Writing style: political implications

Tool

Purpose:

This approach helps to analyse how writing challenges or supports inequalities. We intuitively do these analyses all the time. For example, we sense that the journalist who writes, 'Four fatalities occurred during skirmishes with rebel forces' has a different ideology from the journalist who writes of the same incident, 'US soldiers murdered four civilians'. This tool offers some ideas for systematic, rather than intuitive, analysis of texts to uncover their partially hidden meanings. It focuses on texts that are relevant to environment and development, but could be used more broadly.

Activities:

❶ Collect typical examples of relevant text

Such as newspaper articles or organisational documents

❷ Choose an example

❸ Describe the text

The aim is to break down the text into bite-size chunks for interpretation, being as neutral as possible. The tool gives suggestions for relevant features of the text to look out for. For example:

- Absences of relevant information.
- Concealment of the responsible agent (the person, people, or even non-human thing which is responsible for something)

Keep in Mind

★ Using the tool in groups is often more fruitful than individually because people will have different interpretations.

★ Avoid the analysis of private texts, unless you have permission and are certain that the writer understands the implications.

★ Writing style is only part of the story of inequality. Economic, cultural, institutional, legislative and psycho-logical factors also provide the background to inequality.

POWER TOOLS

④ **Interpret the text twice**

The first time, simply give the overall impression that the text is trying to make. Here we empathise with the writer to be in a better position to understand their motivations and constraints.

The second time, use the features already highlighted in the description phase to give an oppositional reading of the text. Ask, for example, whom the text benefits and whom the text excludes.

⑤ **Explain the text in terms of its historical, socio-economic and geographical context**

Ask what factors acted as the necessary background to the text. For example, colonialist-style language used by a South African electricity company – bringing of 'light to darkest Africa' – can only be understood in the context of South Africa's 'colonisation' of surrounding countries through its market supremacy.

⑥ **Verification and expansion of initial findings**

Do the features of other similar texts support your claims? Verification is much like a crossword puzzle in which you look for intersecting clues to support your interpretation. If an intersecting clue does not fit, you need to check other intersecting clues to decide how to continue.

★ The steps of the tool are linear, yet analysis is rarely so. You can enter the steps of the tool at any point, and will tend to move back and forth between them as you uncover new information and ask new questions.

★ Researching the history, socio-economics and geography of the society in question will help in the contextual analysis.

Further information

Find full tool and other related tools and resources at: **www.policy-powertools.org**

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