

Who is this piece written for?

Notice the name of the publication in which the article appeared – “The Big Issue.” Unlike most magazines it is not readily available from newsagents’ shops. Where is it available? Who buys it? What assumptions do the publishers make about their readers? Is there anything about the writer’s tone or use of language which suggests how she sees a typical reader? The fact that she refers to Luke and Matt Goss and Peter Andre is significant and might indicate something about her anticipated readership.

What is the writer trying to do or say to the reader?

What is Cayte Williams's attitude towards sunbeds? What conclusion does she want us to come to?

How does the writer achieve her purpose?

- 1 Taken as a whole, what is the overall tone of the piece? Is it, for example, sombre and entirely serious, convincing us by the weight of the argument, or is it lighter, appealing more to our sense of humour? Does it have elements of both of these approaches? (Later questions approach this in more detail.)
- 2 What is striking about the headline – “Sun vampires” - which might attract the attention of someone browsing through the magazine?
- 3 The sub-heading bombards the reader with a variety of images - at least three. Can you identify them and explain the pictures Williams is trying to put into our heads? How do you feel about the new word she uses – “tanorexics”?
- 4 What purpose is served by including the illustration?
- 5 How does Williams try to get the reader personally involved in the first paragraph?
- 6 How does the opening paragraph establish the tone which will tend to dominate throughout? How is this reinforced by the image – “walking raisins” - used in the final sentence of the second paragraph?
- 7 A rather different approach is used when Williams refers to the experience of Jane Horwood, later in the first column. What effect are the following intended to have: “It's like smoking”; “when I got pregnant my doctor told me I couldn't go on the sunbed”; “like anorexia”? Are there any other words or phrases in the two paragraphs referring to Jane Horwood which reinforce the tone?
- 8 Why does Williams introduce the opinions of Doctor Julia Newton Bishop, making sure that we are aware of the fact that she is the “consultant dermatologist at St James' University Hospital in Leeds”? What is the point and the effect of the scientific jargon, such as “UVA and UVB rays”, “epidermis”, “melanocyte cells”, “elastin”, “collagen” - only some of which are explained in everyday terms?
- 9 In the fourth column Williams turns to the “suntanning industry” (any significance in “industry”?). Why, do you think, does she place the following in inverted commas: “controlled tanning” and “consultation”?
- 10 Williams now introduces us to Victoria Williams. How does she ensure that our feelings towards her are much more negative than towards Jane Horwood in the previous example?
- 11 What does Williams seek to do in the final four paragraphs, in which she gives us more examples of sunbed users? This is the climax of the piece, underlining her overall message. Try to find examples of how she chooses phrases deliberately to manipulate her readers’ feelings and convince them of her point of view. Consider, for example, the following:
 - “Here models and media people pop in for a top-up on a regular basis”;
 - “Who says tanning isn't trendy?”;
 - “secretive”;

- “It seemed his rugged outdoor tan was of the indoor variety”;
- “It makes you look wealthier, like you can afford regular holidays”;
- “Essex Man with his perennial tandoori tan.”

12 Is it coincidental that the last establishment referred to, Tanning Trends, is in Barking?

So what?

Have you learned anything you didn't know about sunbeds? Is Cayte Williams's article fair in its treatment of what she calls the “suntanning industry”? Will you ever use a sunbed in the future?

Sun vampires

Possible Answers

Who is this piece written for?

The Big Issue is published on behalf of the homeless, seeking to raise funds for those who find themselves in this situation. It is not available through the usual outlets but is sold by vendors, homeless themselves, on the streets of our major cities. The 'target group' for sales is, broadly speaking, seen as those who might be sympathetic to the plight of the homeless: people who are fortunate enough to have homes and jobs, who take an interest in society as a whole rather than in themselves as individuals and who are aware of current issues. Readers are likely to be young, rather than middle-aged, and relatively affluent.

Such readers are likely to have heard of Bros (a teen pop duo of the late 80's) and Peter Andre (popular at the time of publication, but hardly an enduring household name) and might be in the position of being able to spend £399 a year on a suntanning course. They are more likely to respond to the style of writing that uses current colloquial or slang expressions such as "And let's face it", "fork out" and "one hell of a habit" than to a style which they might regard as stuffy and old-fashioned. Although the message is a serious one, the tone is, generally speaking, quite light-hearted - you must never frighten the casual reader because, if the reader were to associate this emotion with The Big Issue, he or she might never buy a copy again, thus defeating the whole purpose of the publication. Understanding your readership is vital in any form of journalism.

What is the writer trying to do or say to the reader?

She leaves us in no doubt here. Sunbeds are dangerous and those who use them are vain and stupid. Those who supply the habit are exploitative.

How does the writer achieve her purpose?

1. The message is serious but the tone is generally relatively light-hearted. There are times, though, when the mood changes: the evidence supplied by Jane Horwood is bleak, and that provided by the medical expert is uncompromising. The tension between the gravity of what she has to say and finding a tone of voice which is acceptable to the casual reader is one which must have posed Cayte Williams considerable problems.

2. The purpose of a headline is to attract the attention of the casual browser. Here Cayte Williams uses the technique of paradox. We are first of all attracted by the use of the ghoulish word, "vampires" - because of our ancient delight in horror stories - but the idea of vampires being associated with the "sun", which is supposed to be fatal to them, is eye-catchingly incongruous. Our curiosity is aroused, and we read on!

3. "Desperate for a sun fix" immediately makes us think of drug addiction, the gravity of which is reinforced by the sinister implications of "coffins"; very different but equally powerful visual images. These are followed by the newly-coined image, "tanorexics", a pun about which the reader might have mixed feelings. A pun is usually used humorously, as a joke which associates two different images. Is it really amusing though, to associate what is usually regarded as an insignificant pastime - suntanning - with the desperately real psychological problems of anorexia? Or is Williams trying to impress upon us that they are, in fact, comparable?

4. The illustration is made to seem very amateur-ish, but it does catch the eye. The simultaneous associations with the coffins and cooked meat are quite effective, and serve the purpose of catching the browser's eye.

5. With repetition of "you" and "you're" (used 7 times), the writer forces the reader to place herself or himself in the situation described.

6. The article seeks to ridicule the use of sunbeds. The opening paragraph paints a ludicrous picture: "plastic cocoon", "weird blue light", "you're naked and sweating profusely". The idea of their users being utterly stupid is highlighted by the obviously daft suggestion: "Have you been abducted by aliens for experimental tests?" In the second paragraph the tone is reinforced by the equally silly picture of "walking raisins", implying that the sun has similar effects upon human skin as it has on grapes! (Williams might also be thinking of an amusing television advertisement of a few years ago which used walking, singing raisins.)

7. Williams becomes rather more serious here, after making sure that our interest has been attracted by other means. Suddenly suntanning becomes dangerous, sinister. We are all aware of and accept the dangers of smoking, so the bluntness of "It's like smoking" hits hard. The prospect of losing a baby as a result of suntanning is chilling. We all recognise anorexia as a very real and devastating psychological disease, and this reinforces the gravity of Williams' message. There are no jokes in this section. "Religiously" and "confesses" underline the importance the issue has for both Williams and Horwood.

8. We have all seen the television advertisements in which 'scientists' in white coats are used to impress upon us the wonderful properties of certain toothpastes or headache cures. We are naturally inclined to believe what we are told by acknowledged experts. Williams uses a similar device here. Doctor Bishop is brought into the argument. She is not just a doctor, but a consultant dermatologist. Although we do not understand the jargon doctors use, we are always impressed by their use of subject-specific language. We may, for example, have no idea what UVB and UVA rays actually do to us; we may have no idea what melanocyte cells are; but most of us are inclined to believe what those who do know tell us about them. It is very interesting to note that Williams, afraid perhaps of losing her audience by using too many expressions we do not understand, eventually gives us one or two layman's explanations - as in the case of elastin and of collagen.

9. Industries are commercial enterprises by means of which people make money - or, at least, hope to. We tend to see them as very large-scale, too, as in 'the motor industry' or 'the film industry'. Other occupations, where the profit motive is supposedly of the most minor significance, are never referred to as industries. We never hear of teachers being involved in "the education industry", for example, or priests in "the religious industry". Doctors are not usually referred to as members of the "health industry". All of these professions are primarily regarded as providing a service for the benefit of the community. The obvious implication behind describing suntanning as an "industry" is that its practitioners are interested only in profiting from their clients' gullibility.

When the "industry" is given the opportunity to defend itself, Williams uses inverted commas to distance herself from the claims made, to make it absolutely clear, in an almost sarcastic way, that she does not believe that there is any policy of "controlled tanning", just as she is sceptical about so-called "consultation". She leaves us in no doubt about her attitude towards her subject.

10. In the case of Jane Horwood, earlier, we were asked to feel sympathetic towards her suffering and asked to understand the fears that led to her taking the wise decision to put an end to her habit. How reasonable, thoughtful and moral she sounds, giving up suntanning to protect her unborn child. Victoria Williams, on the other hand, is made to seem utterly childish and selfish when she says "I wanted that heat and warmth on my body". The response the writer expects to her rhetorical question: "Is she worried about the latest sunbed scare?" is "No way! She's far too self-indulgent and blind to reality for that." Exactly this response is, of course, confirmed.

11. Williams ridicules the whole idea of suntanning in the final paragraphs, with a list (another common device) of those who have, in her eyes, been duped. Each example is used as a hammer blow, reinforcing her point.

"Models and media people" is used scornfully - they are not worth mentioning by name, since they are all of a type. They "pop in for a top-up" (the alliterative "p" for pouting lips?) just as ordinary people like us might fill up the car. They have no consideration at all for the possible consequences.

"Who says tanning isn't trendy?" is, perhaps, another barb aimed at media people, specifically members of the advertising "industry" who, it is suggested, see life as a series of slogans.

"Secretive" implies that there are those who carry on suntanning even though they are aware of the dangers - this is sly and sinister.

"It seemed his rugged outdoor tan was of the indoor variety" is accusing this ex-political leader of using sunbeds to try to give a false impression of his lifestyle to the public. Since many of the readers of this magazine would tend to be a little sceptical about the motives of politicians, this particular jibe might raise a smile or two.

"It makes you look wealthier, like you can afford regular holidays" seems unbelievably tawdry and unfashionably materialistic set against the background of the public's health. John Stevens (who, the suggestion is, doesn't even give his own name because it would embarrass him too much) is allowed to condemn himself with his own words. The writer's opinion, by this time, does not even need to be expressed.

"Essex Man" is a term generally used as a term of abuse – it reminds us of sub-human species like Neanderthal Man) associated with a particular 1980s stereotype - the selfish individual concerned only with himself and what he can get his hands on. The sunbed tan, as a symbol of affluence, is so overdone that the skin takes on the appearance of "tandoori" – a highly spiced Eastern dish partly famous for its vivid red colouring - especially when it, too, is overdone! It is noticeable that by the end of her piece Williams has become more confidently abusive. If you've read this far, she seems to be suggesting, you must agree with me, so I can begin to take a few liberties.

12. This is a very cleverly written piece, in which Cayte Williams has expertly matched her tone to her readership without compromising the sincerity and, ultimately, the intensity of her feelings. This cannot be a coincidence. "Barking" echoes the phrase, "barking mad", and leaves us in no doubt how she feels about "tanorexics". It may also refer back to "Essex Man".

So what?

There is no attempt at fairness in this piece - no balance of opinions; asking the reader to draw his or her own conclusions. The writer has a point to make and scarcely accepts that there might be other points of view. Counter-arguments, when they appear, tend to be ridiculed. We probably haven't learned anything new about suntanning - perhaps a little bit about those who indulge in it - but the piece might be considered amusing.