

The English Teachers Association of Western Australia

**Professional Development Seminar:
Composing Under Pressure: 9 Strategies**



English Teachers Association of WA

Composing Under Pressure: 9 Strategies

Contents:

Imaginative writing

- The 'swoosh' narrative
- Found poetry
- Postcards from the edge (of inspiration)

Persuasive writing

- Identity cards
- It's all Greek to me...
- The documentary maker

Interpretative writing

- Infographic to article
- Tweet about it
- The drone approach

The 'swoosh' narrative

Rules:

- Your story has only four sections
- Your story has two or three characters
- Stick to Aristotle's 'three unities': explore just a single time, place and action
- Your protagonist must grow or change because of some catalyst (this catalyst can be a character or an event)
- You don't need a resolution, but one should be implied (the reader should be able to anticipate how the story will end)



1. Inciting incident: start *in media res*, in the middle of action, to grip your reader's attention and engage them
2. Backfill: with careful signposting, provide the back story as to how the characters arrived in this situation
3. Rising action: build tension, progress the plot towards the climax
4. Climactic resolution: finish at a high point of tension, but one where the reader can imagine how the rest of the story plays out

Good to know:

- Use transition markers to ensure plot cohesion
- Use precise nouns and active verbs to create description, not adjectives and adverbs
- Use figurative language to add style – but sparingly
- You may have a twist in the tail of your tale for added drama, but there should be some subtle foreshadowing earlier on

Example 1

1. Open with the sound of approaching sirens and the stench of petrol in the air. John is cradling his wife Lucy by the side of the road after a car accident. She is begging him not to leave her.

2. Earlier, they were arguing in the car on their way home from a family dinner. They were speeding angrily along the dark or wet roads. Play with audience sympathies by considering who was driving, who was yelling and what the argument was over.

4. The other driver approaches. John stands up, enraged. The driver is shadowed by their car's rear lights, indistinct. They get closer. John steps forward towards the driver, fists clenched. They reach the light from the street lamp....
Play around with who the driver might be.

3. Lucy starts greying out. John is shaking her, frantic. He reminds her of their life together, reminiscing over past joys, future plans they had made etc. Then she goes limp. A car door slams.

Example 2

1. Open with the sound of gunfire and voices yelling military commands. Callum eyes an enemy soldier, getting him in his laser sights. He pulls the trigger and the soldier drops to the ground.

2. Callum calls out in excitement. A voice – his mother - asks him to turn it down. We realise he is playing a video game in the living room of his home.

4. There is an aggressive banging at the door. Callum and his mother look at each other. She goes to the door and opens it to find soldiers in combat uniforms standing on the other side.

3. Grumbling, Callum turns down the volume and returns to his game. A phone rings, snippets of one-sided conversation are heard. Mum's voice becomes increasingly concerned. Callum flicks her a couple of looks but continues playing. Mum puts down the phone and makes him turn off the game, switching on the TV instead. News flash: civil war (or some other conflict) has broken out.

'Found' poetry

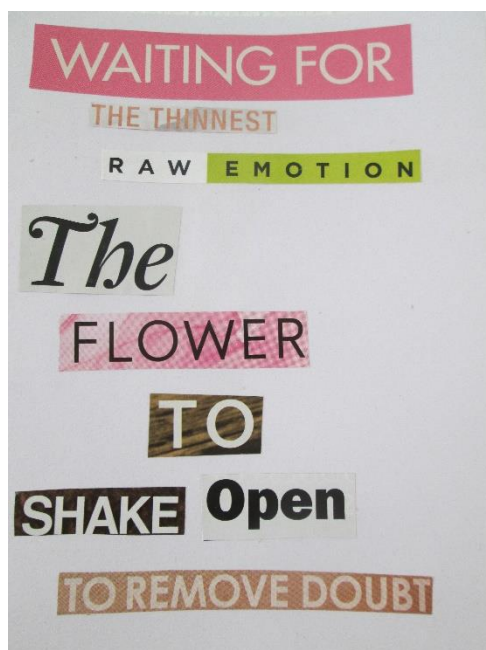
Found poetry is a postmodern literary form that refers to poetry created entirely from words and phrases taken from a source text, such as a newspaper article, letter, tweets, speech or even an extract from a studied text. They can be considered as something like a literary collage.

Blackout poems are a particular form of found poetry where the entire source text is included, with sections redacted or blacked out to leave only found poem visible.

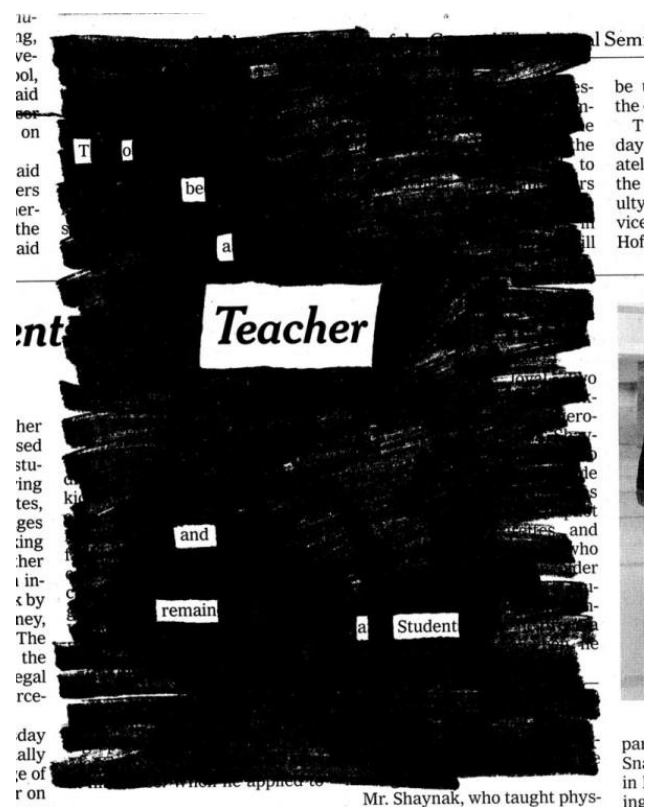
Rules:

- You must take details, words and phrases directly from the source text without alteration
- Such text can be arranged in any way, but arrangement must be for purpose and/or effect
- You should select details, words and phrases that evoke a particular mood or emotion
- You should arrange details, words and phrases to form a cohesive image
- Your found poem can condense, develop or even subvert the themes and ideas of the source text
- Experiment with your arrangement to maximise its impact on the reader

Jake Forrest



Austin Kleon



Good to know:

- Search for details, words and phrases in your source text that stand out; they might evoke powerful feelings or create strong images
- You can experiment with colour, font, size and spacing to add impact and meaning
- Words can be connected into meaningful sentences, left as fragments or even isolated on their own lines

Example

Refer to the extract from *Drylands*, by Thea Astley, for the source text.

The sensual zones

It's cold here... freezing.

You...

me...

a long-lost just-met stranger.

My blood

isn't up to it.

I'm a fraud.

I won't be staying too long.

A short-lived fever.

Love: the old beggar.

Postcards from the edge (of inspiration)

Free postcards are available from many cafes and bars. Others can be purchased cheaply from discount or tourist stores. These can be used as general stimuli. Students may write poems, narratives, memoirs or diary entries as a result. Alternatively, the postcards can be used to generate examples of travel writing, with students imagining situations in which they might have sent this postcard.

Rules:

- Examine the card for a couple of minutes, taking in every detail
- Brainstorm a range of thoughts, images, feelings and ideas that spring to mind
- Select ideas that you can develop into a story (poem, diary entry etc.)
- Imagine that this postcard forms the cover of your text and evaluate its suitability



Creative commons image courtesy of austinevan

Good to know:

- You can easily differentiate this task by:
 - allowing students to self-select cards
 - giving more abstract cards to stronger students
 - giving cards with more literal narrative potential to less able students
 - allowing students to swap cards if inspiration fails
- You can limit the length of text students may write to what will fit on the back of the postcard
- You can shape this task to focus on specific writing skills: the reflective tone of a memoir, the descriptive writing of a recount, language to evoke a mood, offering a particular perspective and so on

Identity cards

After exploring an issue – either arising from a text or as a result of a media study – have students construct a speech, blog post or other persuasive text from a given perspective. Supply each student with an identity card, which outlines the context and identity of a fictitious person. Each student then writes persuasively from the perspective of that person.

Rules:

- Study your identity card carefully
- Imagine the values and attitudes held by this person
- Brainstorm the arguments this sort of person would make in regards to the issue
- Plan your argument, considering how
- Imagine how this person would speak; the diction, tone and style they would use
- Write a text from this person’s perspective, persuading others to adopt their viewpoint






Creative commons image courtesy of USA Dept of State

Good to know:

- Identity cards can reflect characters from a studied text
- You can differentiate the task by adjusting the amount of detail supplied on the card
- You can alter the task so that the identity card reflects the audience being addressed, rather than the writer/speaker
- Inventing a scenario in which the text might be delivered, such as a council meeting, rally or guest editor of a local newspaper, may be helpful in getting students started
- A planning template can provide further scaffolding (an example is included at the end of this booklet)

Examples

Issue: the current debate over the banning of single-use plastic bags in supermarkets and shops

 <p>Creative commons image courtesy of Pedro Ribiero Simoes</p>	<p>Name: Erica Ramirez Age: 63 Profession: Biology teacher Cultural background: Portugese Lives in: Albany, WA</p> <p>As a biologist, Erica is interested in the environment, especially marine animals and ecology. She grew up in a fishing town in Portugal, where her family operated a commercial fishing business. She is a naturalised Australian, having migrated here after attaining her biology degree. She studied teaching in WA and teaches at a school in Albany. She has three children, and recreation at the beach is important to her family.</p>
 <p>Creative commons image courtesy of Pexels</p>	<p>Name: Peter "Hopper" Hopkins Age: 25 Profession: Student Cultural background: Anglo-Australian Lives in: Perth, WA</p> <p>Peter is studying economics at Curtin University. He still lives at home with his parents, as he is saving money for a home of his own. He enjoys going for brunch with friends, listing his favourite meal as smashed avocado on toasted sourdough. He also plays squash and enjoys kicking a footy with 'the lads'. He plans to travel after completing his degree and hopes to find work developing economic policies in the corporate sector.</p>
 <p>Creative commons image courtesy of Pexels</p>	<p>Name: Jennifer Kwan Age: 18 Profession: Future student Cultural background: Japanese-Australian Lives in: Perth, WA</p> <p>Jennifer has recently graduated from school and is taking a year off to consider her options. She enjoys socialising with her friends, shopping and reading fashion magazines. She has a large circle of friends and remains connected through social media. She never leaves the house without her phone. She professes she's not really a fan of watching the news. She values convenience and style when making purchases.</p>

It's all Greek to me

Another strategy to get students started with writing persuasively is to focus on their rhetorical techniques. This can help in planning their argument and voice. It provides enough scaffolding that students end up with a number of entry points into their argument.

You may be familiar with Aristotle's categorisation of rhetorical approaches; logos, pathos and ethos are terms that are quite common. Add topos and kairos and you have the complete set. Typically, a persuasive writing task will provide a particular topic or situation. This strategy provides a planning method that may help students generate enough ideas to begin writing. Furthermore, while you would never encourage students to write five paragraphs employing each of the rhetorical approaches, each one is suitable for the attention-getting opening salvo.

Ethos: refers to the credibility of speaker or writer. Qualifications, experience, personal history, appearance, relationship with the audience: all of these provide credibility and work towards persuading the audience.

Pathos: refers to the emotional appeal of the argument; the appeals to the heart. A skilled, persuasive writer or speaker will consider the nature and values of his or her audience, and shape their emotional appeal to suit. Emotive language, hyperbole, confronting images and so forth can appeal to the audience's emotions.

Logos: refers to the rational appeal of the argument; the appeals to the head. All persuasive texts need some degree of facts and evidence – or at least the appearance of such. Their inclusion will appeal to the audience's sense of logic and reason. Statistics, expert testimony, quoted research, technical language and causal structures can all appeal to reason.

Kairos: refers to the most opportune moment. Many persuasive texts are timed when they will be most effective – just think of all the fast food ads that appear around dinner time. Another form of Kairos is to emphasise that the audience needs to act now, or do something before it's too late, or to coincide with a particular event.

Topos: refers to conventional structures. There are several common rhetorical structures that speakers and writers use. These include problem-solution, question-answer, cause-effect, analogy, compare and contrast, repetition or recursion. Narrative tropes can be popular topoi also; consider how the Faustian bargain, the miracle cure, the snatched victory, David and Goliath and so on can be used for persuasive purposes. Topoi can also develop as a result of clichés and catchphrases: "I have a dream" has become an oft-employed trope in many persuasive texts.

Rules:

- You must know the definition of each of the five Greek words
- You must make notes for each of the five rhetorical approaches
- Aim for a relative balance between the approaches

Good to know:

- This strategy can also be used for planning spoken persuasive texts
- Focus on one of the five approaches in order to construct an effective and engaging opening

Example

Issue: the current debate over the banning of single-use plastic bags in supermarkets and shops

Perspective: Australian teenager

Audience: fellow students

Rhetorical approach	Notes	Usage
Ethos - credibility	<p>Emphasise similarity with audience</p> <p>Establish relationship with audience by showing I'm just like they are</p> <p>Point out that nearly every day I shop or grab fast food and carelessly accept a new plastic bag each time, which often ends up in the bin a few minutes later</p>	<p><i>Begin with an anecdote about my day yesterday, and how many single-use plastic bags or other disposable items I ended up with, before using rhetorical questions to get audience to reflect on their own day</i></p>
Pathos - emotion	<p>Talk about examples of marine life choking on discarded plastic</p> <p>Point out stats that reveal the plastic content in table salt from seawater sources, and then remind audience that half of Perth's drinking water comes from seawater desal plants</p>	<p><i>Use the case study of the turtle that was recently operated on where they removed seven plastic bags from its stomach, because it thought they were jellyfish</i></p>
Logos - reason	<p>Provide stats from recent study that shows 78% of the world's table salt contains micro particles of plastic from seawater</p> <p>Provide facts about how long plastic bags take to degrade in the environment</p> <p>Quote Dr Salvator Greene who identifies the four plastics that are the worst pollutants: single-use bags, drink bottles, straws and cups.</p>	<p><i>Quote from the article by Dr Greene, using quotes as expert testimony and providing facts.</i></p> <p><i>List the worst polluting plastics and the extent that we discard every day.</i></p> <p><i>Include a diagram that shows how microplastics are not filtered out by desalination</i></p>
Kairos - timing	<p>Emphasise that we need to act now, as seawater desal rates are increasing and the plastic pollution is increasing at alarming rates</p> <p>Point put that QLD has already banned the bag</p>	<p><i>Use emotive language and inclusive language to emphasise that this is an immediate problem facing all West Australians – including teenagers. We need to get better habits now to reduce plastic pollution in the future.</i></p>
Topos - structure	<p>Problem-solution</p> <p>Highlight the problems of plastic pollution and offer banning the bag as a solution</p>	<p><i>Conclude with a list of three easy changes we can make in our lives to reduce plastic consumption, and a call to action to join the 'ban the bag' campaign</i></p>

The documentary maker

Many students are more comfortable with visual texts. Sometimes, asking them to imagine the visual version of the text type you want them to write can be a way of overcoming writer's block. Although – of course – there are significantly different types of documentary films, many persuasive documentaries incorporate similar conventions. The common conventions include:

- a powerful and engaging opening image, often accompanied by emotive music
- voice over from the journalist to introduce the points of argument
- an interview with an expert)
- a case study or interview with a 'victim' > usually just fragments
- corroboration from a witness)
- important facts or quotes written on the screen
- a 'to-camera' piece from a journalist to speak directly to the audience

This can be useful in writing a feature article.

Rules:

- Construct a powerful opening paragraph that sets the scene and engages the reader
- Construct a series of main body paragraphs that develop the argument through the voice of the journalist
- Within these paragraphs, you should include quotes and other evidence, drawing on the victim for pathos, and the witness and the expert for logos appeals
- Highlight important facts or dramatic quotes by placing them in callout boxes
- Finish with a conclusion that directly addresses the reader



Creative commons image courtesy of Pexel

Good to know:

- This strategy is easily scaled up or down to different year levels: senior students will have studied more complex documentary forms on which to base their writing
- This can be adapted easily to blog writing by focusing more on the writers' own experiences with the issue
- Segments from commercial current affairs shows provide useful examples of this kind of documentary text and are often straightforward enough for students in younger years
- Many current affairs programs have segments available for viewing on-demand on their websites
- Students could even convert a current affairs segment into a written feature article as practise before attempting original writing

Example

Issue: Banning live sheep trade to overseas countries

Planning:

Opening scene	A long, panning shot across a huge animal transport ship to emphasise its size Cut to the pens being cleaned out after the journey, showing piles of animal waste, blood, dead and injured animals
Interview with expert	RSPCA inspector who provides poor health stats of animals exported
Interview with victim	Farmer whose livelihood is threatened by the calls to stop the live sheep trade
Interview with witness	Hidden camera footage showing poor treatment of animals upon their arrival in foreign ports
To camera	Sympathise with the farmer but call for tighter regulation of live trade; offer potential solutions such as having vets on board, mandatory minimum standards of care and sanctions against foreign trading partners who breach animal cruelty standards

Opening scene:

The ship is huge, rearing twelve stories above the dock. The air is filled with bleating cries of panic-stricken sheep, and the harsh yelling of those men responsible for loading the poor creatures on board. The wind shifts and the stench becomes unbearable. The sheep blindly follow each other up an enormous ramp, to the dark interior of the ship where they crammed twelve to a pen. Most will never see the sun for the entire journey to Saudi Arabia. A sheep stumbles to its knees. Before it can get back to its feet, the crush from the thousands of animals behind it pummel it to the ground. Its desperate cries become drowned out as its brethren sense its fear and raise their voices in a frenzied chorus. Eventually, a handler wades through, creating enough space where the poor animal can rise again, stumbling on its way, its leg gashed and bleeding. Before the ship has even left port, this is the first casualty. Unfortunately, it won't be the only one.

Infographic to article

In some cases, the factual content of a students' piece of writing is less of a focus than their skills. Students can be encouraged to draw on their learning in other subjects to provide the content of the text types they produce in English. If the purpose of the writing task is for students to demonstrate their control of the textual features of a particular form or genre of writing, why not simply provide them with content matter to base their writing upon? After all, in an exam-style situation we often tell students it's okay to "invent" facts and quotes for the purposes of constructing their text. After all, no real writer would sit down to write an article without the facts to hand. An infographic can be a simple and readily accessible source of a variety of facts and statistics with which students can be tasked to produce an interpretative text.

Rules:

- Use the information on the infographic to construct your interpretative text
- You don't have to use all of the information; use the parts that support your interpretation
- Your interpretation will be evident in *how* you use this information; the way you shape and represent it for your reader
- Remember that interpretative texts inform, explain and interpret, albeit from a particular perspective, rather than persuade or argue



Creative commons image courtesy of US Dept of Agriculture

Good to know:

- An infographic is, itself, an interpretative text; designing one may be a viable alternative task
- You can create your own infographics quickly and easily using online tools such as Canva or Piktochart if you want to control or specify the data to be used
- Encourage *interpretation* by asking questions that require students to *apply* the information

Activity

Drawing on the information supplied on the coffee infographic, compose an interpretative text on the importance of coffee to teachers.

- Look at the facts
- Apply them to this context: teachers
- Select those you think might explain why teachers depend on coffee; for example:
 - Teachers have early starts to their working day; coffee is mostly drunk in the morning
 - Coffee is a stimulant; improves attention and memory performance which is essential in this profession
 - Coffee increases dopamine; it makes teachers happier which is a benefit for all concerned!
- Shape into an interpretative text: a blog, article, personal reflection etc.

Plan your text here:

Tweet about it

Sometimes, the problem for a student of getting started is in being overwhelmed by the amount that they are expected to write. Reducing this amount, and the anxiety surrounding it, can be a good way of getting students to put pen to paper. This strategy is based on the concept of micro- and nano-stories and their use to encourage students to develop their understanding of narrative form in 50 words or less.

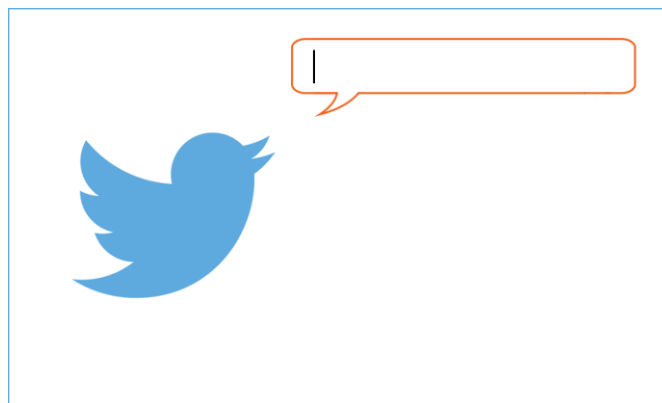
Tweets are a mode of communication that are interpretative. Tweets, however, are limited to 140 characters, encouraging concise communication. Those who use the platform often create a series of connected tweets, reporting on their interpretation of an event or situation as it unfolds. A strategy can be to have students draft a series of tweets on an event or issue that they are exploring. It's actually harder than it sounds but it is less daunting because of the brevity of the task.

This becomes particularly powerful if a reflection is included in which the student explains the construction of each tweet, identify the language devices they have employed and their intended effect. The task can also be extended by having the students construct replies to their (or others') tweets, reflecting the different interpretations that arise of an issue or event.

Alternatively, the tweets can be used as the stems from which to develop more traditional expository paragraphs.

Rules:

- With your topic in mind, brainstorm 10-12 tweets revealing your various thoughts
- Each tweet can only be a maximum of 140 characters
- Craft each tweet carefully, creating nuance in your interpretation and maximising its impact on the reader



Good to know:

- Look at examples of tweet discussion prior; Twitter publish a guide to writing effective tweets which may be useful
- Tweets are a good way to encourage the development of personal voice in writing
- The task can be differentiated by giving a series of prompt questions for students to reply to in tweet form
- Particularly powerful tweets can operate as single sentence paragraphs or as highlighted quotes in callout boxes

Example

Ruth Bucktin is a character who might be considered to be marginalised in the novel *Jasper Jones*, by Craig Silvey. Represented through Charlie's eyes, she does not come across as a positive figure. Using this as a starting point, a student crafted the following tweets.

These are a selection from a longer piece.

Charlie finds Ruth seeking refuge in the arms of another man. Decides she's ugly and old. Apparently even sons define a woman's value by her appearance.

Charlie is ashamed of his mother's unhappiness being exposed in front of Eliza. So his pride is more important than Ruth's unhappiness? Wow.

Who's to blame for infidelity in a loveless marriage? Funny how it's automatically Ruth's fault.

Ruth explains her husband doesn't love her. Charlie doesn't care.

So Charlie feels "powerful" for telling his mother to go home. Um, patriarch

Dragged to the country, ignored by husband, disrespected by son? But Ruth should stay? The 1950's called, Charlie, they don't even want you.

Poor Ruth. #Iwouldleavetoo

Ruth's "true nature" is apparently "ugly and loud and mean" because she argues. Another example of how women are demeaned for having a voice.

And that's twice he's called her ugly!

The saddest thing? The supposedly sensitive Charlie perpetuating the patriarchy... #thecyclecontinues

The drone approach

Drone technology is familiar to most students: small, airborne devices that typically have cameras attached to them. Such devices have the capability of getting wide angle or birds-eye shots, while also being able to zoom in and focus on quite small details.

Effective interpretative writing is much the same: it offers a big picture view whilst also drawing attention to the tiny details that matter. This analogy is useful in reminding students of this salient quality of interpretative writing. This applies whether students are writing an interpretation of a person, in biographical form, or of an event, as a form of news or documentary report. For example, when writing biographical profile pieces, students were encouraged to consider the birds-eye view of one aspect of their chosen person, such as their career, before zooming in to highlight a specific detail or anecdote about their career, in order to humanise them. Then they zoomed out to another big picture view, such as of the person's family life, before zooming back in again on another intriguing detail. This approach resulted in a balance between giving the facts about their person and selecting details that revealed the significance of such facts.

Providing a photograph is a common stimulus for interpretative writing. However, the resulting piece produced by students can be largely descriptive. This strategy may help students get started.

Rules:

- Plan first: identify three 'big picture' ideas and zoom in on three small details that characterise these details
- Ask yourself 'so what?'; what is the *significance* of these three details
- Always remember that you are offering an interpretation of this person or even, you need to *explain* and not just *describe*

Good to know:

- This approach works equally well with interpreting individual people as well as events or issues
- Providing a selection of images may be helpful in sparking students' inspiration
- Students may even select their own image and bring it into class
- A note-making scaffold may help further (an example is provided at the end of this booklet)

Example

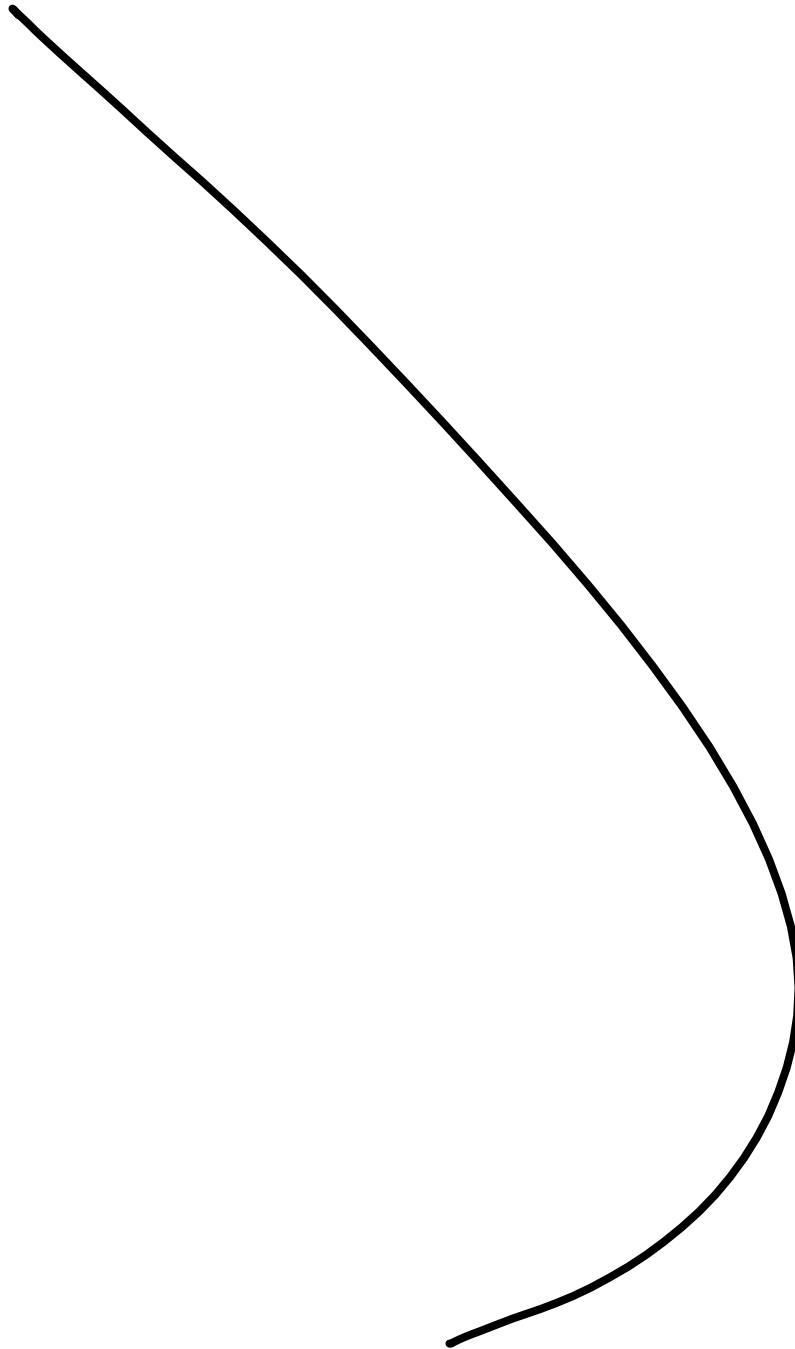


Big picture idea (zoom out)	Fine detail (zoom in)	Significance
<p>The protest march featured a number of homemade and professional signs drawing attention to the plight of the animals involved</p>	<p>One homemade sign stated 'animals are here with us, not for us'</p>	<p>This is an issue about animal rights, implying that humans exploit animals for their own benefit without regard for animals' own right to exist</p>
<p>The crowd included a wide range of people from all walk of life, marching through the streets of Perth to protest against animal cruelty of the live export trade</p>	<p>One man wore the Guy Fawkes mask popularised by the 'Anonymous' activist movement</p>	<p>Symbol of resistance against corporations and governments, showing this is not just an animal rights issue but also an issue of economic exploitation by those in power</p>

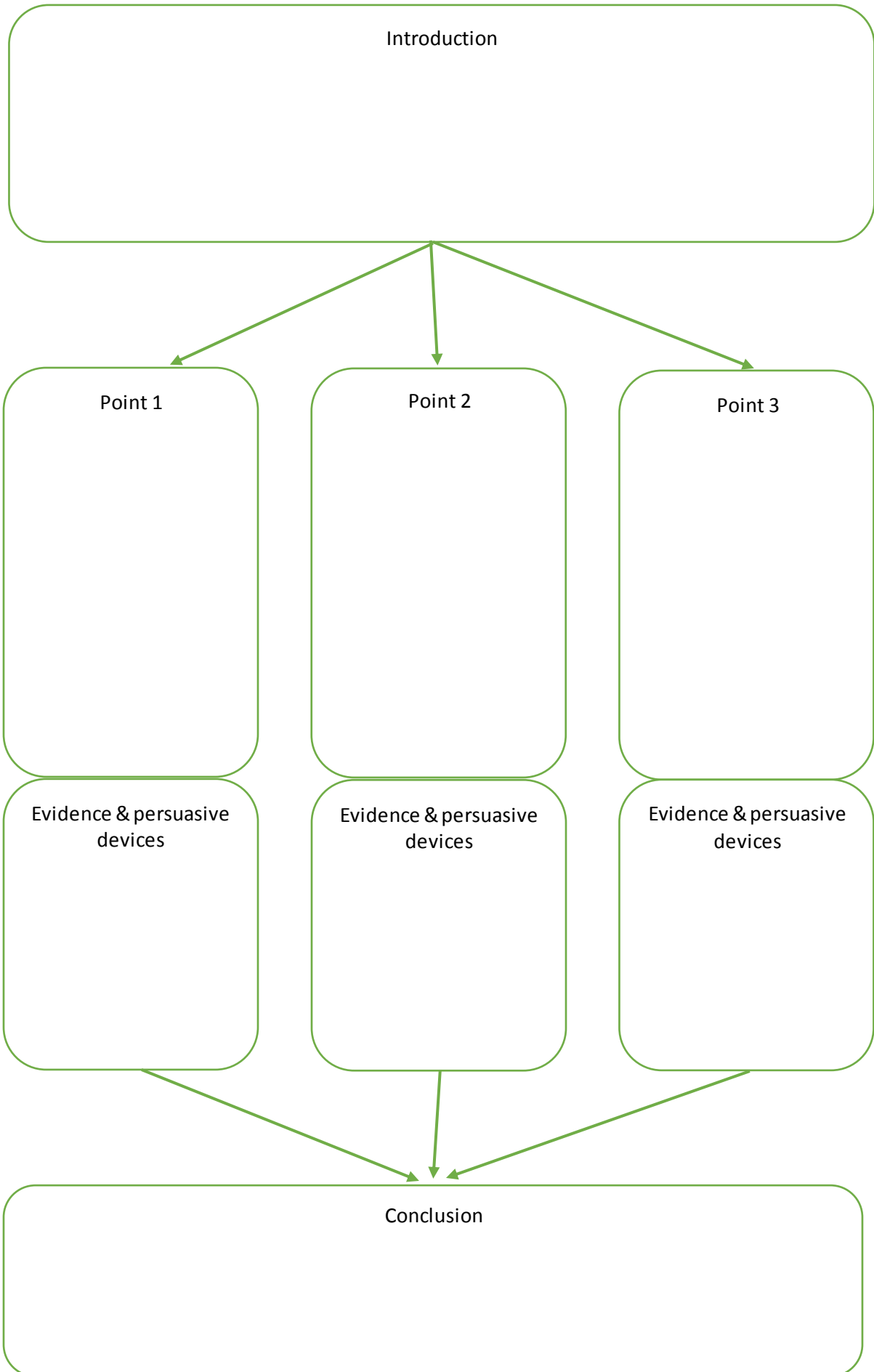
Activity

Identify a third point that could be made drawing on this image.

'Swoosh' narrative planning sheet



Persuasive text planning sheet



Topic:

Planning:

Big picture idea (zoom out)	Fine detail (zoom in)	Significance

Conclusion