Loaded language

As I explained in *How to Write Better Essays*, with loaded language it is not that we don't understand the meaning of the language being used, just that not all the meaning is being disclosed to us. It has an emotional content or a value judgement, which manipulates our thinking without us being conscious of it. Once you have identified a passage you suspect contains loaded language you will have to reveal and neutralise its impact in order to critically evaluate the substance of the argument. One or more of the following strategies will help you do this.

1. Reverse the description

The first thing to do is to test it to see how seriously loaded the language might be. One way of doing this is to see how much the writer's arguments are changed when you use the same language to describe the other side of the argument.

If you suspect the writer of using loaded language against environmentalists to support businesses that are exploiting the environment, reverse it and use the same language about the businesses. You may find that such a description now jars with what you believe to be an accurate description of the situation: that it is being unfair on businesses, which suggests it might also have been unfair on the environmentalists. If this is the case, then you have to ask yourself if it is the language that is leading you to believe this or if there is, indeed, a substantive issue that has influenced you, which gives firmer ground for your beliefs and might justify the use of such language.

<p style="text-align:center;">Example</p>

Management and trade unions

In the 1980s the Glasgow Media Group analysed the way in which language was used by the media to describe workers and management in their pay disputes. They found a significant and revealing difference, with pejoratives used generally and without much exception to describe the activities of workers, but more positive language to describe the pronouncements of management.

To show how unbalanced and manipulative this was a prominent left-wing politician reversed the language. It resulted in startlingly different accounts of the news, in which workers 'offered to work for 15 per cent and pleaded with their management not to cut their living standards. Management demanded they worked for 2 per cent or 5 per cent and threatened to sack them if they did not accept that'.[6]

2. Separate the ideas from the language

Having done that, it will be all too clear whether or not the passage depends upon language to make its point, rather than the strength of the argument and its substantive content. So, to get to the heart of what exactly it is saying remove all the loaded language and substitute neutral words that represent the core ideas that lie beneath, without the value judgement or emotional content. By identifying the idea in this way,

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[6] *The Guardian*, 9 June 1980.

free of the particular connotations of the word itself, you are in a better position to evaluate the argument. It will reveal just how convincing are the core ideas of the argument.

3. An adjective audit

A more selective approach is to count the adjectives in the passage and then see whether any convey unsubstantiated attitudes, rather than a line of thought. Can the writer do without the adjective? Does it affect the meaning of the passage? Adjectives are easy to attach, but they are dangerous if they have no basis in fact and express an attitude almost unnoticed. They slip beneath our rational radar more easily than just about any other word. Try to tune your radar for them as you read a newspaper or listen to the news.

4. Three-step technique

If you're not sure whether a word does convey substance and genuinely develops a line of thought, use the 'Three-step technique' I described in *How to Write Better Essays* and analyse the word. Ask yourself, 'But what does the writer mean by X?' This will unfailingly get to the bottom of things. It may take you a little longer, but you will be left in no doubt as to what is happening in the passage.

Exercise

1. Read Mark Antony's funeral oration in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* (Act III, Scene 2) and analyse the various ways in which Mark Antony arouses emotions in his readers. Translate these words into neutral terms to make the address more like an unemotional appeal to reason.

2. Read the following report on the Education Department's initiative to set up 'free' schools. Concentrate particularly on the language that is used to justify the education department's decision not to send this contract out to tender.

> The education department has approved a £500,000 ($800,000) grant to the New Schools Network to assist parents wanting to set up semi-autonomous "free" schools. No surprise there: the Network is an established charity and company seeking to help parents who want to establish schools.

It is also, interestingly, run by Rachel Wolf, a 25-year-old former colleague of the education secretary, Michael Gove. The grant was made without being put out to tender, which Ms Wolf readily explains:

"There have been a number of other charities given grants by the Department for Education on precisely this basis without tendering, and for the same reason – that a programme was to be kick-started and there was one obvious organisation to help," she said. A department spokesman said that the Network was the only organisation providing help to groups interested in opening schools. "That's why we believe they are best placed to help us build early momentum in this policy area," he added.

Answer:

This is, of course, just one interpretation of the passage – you will have your own. The interesting words used are 'kick-start', 'help' and 'momentum'. They all suggest an engine, a motor car, which cannot be started. Despite trying every other method to get it started, the only thing we can do is to try to 'kick-start' it. For this we will need the 'help' of people to push the car, so that we can let out the clutch and try to turn the engine over so that it fires. However, to be successful we must build up sufficient 'momentum' until we're sure that this is enough to get the engine to fire, when, hopefully, the engine will then run normally.

This suggests, through the use of well selected words only, that the programme had failed to get started using other methods, so in these extreme circumstances the department called on the 'help' of the New Schools Network to get it started, just to build up some momentum. The implication, I suppose, is that once this has been achieved, and in more normal circumstances when the programme is running normally, other organisations will be offered the chance to get involved. However, this doesn't appear to be the situation: this was a new venture, which hadn't been tried before and

hadn't failed to start using other means. As you can see, the spin given to it by the use of these words seems to present quite a different picture.