How to Analyse a Picture

Methodology sheet · TSI · paintings, photographs, cartoons, posters and front pages

1. A method in four steps

Describing is only the first step. At the exam, you must also **analyse** how the picture is made and **interpret** its message.

Step	What to do	Key sentence
1. Identify	Say what the document is: kind, author, date, source, subject.	*This cartoon, published in … in …, deals with the issue of …*
2. Describe	Say what you see, from the foreground to the background, then the people and what they are doing.	*In the foreground, a man is …; behind him, there is …*
3. Analyse	Explain how it is made: framing, colours, light, symbols, text, exaggeration.	*The artist uses … to …*
4. Interpret	Give the message, the intended effect and your evaluation. Link it to the topic.	*The cartoonist probably wants to criticise …*

2. Identify the document

Kind of document	Made by	Typical sentence
painting (portrait, landscape)	a painter, an artist	*… is a painting by …, painted in … / … painted … in …*
photograph, photo	a photographer	*This photo, taken by … in …, was published in …*
cartoon, caricature, comic strip	a cartoonist	*This cartoon, drawn by …, appeared in … on …*
drawing, illustration	an illustrator	*This drawing illustrates an article about …*
poster, advertisement	a graphic designer, an advertiser	*This poster was designed for a campaign against …*
front page, cover	an editor, a magazine	*This is the front page of … dated …*

- **Source and date**: *This picture was published in … (year) and comes from … (source). It dates from …*
- **Subject**: *The picture deals with / addresses / raises the issue of …*
- **Place and time**: *The photo was taken in / at / near … during …* ; *The scene takes place in …*

Use the **past tense** for the making of the document (*was painted, was taken, was published*) and the **present tense** for what the picture shows (*the picture shows*, *a man is standing*).

3. Describe what you see

Where?

Position	Distance and relation	Structure of the picture
in the foreground **in the background** in the middle distance in the distance	next to, beside, near in front of ↔ behind between, on either side of above ↔ below	at the top ↔ at the bottom on the left-hand side ↔ on the right-hand side in the top left-hand corner in the centre / in the middle *The picture is divided into … parts.*

Who and what?

- **There is / there are** or **we can see**: *On the left, there is a crowd of … ; we can see …*
- **Actions** (present continuous): *The man is holding a flag; the characters are looking at …*
- **Doubt**: *He seems to be … ; She appears to be … ; It looks like … ; He looks as if he were …*

	Useful words
Facial expression	smile, grin, frown, stare, gaze, glare ; *look worried / determined / exhausted / shocked*
Gestures and posture	point at, wave, raise a fist, fold one's arms, lean over, turn away, hold, carry, shake hands
Clothing	wear a suit / a uniform / a hat, be dressed in …, in casual clothes
Groups	a crowd, onlookers, bystanders, protesters, a group of …, a line of … (*people* takes a plural verb)

4. Analyse how it is made

Element	What to look at	Useful phrases
Framing	close-up, long shot, high angle (seen from above), low angle (seen from below), cropping	*The low angle makes him look powerful.* *The close-up focuses on …*
Composition	central or off-centre subject, symmetry, lines that lead the eye, empty space, crowded image	*The eye is drawn to …* *The empty space around … emphasises his isolation.*
Colours and light	warm / cold, dark / bright, vivid / dull, black and white, contrast, shadows	*The dark colours create a gloomy atmosphere.* *The bright red stands out against …*
Text	title, caption, headline, slogan, speech bubble, label	*The caption is ironic: it says the opposite of what we see.*
Symbols and devices	symbol, metaphor, exaggeration, irony, parody, contrast, juxtaposition	*The … symbolises …* *The artist exaggerates … to mock …*

5. Impression and effect

Say what the picture makes **the viewer** feel, not only what you feel.

	Words and phrases
Atmosphere	*positive:* cheerful, vivid, hopeful, peaceful, serene, uplifting · *negative:* gloomy, bleak, tense, ominous, disturbing, chaotic, desolate · *other:* striking, ironic, humorous, moving, thought-provoking
Phrases	*The picture is vivid / expressive / striking.* *The viewer has the impression that …* *The picture makes the viewer feel sad / uneasy / hopeful.* *It conveys a sense of … / It evokes …* *It inspires the viewer to think about …*
Look	*look + adjective* (*they look afraid*) · *look as if + clause* (*they look as if they were afraid*) · *look like + noun* (*he looks like a king*)

6. Intention, message and evaluation

	Words and phrases
Verbs of intention	criticise, denounce, condemn, mock, ridicule, satirise, question, challenge · celebrate, praise · warn, raise awareness of, draw attention to, point out

	Words and phrases
What the author wants	*The artist / the photographer / the cartoonist uses … to express …* *He / she (probably) wants to criticise / express / show …* *It is obvious that the artist wants to …* *What the artist wants to point out / focus on is …*
Hedging	*probably, perhaps, seems to, may be intended to, could be seen as, can be interpreted as*
The issue	*The problem illustrated here is … ; The issue raised is … ; … symbolises … ; … is typical of … ; The picture is part of the debate on …*
Evaluation	*The picture is effective because … ; The use of … is particularly striking.* *However, it may be one-sided / it simplifies a complex issue.* *It is aimed at readers / voters / young people …*
Your opinion	*I think / I believe / I am sure that … ; It seems to me that … ; One could argue that …*