

OXFORD IB DIPLOMA PROGRAMME



2ND EDITION

# ENGLISH A: LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE

COURSE COMPANION



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1

# READERS, WRITERS AND TEXTS





"In the beginning was the word ..."

John 1:1

"A word after a word after a word is power."

Margaret Atwood

A well-known literary critic, Terry Eagleton, once pondered the question: "What isn't political?" Here, he was asking a question about how language is used. Yes, sometimes language is overtly aesthetic—as in poetry or literature or song—and yes, sometimes language is overtly practical—as in timetables for trains. But when we consider language, texts and works in the context of this course, we really mean the use of language for very specific purposes (intent) or for very specific effect (impact). We presume, in fact, that language is intentional or impactful, and the nature of this course is to trace the ways this may be true and, if so, how it has been accomplished. In this part of the course, you will consider overtly the way that both creators and consumers actively participate in the construction of knowledge.

This area of exploration introduces you to the nature of language and literature and their study. Specifically, the investigation in this area involves close attention to the details of texts of a variety of types, literary forms and genres, so that you learn about the choices made by creators and the ways in which meaning is communicated through, for example, words, image and sound. In your course, you will also focus on your own role as a reader in generating meaning, and you will learn to negotiate your own understanding of a text with the ideas of others in the classroom. Our goal in this first section of the book is to present works and activities that will help you understand the creativity of language, the relationship between language and thought, and the aesthetic nature of literature. Texts are powerful means to express individual thoughts and feelings, and your own thoughts and feelings and your own experience with texts are an essential part of communication.

The works in this section should also allow you to become familiar with the literary, stylistic and rhetorical features of all texts. The nature of the book is to let you experience texts and to learn features on a "need to know" and a "want to know" basis. In other words, this section gives you the opportunity to read a variety of complex texts and ask questions about the details of their operation. The aim is not simply to find or list the features of texts but to recognize the complex elements that affect meaning and to see that texts—indeed, all communicative acts—are constructed. Our questions throughout the section will allow you to respond to texts in ways that linguistic and literary professionals might and to engage with the same concerns. In your responses and your learner portfolio you can be a producer yourself, completing all kinds of writing: creative, academic, personal, expository or whatever you think you want to put on the page to record and respond.

These are the guiding conceptual questions that underpin the study in "Readers, writers and texts".

- 1** Why and how do we study language and literature?
- 2** How are we affected by texts in various ways?
- 3** In what ways is meaning constructed, negotiated, expressed and discovered?
- 4** How does language use vary among text types and among literary forms?
- 5** How does the structure or style of a text affect meaning?
- 6** How do texts offer insights and challenges?

## 1.1

## THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS

**How do we approach any text?****Activity**

In this course, in order to study language and literature, you will be looking at a wide variety of texts. Our definition of “texts” must remain fairly broad and might include advertisements, websites, poems, television shows or even stand-alone images, as in this untitled photograph by Carrie Mae Weems.

Perform the following activity as a warm-up for the rest of the work in this book. It is important that the way you approach this text—in an open, inquiring way—is the way you will always approach texts. Though we will guide you with questions, just as your teacher would in class, we are not providing a formula for breaking down the text or a checklist of elements to find. A checklist, a list of features or prescribed steps can create a screen between you and the text, and can get you thinking about the “requirements” rather than the text at hand. As you move through activities, texts and information in this book and in your course, you will naturally build the skills of a critical reader.

- 1 Spend some time looking at the image, focusing primarily on what you see, but also what the image makes you think and feel. Note these initial impressions.
- 2 Some of your initial notes may have included stylistic elements such as the use of light or details such as the expressions on the faces. Putting these aside for a moment, let’s focus again on what you think and feel.





- Do certain thoughts come straight into your mind?
  - Are you immediately thinking of what this image suggests or implies?
  - What is the “content” of the image and what does this make you think or feel?
  - Does this image cause you to feel emotions?
  - Are there emotions that are somehow part of this image?
- 3 Let's focus on thoughts and feelings a bit more closely. It could be argued that thoughts and feelings are at the heart of, or are the very purpose of every “communicative act”. In fact, a definition of communicative act would be any process that demands an engagement between two or more parties involving production, reception, interpretation and response. One person speaking to another can be a communicative act just as the image on the opposite page functions as a text that is a communicative act. But where do the thoughts and feelings reside?
- What are your feelings or thoughts when viewing the image? To what extent are these reactions based on the image itself or based on your own experiences? To what extent are the reactions based on external information or your own community?
  - What thoughts and feelings seem to be generated by elements of the image itself? Does colour (or lack of it) affect feeling? What about the light? What gestures are depicted?
  - What about the people in the picture? Do we have a sense of their thoughts and feelings? Do these, in turn, affect our own?
  - Can we imagine the thoughts and feelings of the photographer in this case? Can we imagine what thoughts and feelings this photographer was attempting to communicate? Is the photographer communicating the emotions of the subjects or ideas about those emotions or both?
  - Finally, what happens when your thoughts about the image might contradict the purpose of this image? Is this a work of art, part of an advertisement or a piece of journalism? Does this make the thoughts and feelings different?

## Thoughts, feelings and communication

The notion or topic of thoughts and feelings can be a great way of beginning to think about the nature of texts and communication. If we consider “thoughts and feelings” from a variety of perspectives, we begin to see that this is at the heart of the experience of everything from a poem to an advertisement. What are the thoughts or feelings of an author? A narrator? Characters? A text in general? What is an advertisement trying to make us think? What do we really think? Can we separate our feelings from our thoughts? One avenue for considering thoughts, feelings (and

maybe even intentions or purpose) in a text, is to consider “natural” storytelling, or the way we create narrative in everyday speech and communication. After all, every response to the question “What did you do this weekend?” tends to elicit a story. If it does not produce a coherent narrative, our response might be, “I guess you had to be there”. While a short story, poem or work of art might be carefully constructed, almost all communicative acts might be looked at through the lens of basic communication theory. In this course, it is likely that you will draw from a number of fields in order to interpret or critically approach texts. It is interesting to consider all texts from a variety of critical contexts.

In order to study mass communication—in order to study every text in this course—the most important thing this course can do is, perhaps, make communication seem bizarre to you. This may seem like a ridiculous statement, but the idea is that communicative acts are such a key part of the fabric of our lives that the “texts” become difficult to consider from a critical perspective. From a very young age, you are trained to approach literary texts; even when you are 5 years old, teachers ask such questions as: “What do you think will happen next in the story? How do you think the main character feels? Were you surprised when this happened at the end?” We do not always think, though, about all of the texts we encounter every day. Think about conversations you have with a friend and the difficulty of getting things right. Communication between two people is strange enough but the desire to communicate with a group of people and the attendant effects of this communication should seem almost magical. We are so immersed in a culture of easy and constant communication, however, that we too often ignore its complexity. One of the goals of this course is to step back from something you do every day in order to think critically about its means and effects.

## Vocabulary



### Natural Narrative

Natural Narrative is the name for the unpremeditated, unrehearsed stories that people tell every day. Natural narratives can tell us a lot about human concerns but also offer insights into the methods and structure of communication.

A basic model of communication, while it may break the communication process into steps, also suggests the complexity of the various components. When two people communicate (also known as dyadic communication as opposed to mass communication) the process can be described as follows.

- An individual reacts to stimulus and formulates thought.
- Thought is translated into code or language and sent along a channel (or, in the most basic case, spoken).
- Receiver perceives message.
- Receiver translates code into thought.
- Receiver can reverse the process.

While this model (which describes a basic “turn taking” model of communication) is a logical step-by-step explanation, it does not explain the complex contextual considerations of basic two-way communication. For one, it is assumed that the two participants speak the same language. Beyond this, however, there are other factors: some parts of the utterances may not be important to understanding, others may be key and cannot be left out; the participants are also, in this model, assumed

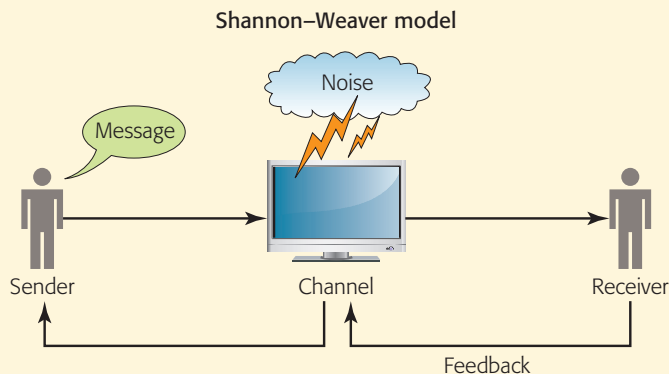
to be in close proximity and can understand paralinguistic features such as gestures and facial expressions. Difficulties in communication arise as soon as people are separated by distance or as soon as participants begin to rely on a medium for communication such as paper and pencil.

## Noise

Noise is the enemy of communication. Noise is unfiltered information from which we must discern a message. As soon as a message leaves the sender, it is subject to noise: messages from other sources, background sounds and irrelevant chatter. Think about being at a party where four conversations are taking place around you at the same time. As a listener, you can filter the mass of undifferentiated information (the noise) by turning your head and focusing your attention on one conversation. However, this filtering system is imperfect and it would be easy to lose parts of the conversation or to misunderstand. Media designed for mass communication are made to reduce noise during the sending and receiving process (headphones are an example of a device that can help to filter noise and accentuate a message on the receiving end).

### Communication models

In the late 1940s information theorists Claude Elwood Shannon and Warren Weaver described what has come to be known as the Shannon–Weaver model of communication. This basic description of language transmission often serves as a starting point for studying the various stages of sending and receiving a message. The actual writings of Shannon and Weaver are quite complex and delve into detailed issues of encoding/decoding and the nature of noise, or those elements like poor satellite reception that affect the quality of the reception of information. The usefulness of the model is also complicated by current developments in technology that make the roles of participants and various technologies less clear. Here is a rough drawing of the model.

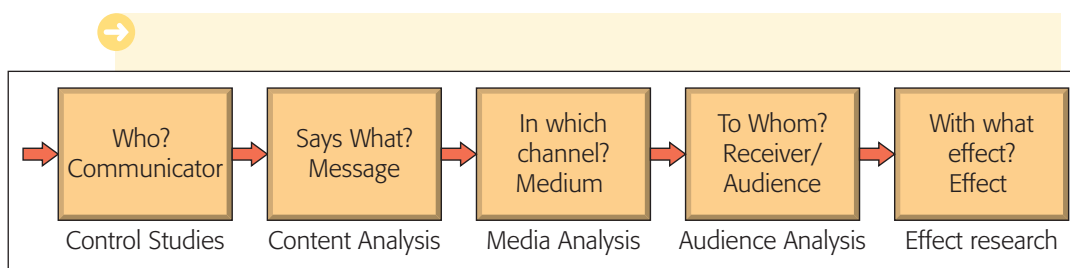


Also in the late 1940s, the political scientist Harold Lasswell developed a formula for the study of communicative acts. This model is similar to the Shannon–Weaver model and suggests possible areas for analytic attention.

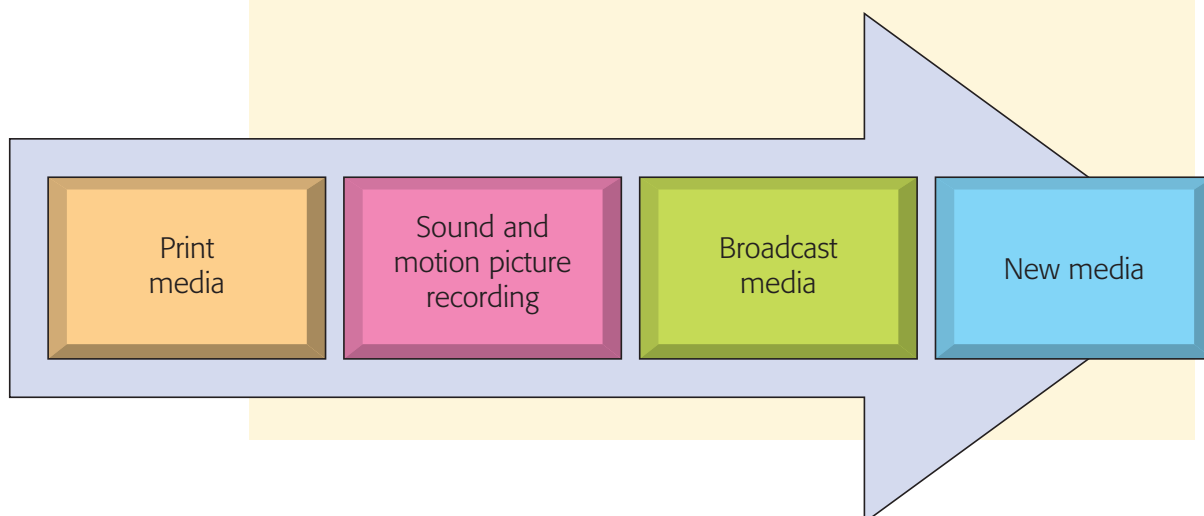
**Conceptual  
understanding**

**COMMUNICATION**





The mass media, which can be discussed as a conglomerate or plural mode of transmission, is the form of communication technology and its business interests that enables communication. While these technologies have changed over time, the technologies do not necessarily die; rather, they develop in relation to each other, and in relation to both technological developments and economic and social demands. The diagram below gives a basic list of the major categories of communication media in the order they were developed (the list does not consider the telephone and telegraph because these were initially meant to be only for one-to-one communication).



### Message interrupted

#### Activity

Noise is interesting in that it serves as a nice metaphor for the complexity of communication. Thinking about all of the steps in the basic communication model, and considering the addition of noise, at which points along the continuum can a message deviate from its original intention as thought? Does an institutionalized mass communication apparatus (such as broadcast television) help to clarify or confuse messages?

- Reconsider the image at the start of this section: Is there “noise” in this image, or between you and the image? Are certain elements of the image itself or of your experience unnecessary?
- How do we know what is essential and what is noise in a newspaper? On a website? In a work of art?



## A literary perspective

### Activity

We could easily call literary works a special form of communication or at least a distinct use of language. Like any work of art, we may find it hard to talk about “purpose” or even “audience” in relation to literature. Even if the only, or most general, purpose of literature is to entertain, there is still communication. The short story “Faces” by Aimee Bender does more than serve here as an example of the communication of thoughts and feelings. In the passage below a young boy is taken to the doctor by his concerned mother because, strangely, he doesn’t seem to be able to name his friends ... or recognize their faces. Read this excerpt and consider what is interesting. Consider the questions that follow.

The doctor wrote something on her clipboard and returned to the drawer to take out another picture, this one of a family. I wasn’t sure why she had all these group pictures in her drawer, but maybe she saw people like me all the time.

“How about them?” she asked.

5 “Yes?”

“What can you tell me about them?”

“They’re all black,” I said. “I can see that.”

“Can you pick out the grandfather?”

I looked for a while. No one had white hair. “No.”

10 “Can you pick out the baby?”

I looked for a while again and finally I found a baby stroller, off in the corner.

“There,” I said. “A baby.”

“Can you find the young man?”

15 I stared at it, but I couldn’t find the young man any more than I could tell who was the grandfather. And just because someone was old didn’t mean he was a grandfather anyway.

“No,” I said. “And it’s not because I’m racist.”

She brought out a similar photo of a family of white people. All I got was the shape of the group made by their heights and the positions of arms and feet.

“This one is sitting,” I said, pointing.

20 The doctor looked at my mother now. They exchanged a meaningful look.

“What?” I said. “Do I have brain damage? What? Who cares who’s who? I enjoy the general. What’s so wrong with that? Why is this important? If I meet the person and talk to them, I’ll know who they are then.”

My mother was silent.

25 The doctor was silent.

“Why did you say that?” asked the doctor, after a minute.

“What do you mean?”

“Why did you just say all that?”

“Because I hate snap judgements,” I said.

30 The doctor folded her arms.

“But how do you know?” she asked.

“How do I know what?”



"How do you know we're making snap judgements?"

I unwrapped another candy. Green peppermint. "No reason," I said. "My mother gave you a  
35 look."

Now the doctor leaned against the wall.

"So you could see her look?"

"What do you mean?" I asked. "Didn't she give you a look?"

"Yes," Mom said. "I gave her a look."

40 "But you could *see* your mother's look," said the doctor. "Why?"

"Why?"

"You can't see an old man. You can't see a soldier getting shot."

"I know my mother's face."

"Can you see it now?"

45 I looked over. Truth was, I couldn't really see her face. I could see big red lips because she was wearing lipstick because she likes to look nice for doctors.

"Make a face, Mrs. Robertson," the doctor said.

She did something. What, I couldn't tell.

"Can't tell," I said, sucking on the candy.

50 "But you could tell the earlier look," said the doctor.

"Just sometimes," I said. "Are we done?"

"Do you see me as a group?" asked the doctor then, in an all-too-friendly voice.

"I am not retarded," I said, pulling my shirt back over my head. "I can see that you are one person, and that you have a ridiculously long neck."

55 "William!" barked my mother.

"William, may I speak to your mother alone for a moment?" the doctor asked.

I stormed out. I emptied the entire lobby candy jar into my pockets and left the building.

There was a candle shop next door so I went in there and smelled wax for a while; the one that said it smelled like chocolate was wildly misleading. I have an excellent sense of smell. On the  
60 street I tried to look at all the people walking by but they just looked like walking people to me. I didn't see why I needed to read their faces. Wasn't there enough complication in the world already besides having to take in the overload of details and universes in every single person's [...] face?

From "Faces" by Aimee Bender in  
*The Paris Review*, Issue 191 (Winter 2009)

- 1 What seems to be the general situation in this passage? Is this a "normal" visit to the doctor?
- 2 What are the various thoughts and feelings of the characters? How do you know?
- 3 Consider the narrator's response to the "look" exchanged between mother and doctor. If he can't read faces, how would he know there was a look? How would he know what look was exchanged?



- 4 It is worth considering at this point how we receive any thoughts and feelings from a work of fiction. If an emotion or thought isn't directly stated in a text, how do we know it is there? How do we know what the doctor is thinking or the mother? Do you think an author can give us too much information?
- 5 "Thoughts and feelings" wouldn't be a bad way of thinking about how to do a commentary: consider first your own thoughts and feelings about a passage. Next, what is the general situation? What is going on? Then, how do you think the passage generated the thoughts and feelings you had? If you thought something, it probably came from some association you had when reading the text. If you laughed, for example, what made you laugh? Why is this interesting or important?

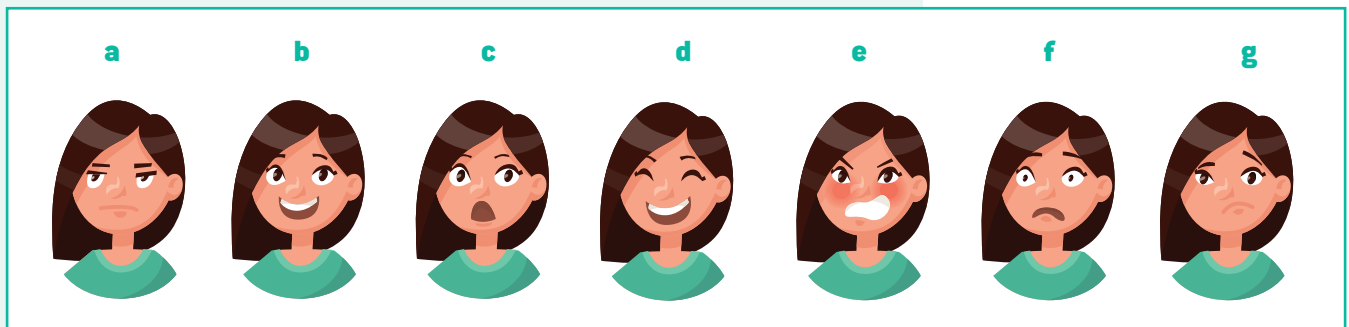
## Gesture and expression

### Activity

Language is expressed through writing and through the spoken word. Other types of communication, such as facial expression or gestures may be called language (body language) but they are not rule-governed in a complex system in the same way that language is. At the same time, facial expressions and gestures do communicate and often communicate across cultures.

- 1 Some researchers have suggested that there are seven basic emotions that can be communicated through facial expressions and that these are universal (some researchers suggest that there are up to eleven). Look at the facial expressions below and see if you can accurately match the emotion to the expression.

1. anger 2. disgust 3. happiness 4. fear  
5. sadness 6. surprise 7. contempt



Thinking about the nature of expressions and gestures can help us to consider the complexity of human communication. While speech and writing are conscious acts, expressions and gestures can often be subconscious. Expressions can work in conjunction with or against verbal communication.

