

WRITING SKILLS – Analysing a cartoon

A cartoon is a humorous drawing that critically deals with a current news item, i.e. it responds to a topical event. It often contains some text, e.g. speech/thought/sound bubbles and/or a caption (text under the picture).

A cartoon is critical of people or institutions in the news, topical events or new trends/ideas (its *target*) and usually makes a one-sided point (its *message*). It usually combines visual techniques (e.g. caricaturing a person or using objects with a symbolic meaning) with verbal humour (wordplay, irony ...) (its *devices*).

'Cartoon' can also mean a series of drawings inside boxes that tell a (short) story (= comic strip), or a short animated film, such as "Tom and Jerry".

Step 1 (Introduction): The Grid below contains the questions your introduction has to cover. Fill it in and then turn your notes into a paragraph.

Where is the picture taken from?	
Who made it and when?	
What type of picture is it?	
What does it roughly show?/ What's your first impression?	
Why was it drawn? / What's the topic?	

Useful phrases: Introducing cartoons !

The cartoon

- was drawn by [name of cartoonist].
- was published/appeared in [newspaper] on [date].
- was created in response to [a news item].
- shows/presents/depicts/deals with/alludes to/ refers to/criticises [an event/crisis/trend/...].
- is directed at/comments on/targets [an attitude, policy ...].

The message of the cartoon is obvious/clear: It aims to show that ...

The key point the cartoon is trying to make is to expose the fact that ...

The cartoonist criticises ... for doing sth/makes fun of ...

Step 2 (Description): Describe the cartoon systematically. Mention any labels, speech bubbles or caption.

LANGUAGE HELP

In the centre/foreground/background, at the top/bottom of ...
On the left/right of the cartoon ...
Underneath there is ...
The caption reads ...

Useful phrases: Describing cartoons !

The cartoon

- consists of/is made up of ... several pictorial elements/speech or thought bubbles/a caption
- is divided into ...

The caption

- is a comment/statement by ...
- states that .../reinforces the cartoonist's message that ...
- is unexpected/short and sweet/ironic.

Step 3 (Analysis): Examine the elements and their relationship and functions. Which message do they convey? Pay special attention to the characters (body language and facial expression)!

Useful phrases: Analysing cartoons !

The cartoon expresses sth/points out that ...

An element in the drawing represents/stands for/symbolises.../is exaggerated/stressed.

A character is a caricature of .../the stereotypical ...

A character is caricatured/ridiculed as ...

The humour lies in the difference/misunderstanding/discrepancy/contrast/parallels between ... and ...

LANGUAGE HELP

The cartoon may be meant to show ... It is very eye-catching because of its use of ... It speaks to the observer directly by ...

The layout / use of colour / ... is criticizing/ making fun of ...

The cartoon shows ...

It conveys its message through ... / brings its message across by ...

Step 4 (Evaluation): Say whether you think the cartoon is effective or not and give reasons, using your background knowledge about the cartoon's topic.

Useful phrases: Evaluating cartoons !

- The cartoon achieves its aim of [doing sth]. It skilfully/effectively ...
- The point/message of the cartoon is lost on me/fails to work for me because ...
- The cartoon appeals/does not appeal to me. In my opinion it is
 - detailed/well-made/very clever/effective/of high quality/convincing ...
 - simplistic/confusing/unfair/exaggerated/...

(Source: Abi Workshop Englisch. Ernst Klett Verlag: 2008, p. 52F and Context Starter. Cornelsen Verlag: 2017, p. 156f.)

An Example/Exercise:

Step 1:

The cartoon was drawn by Rob Cottingham and published in Noise to Signal. It shows two people, a man and a woman, holding hands at a table.. ..

Step 2:

There is a man on the left and a woman on the right of the cartoon. They are sitting at a table with a candle and are holding hands as well as looking into each others eyes. He is wearing a nice pullover and she is wearing a dress. ...

Step 3:

The cartoon mildly criticizes the widespread use of modern media, especially mobile phones and social networking sites. It stresses what modern media can't do making the two characters looking into each others eyes and holding hands. ...



*'I'm so glad you agreed to meet in person.
There are some things that just can't be said
in 140 characters.'*

Step 4:

The cartoon addresses an important aspect of our digital age and its influence on personal relationships. I think it does that effectively/not very effectively... The exaggeration is amusing, but despite humour, the criticism of...