

How to identify techniques and devices in an essay

Before you begin

What you need:

Related text: **“Seven Wonders” by Lewis Thomas**

Approximate time this exercise should take you: **30 minutes**

Reminder

In the “Writing Guidelines” that are part of the Exit Exam instructions, you will be given a list of techniques and devices that authors may use when writing short stories and essays. When analysing the text prior to writing your essay, note the most obvious techniques and devices that the author has used to develop the main idea or thesis of the essay. Remember that you must be able to show **how** the writer uses techniques and devices. Also remember that **literary devices are any specific aspect of the text that can be recognized, identified, interpreted and analysed**. Keep in mind that there are certain techniques and devices that are specific to the essay genre, such as the technique of argument or the use of facts and statistics to defend a point. The techniques and devices you are working with in this module are particular to **non-fiction**.

Instructions

Read the excellent student essay on the next page based on “Seven Wonders.” You will find that in this essay, the student has organized the discussion around techniques and devices. Your first task is to **find and underline** each technique and device as the student names them. The second part of your task is to identify how the student explains the way the author, Lewis Thomas, employs each of these techniques and devices. To do this, **list the three examples** the student gives to support the discussion of each technique and device in the chart **that follows the student essay**. (In doing so, you will also be exploring how a writer uses **details** to develop a thesis!) Then, to wrap up the exercise, **write the student’s concluding remark** on the lines following the chart. This should help you to see how the techniques and devices do tie in to the main idea of “Seven Wonders” and, of course, to the student’s thesis. Compare your answers to those in the **Answer key** when you have completed the exercise.

Exercise 3

SEVEN WONDERS (student essay)

Seven Wonders, a sobering essay by Lewis Thomas, provides a variation on the wonders of the world. Through an academic, yet personal writing style, Thomas explains to the reader how amazement can arise from the most unexpected places. He accomplishes this through the use of description, comparison and tone.

Description is the groundwork upon which Thomas builds his essay. Throughout his work, descriptions are basically used to convey the sense of awe he feels for the wonder in question. The most significant example of this is found in his last wonder. Of all the celestial bodies known to us, “the most wonderful and marvellous and mysterious is turning out to be our own planet Earth.” It is a “living thing” and “the strangest of all places,” he writes. This relates to the theme since after his description of the universe as “stupefying” (and having an appreciation of its magnitude to begin with), Earth would seem rather insignificant, an odd choice for a wonder. He also describes the olfactory receptor cell as a “certified neuron belonging to the brain, but miles away in the open air.” A cell in the human brain might normally seem mundane, but by describing it in a way that hints at physical impossibilities (being in two places at once) elevates it to the status of “wonder.” Another description would be the termite collective as an organism, “a thoughtful, meditative brain on a million legs” which makes a group of insects seem like a singular, intelligent creature. Overall, Thomas’s descriptions of the various wonders allow the reader to appreciate them on the level he has, that they are truly remarkable beings.

Thomas also uses comparison several times to accentuate his amazement. His second wonder was bacteria that can live and reproduce at extremely high temperatures and pressures. While this alone would be enough to tantalize readers, Venus’s «comparable temperature» to that bacteria’s habitat only increases this interest. Comparing the bacteria’s habitat to Venus’s surface hints at the notion of extraterrestrial life. Moreover, the author continues by comparing (implicitly) Venus to early Earth, implying that the former could one day give rise to a species similar to humans. Another significant comparison occurred between termites and humans: “there is no such creature... as a lone termite, any more than we can imagine a... solitary human.” The author then uses a series of metaphors to describe the termites’ actions. They “organize in platoons,” “[construct] the cathedral” which is “air-conditioned and humidity controlled.” All of these quotes allude to human behaviour and humans’ ability to construct, essentially making the termite seem like an intelligent being, or at least a truly unique one.

Finally, tone is also used to convey amazement. When Thomas wrote about the bacteria that exist in extreme temperatures, he noted that they can be killed “only by chilling them down in boiling water.” Other than personalizing his essay with humour (note the use of the word “chilling”), it also helps the reader understand just how extraordinary this life form is and how radically different it is from other

life forms, if boiling water is too cold for it. His colloquial tone is also apparent later on when he points out that he once thought that “beyond the feckless, irresponsible pleasure of childhood,” children had nothing to show for the amount of work that was expended in their raising. This statement (of his former opinion) underlines just how important childhood is by providing a contrasting belief and/or view on the subject. Towards the end of the essay, however, Thomas’s tone changes from an almost light-hearted one to a more grave and serious one. “Provisionally, but only provisionally, we are a wonder” he says, hinting at the demise of the human species. By adopting such a tone, he emphasizes his amazement towards man and Earth over all else. By ending with “what our species needs most of all, right now, is simply a future,” he leaves the reader with a feeling of seriousness and possibly urgency as well. By stressing that humans need a future, he insinuates we are missing one. This places utmost importance on the survival of the planet, and conveys the sense of wonderment he feels about Earth to the reader.

Thomas’s essay carries several main ideas, only one of which was elaborated on in this essay. One could argue that the small wonders (or not so small wonders) accentuate Thomas’s final message, but ultimately, that final message underlines what this essay is attempting to show: wonders can exist in things neglected or unnoticed, much like Earth.

Worksheet			
Technique & Device #1	Example 1	Example 2	Example 3
Technique & Device #2	Example 1	Example 2	Example 3
Technique & Device #3	Example 1	Example 2	Example 3

Conclusion:



Answer key

The way you express your responses may vary; the content should be similar to the answers found in both the essay and the chart, however.

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Worksheet			
Technique & Device #1 Description (to convey the sense of awe the writer feels)	Example 1 Planet Earth	Example 2 Olfactory receptor cell	Example 3 Termite collective
Technique & Device #2 Comparison (to accentuate his amazement)	Example 1 Bacteria (its high temperature survival compared to Venus)	Example 2 Termites and humans (a comparison of their societies)	Example 3 Metaphors to signify the termites’ actions (and ability to construct)
Technique & Device #3 Tone (also used to convey amazement)	Example 1 Humour—chilling process becomes a form of humour (almost irony) when the bacteria is described as surviving extremely hot temperatures	Example 2 Colloquial tone (this casual tone and form of expression is used when describing some of the importance of childhood)	Example 3 Tone changes from light-hearted to serious (this leaves the reader with a feeling of seriousness and urgency)

Conclusion:

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Reminder

In the “Writing Guidelines” that are part of the Exit Exam instructions, you will be given a list of techniques and devices that authors may use when writing short stories and essays. You should be familiar with some of these, but it is not necessary to know all of them. When you analyse the non-fiction text, one way to understand how the author has employed certain techniques and devices to build the discussion or argument is by asking yourself a series of questions such as the ones in the exercise below. Searching for the responses to these questions should help you gain a clear understanding of this criterion in connection to the text.

Instructions

Answer the following questions about **techniques and devices** in complete sentences, using examples from the text to support your interpretation. Compare your answers with those in the **Answer key**. Although your answers may vary slightly from those in the **Answer key**, they should reflect the same general ideas.

Exercise 4

1. Explain how Thomas uses **personal anecdote** to introduce the reader to his essay.

2. Examine the **structure** of the essay. Look at the beginning, middle and end of the text. How does the essay's structure complement Thomas's thesis development?

3. The author uses **definition** to set up the reader's understanding of the word "wonder." Why?

4. The author uses **description** to vivify each of the seven wonders. How is this effective?

5. **Comparison** is frequently used in the text. Explain why this is effective.

6. The writer uses **enumeration** to outline his points. How does this work in the essay?

7. How does Thomas shift from using **facts** to set up his list of seven wonders to using **emotional appeal** at the end of the essay?

8. Find two examples of **metaphor** in the text.

9. How does Thomas use **cause and effect** to illustrate his thesis?

10. How is Thomas's **diction** effective in maintaining the reader's attention throughout the text?

Answer key

Your answers will probably vary from those below; the content will likely be similar, however.

1. The author uses **personal anecdote** to introduce the reader to his essay because he wants the reader to understand the reason he made this list of the modern seven wonders. This personalization also draws in the reader. We then become curious about what he has come up with, especially since the creation of the list is a dinnerparty challenge.
2. The essay's **structure** is interesting. It commences with the personal anecdote (explained in question #1), then moves into a specific definition of the word "wonder" and then continues with explanation and extended definition of six of the seven wonders. It is in the concluding paragraphs of the text that Thomas explains his first wonder, and also the point of his essay beyond the enumeration of the seven wonders as initially proposed in the dinner-party challenge.
3. The writer, in essence, is writing a **definition** essay. The author defines the word "wonder" in detail in the second paragraph so that the reader understands what he is searching for: "something marvellous and miraculous."
4. Thomas uses a lot of **description** throughout the essay. Each time he proposes a "wonder," he gives a detailed description of it and its function/purpose. This helps the reader to appreciate the magnificence in each of Thomas's choices – especially since each is a scientific wonder, ironically very small (compared to the vast planet Earth he describes at the end of the essay).
5. **Comparison** is frequently used in the text, but overall the main use of comparison is of the list of six wonders compared to the first. This provides the reader with the emotional impact about the possible state of the world around us. Thus, when Thomas compares the human child to "us," it adds to the emotion and guilt that he incorporates into his concluding paragraphs as he questions the future of the world.
6. **Enumeration** is an effective device because it helps to maintain the clarity of the explanation, particularly as Thomas strategically moves from wonder two through wonder seven, saving the first and most important for last – the world.

7. **Facts** maintain the validity of the argument while the **emotional appeal** at the end of the essay makes the reader think deeply about the consequences of man's actions if we do not protect what we have. Also, this difference in style accentuates the beauty and magic of nature and its ability to protect itself compared to man's destructive (thoughtless) actions.
8. **Metaphor** is a type of comparison. Thomas uses metaphor to illustrate the wonders he describes. A few examples are: an organism, a thoughtful, meditative brain on a million legs; and it takes eight hours to finish this cabinetwork.
9. **Cause and effect** is always an effective essay writing technique. In this essay, in particular, the reader becomes aware of Thomas's belief that man could destroy his world. This is clear in the statement where he says, "provided we do not kill ourselves off, and provided we can connect ourselves by the affection and respect for which I believe our genes are also coded, there is no end to what we might do on or off this planet."
10. The **diction** Thomas uses is clear, yet scientific, yet emotional. He successfully combines each level of language in order to convey his message about each of the seven wonders and in particular his final appeal of awareness to his readers. The clarity is evident in the description of each of the seven wonders; the scientific language is used to explain the marvel of each of the cells, insects and bacteria; and the emotional language is used in his concluding appeals.