about the text, even before you have seen it.

Write down your pre-observation notes. This will be useful to reflect on later as you consider the purpose, audience and techniques used in the text.

Where there are gaps, make sure you are able to fill these once you have watched and studied the text.

Oral aspects	Dialogue	Voice-over/ narration	Sound effects	Ambient or background sound	Music	Silence
<i>Whale Rider</i>	Koro's first words are 'Where's the boy?' They show that the male grandchild is his focus, more than his son, daughter-in-law and granddaughter.	Paikea narrates the opening. She tells of the legend of Paikea and her own birth. Her story is sad – 'There was no gladness when I was born.'	The whale sound cuts across the sea scene into the birth scene.	The bird song in the background as the family arrives at the hospital suggests newness.	The music is sad and mournful as we realise that Paikea's mother and brother have passed away.	
Oral aspects	Dialogue	Voice-over/ narration	Sound effects	Ambient or background sound	Music	Silence

Once you have viewed the complete text, add to your answers where your understanding has developed.

Literary features of film

Like other types of literature, films have certain literary features. When looking at film we will pay close attention to:

- plot – what happens in the film?
- setting – where and when does the story take place?
- characters – who is involved?
- structure – how is the film organised?
- themes – what does the director want us to learn or think about as we watch the film (and afterwards)?

Plot

For film for Achievement Standard 90850 (English 1.2), students are expected to be able to identify the main events of a film and be able to explain how they are important in developing characters, communicating main ideas, setting up tension or resolving conflict.

Knowledge of the plot of your text is crucial to your answer as you need to understand the story and how the technical aspects work to communicate it.

Significant events in *The Hunger Games* by Gary Ross:

- Peeta Mellark, a friend of Katniss, who once gave her bread when she was starving, is also chosen at the ceremony and goes with Katniss to the Capitol to compete.
- In the Capitol, Peeta and Katniss are mentored by a former Games victor, Haymitch Abernathy, and a stylist called Cinna, as they train for the Games with the other participants, some of whom come from more wealthy districts where they have training almost since birth – they are known as ‘Careers’.
- Katniss and Peeta are interviewed together live by a TV personality, Caesar Flickerman, and Peeta reveals he has feelings for Katniss, who becomes very angry.
- The Games begin and are televised live, with half the tributes losing their lives within the first eight hours.
- Katniss relies on her excellent hunting and outdoor skills to survive in the arena, a densely forested environment.
- Katniss is wounded in a forest fire and develops an alliance with 12-year-old District 11 tribute, Rue, while Peeta develops one with the ‘Careers’ group.
- With Rue’s help, Katniss blows up supplies gathered by the ‘Careers’ tributes for their own use at the steel Cornucopia out in the open.
- Katniss saves Rue from a net Rue becomes trapped in, but Rue is killed by a District 1 tribute, Marvel, whom Katniss kills in self-defence by shooting an arrow at him, but too late to save Rue.
- The rules are changed, stating that two tributes from the same district can win the Games as a pair.
- Katniss searches for Peeta and nurses him back to health after he is wounded by a sword, so that they can work together.
- Katniss tries to get medicine for Peeta’s wound, and, in an intense fight, she is attacked by Clove, but saved by Thresh who is from the same district as Rue.
- A pack of hound-like, vicious creatures is released in the forest, killing Thresh and forcing Katniss and Peeta towards the steel Cornucopia out in the open.
- After another action-packed battle, Katniss shoots Cato in the hand with an arrow to save Peeta once again, and Cato falls to the hounds.

Filming techniques

Visual techniques

Following is a list of terms you should know. Get used to using them, because when you do, it shows that you are knowledgeable about film and can describe what you see accurately and clearly.

Shots

Shot: what is seen from when a camera starts filming until it stops.

Wide shot (WS) or Long shot (LS): a shot from a distance when we can see a whole body (e.g. a person standing in a prison yard).

Shots, camera movement and lighting, as well as soundtrack techniques are all used as evidence in exam essays.



Example of a wide shot (WS)

Establishing shot: often a LS or WS sets a scene or gives the audience important information about time and place or a context where things are about to take place.



Example of an establishing shot

Medium shot: a shot of a person from the waist up, or similar proportion of an object; can provide some details of surroundings as well as detail of expressions or actions (e.g. Andy sitting on his bed with the rope in his hands the night before his escape from Shawshank Prison).

Close-up: just head and shoulders or an equivalent; the director may be wanting us to focus on emotions or reactions.



Extreme close-up: focus on one part of the body or similar to draw attention to it (e.g. an eye widening, a finger twitching).



Subjective shot: this is the name for a shot from a particular character's point of view, used to make the audience see through that character's eyes (e.g. in *The Shawshank Redemption*, when Andy is walking to his cell from the Warden's office, he looks up at Red and the camera then cuts to look down from Red's point of view as Andy passes below – because we see from Red's point of view, we seem to share the sense that Andy is about to do something, and we also share Red's concern).

Neutral: shot from eye level, as we would see it ourselves.

High-angle: the camera looks down at the subject, sometimes making them look alone and/or vulnerable.

The shots just described can be filmed from different angles. The use of high- and low-angle shots in a film can tell you a lot about the relative power of characters.



Low-angle: the camera looks up at the subject – the subject can look more imposing, powerful and important.

Further visual features

There are still other film techniques that the director has at their disposal.

Costume: a great tool in getting the audience to react to a character the way the director wants us to (e.g. in *The Shawshank Redemption*, Andy goes from business suits as a banker, prison uniform as an inmate, and loose shirt and shorts as a free man; Hadley, the Head Guard, is always in his uniform, complete with badges, hat and truncheon, all symbols of his power and authority).

Make-up: make-up can also emphasise key features and show changes in appearance and age (e.g. the way Red ages in *The Shawshank Redemption*).



Mise en scène: this term means ‘what is in the shot’. The director usually has control over exactly what is in the frame, so whatever they choose to let us see is there for a reason. Elements in the frame may add to our understanding of a character, perhaps as a clue to what has happened or hint at what might happen next.

Special effects (SFX): these come in a few categories, like animation, CGI (computer-generated images), explosions, crashes and other actions that can’t be filmed live. Anything from mechanical sharks to light sabres fits into this category, and many are put in at post-production stage.

Verbal techniques

Filmmakers can also use different verbal or sound techniques, depending on what they want you to think or how they want you to react.

Soundtrack: this is the term for all of the sounds you hear throughout a film – includes music, dialogue and sound effects.

Dialogue: the words spoken by the actors to each other – not only the words are important, but also how they are said.

Voice-over: sometimes, the director has a character speak over the action, either from off-screen or as if the character was thinking (e.g. Red does this throughout *The Shawshank Redemption*).

Sound effects: these are added sounds, important for the audience to hear (e.g. gunshots, sirens, breaking glass, thunder).

Diegetic sound: sounds that you would expect to hear in the scene you see on the screen because they could occur naturally in or near the scene (e.g. seagull calls in a beachside scene).

Music: this is always deliberate, and can indicate changes in mood, increased suspense and reflect the characters’ emotions.

Silence: usually, there is some sound coming out of every shot and scene; when there isn’t, it can be very surprising and act as a tool to sharply focus you on what you are looking at, as well as raising suspense and tension.

Settings and how they are filmed

The settings used in a film are important and so are the ways they are filmed. The visual techniques, verbal techniques and range of characters we see in a setting help establish the world of the film. Use the following table to build up a set of notes about key settings used in the film you have studied; in the last column, explain why you think your chosen setting was important. Consider if the setting is important in showing what characters are like, helping to illustrate important ideas, establishing mood or atmosphere, or providing background for an event.

An example follows for *The Shawshank Redemption*.

Setting (Where and when)	Visual techniques (Camera angles, lighting, etc.)	Verbal techniques (Sound effects, voice-over, soundtrack)	Characters we see in this setting	Why this setting is important
The prison yard as Andy arrives.	Helicopter shot (high angle).	Slow strings on soundtrack.	Lots of inmates, including Red and Heywood.	Shows us the grim nature of the prison as well as the fact that the inmates are like animals, enclosed and heading for the gate to see the new 'fish' arrive.

Setting techniques

Complete the following table for your text.

Setting (Where and when)	Visual techniques (Camera angles, lighting, etc.)	Verbal techniques (Sound effects, voice-over, soundtrack)	Characters we see in this setting	Why this setting is important

The wider world

In order to reach Excellence, NCEA English Achievement Standards require students to offer judgements and references to the wider world. This means you need to think about the themes and ideas raised in the text and consider how they relate to your experience and knowledge today.

For example, when looking at *The Hunger Games*, you could consider how the current trends in reality television may lead to a future where killing for entertainment is part of the norm.

World view

Consider the key ideas of your selected text and make notes on your personal observations, judgements and feelings on each idea. Use the example from *Whale Rider* as a template for your own ideas.



The Legend of Paiake

Paiake is named after her male ancestor by her mother. I see this as a challenge to the expectation that Māori leaders are male.

Paiake succeeds in becoming a leader, but only by recognising that it is best in this Māori community if the people take collective responsibility.

I understand that New Zealand society can accept women as leaders but I see that most political and social leaders are still male.



Māori identity

Porourangi struggles with his Māori identity. He gives up on carving the waka after the death of his wife and son and travels to Europe. At the end of the film he has returned home with his European fiancée, Anna, who is pregnant with his child. The waka is complete and Porourangi paddles along with his whānau.

Many Māori today take time to reconnect with their roots and to find their place in the world and within their community.



World view

Koro does not appreciate Porourangi's success as an artist in Europe. Koro also seems to be disappointed that Porourangi's girlfriend is German. The old man cannot see success in the world beyond his community. He believes that his son should remain in New Zealand.

Many old people are threatened by the fact that the world is now a more connected place. Some people struggle with the idea that people of different races and nationalities can choose to be together.

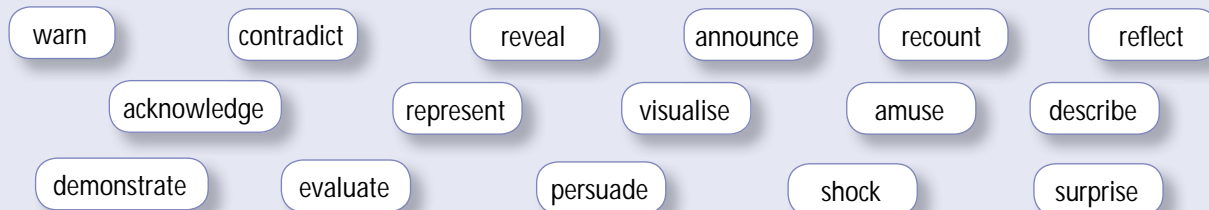
Director's purpose

Having an understanding of the director's purpose will help you to understand your text more clearly. Every successful author and director has an awareness of their audience, and a purpose in creating their text.

There are numerous ways that the purpose of a text can be expressed. Some of the more obvious purposes include:

- **To entertain** – to engage and sustain an audience's attention. This is usually at least part of the purpose of a film.
- **To inform** – to give a factual account or state a case.
- **To instruct** – to give details to further knowledge or give guidance.
- **To argue** – to state and defend a position on an issue.

Here are some other purposes that may be relevant to your text in part, or as a whole.



Gary Ross, director of *The Hunger Games*, explained his purpose in avoiding the use of voice-over in his film:

'... I never wanted you to feel like you were in a movie. I wanted you to feel like you were in the Games. I wanted you to feel like you were in her world. I wanted you to feel like you were in the Capitol. And the minute I engage in voiceover, I shatter that and tell you that you're in a movie and I create a distance I don't want. I want engagement not distance.'

(source: <http://screenrant.com/hunger-games-interviews-gary-ross-rothc-162268/>)

Director's purpose

Identify your view of the director's purpose when creating your studied text. Select particular scenes that would help you to support this observation.

Purpose

Scene 1 for support

Scene 2 for support

Scene 3 for support

Visual techniques used to support purpose

Verbal techniques used to support purpose

Essay writing for AS 90850 (English 1.2) exam

Choosing a question

Spend some of your time selecting the best question to answer. If you have studied and revised thoroughly, you should be able to answer several questions from the options given. For example, information learnt about an important character could be used in a question on character, or structure, or visual or oral techniques.

You can write about *one* or *more* visual or oral texts you have studied. If you choose to write about more than one visual or oral text, the texts can be:

- the same text type (e.g. two short films)
- different text types – intertextual studies (e.g. a feature film and a short film, a film and a radio programme)
- by the same or by different authors or creators
- compared and contrasted in your answer.

If you write about one shorter text (e.g. a short film), it is especially important to plan your answer before you begin writing to make sure you have enough material to answer the question to the standard required.

Answering a question

The question format is designed to help guide your response.

- ‘Describe ...’ – you should outline how the specified ideas, style or language features apply to the written text on which you are answering (‘on the lines’ – straightforward material).
- ‘Explain ...’ – this part of the question prompts a more convincing and/or perceptive response (‘between or beyond the lines’ – material that shows developed thinking).
- Phrases such as ‘important in the text(s) as a whole’ indicate that you need to write about the ideas in the text(s) and/or the director’s purpose, in the context of the question.

You should spend approximately 60 minutes answering the question.

- Answer all parts of the question in order to create a balanced answer.
- Use clear, well-chosen points.
- Back up your points with reference to relevant and specific details from the text(s) such as summaries of events, descriptions of characters, scenes or settings, visual and oral language features, direct quotations of dialogue from the text(s) you have studied.
- Show that you have thought about and reacted to the characters, events and issues in the text(s).

Structuring a formal essay response for English 1.2

A good essay structure:

- makes it clear how you are going to address the question in the examination, where you are going, and why
- sets out your main ideas clearly
- makes it clear how the main ideas relate to one another
- takes the reader through your response in a logical, progressive way
- helps the reader to remember what you have said
- organises groups of related information in paragraphs
- uses connecting words and phrases to relate each point to earlier and later points.

Introduction

The introduction should:

- address the key words in the topic
- describe the required aspects clearly and briefly

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