

English A1 Language and Literature (HL)

Written task 1 – Opinion column

Session: May 2013

Number of words in the rationale – 278

Number of words in the task – 908

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Rationale

In class, for part 2 of the course we studied how the media create bias through the use of language and image in their news coverage. For my written task 1 I have decided to show my understanding of this topic by writing an opinion column examining how textual bias is conveyed in sports news coverage and what is the effect of this bias, especially on professional female athletes.

An opinion column is suitable for this task because it allows me to express my views.

This topic can be controversial because sports news reports on women seem to focus on female athletes' physical appearance and personal life instead of their athleticism. Therefore, an opinion column is an appropriate text type for this task.

Since language used in sports coverage seems biased against female athletes by focusing on their physical appearance as opposed to their achievements in athletics, my opinion column would be published in *Women's Health* magazine because women would be my target audience.

I have used a conversational tone and rhetorical questions to persuade the reader to consider my point of view. The short structured paragraphs make it easier for the reader to pay attention and understand my purpose. Most opinion columns have short paragraphs; hence I decided to put this into practice to show my understanding of the conventions of opinion columns.

To avoid being biased myself, I have also highlighted that although sports news coverage tends to focus too much on female athletes and their personal lives or appearances, this is not always the case. At times they praise their achievements, but at the same time focus on details that may undermine women's success in athletics.

Word count - 278

Written Task 1 - Opinion column

Topic: Textual bias in sports news coverage

Could sports writers be undermining professional female athletes?

At the just concluded London 2012 Olympics, tears of joy and tears of frustration were shed depending on whether dreams came true or whether they were crushed.

This is what we would expect when athletes spend every second, of every minute, of every hour, of everyday day, training to compete with the best of the best in the world's most competitive sporting event.

What concerns me, however, is how the media reported on these events. Specifically, the language they used when reporting on the achievements of both female and male athletes.

For male athletes they raised them to the level of 'demi-gods', which in all fairness they should. After all, winning a medal at the Olympics is a dream come true for any athlete.

Just to show you what I mean, consider this headline: *"Immortal man Mo delivers his dream: Farah judges his run to perfection as he grabs his place in history with a golden double"*.

The above article published in *The Daily Mail* (August, 11, 2012) puts Mo Farah, the British long distance runner who won two gold medals for both 10,000 and 5,000 meters race, up on a pedestal for his performance during London 2012

Olympics. By all means, this is a top athlete who deserves all the credits in the world.

The diction used in the news report reflects well on Mo Farah's success during the Olympics. By referring to his performance using words such as "immortal", "perfection", "grabs his place in history", "on a night touched by magic", 'domination' 'elegant', the report recognises Farah's achievements.

Additionally, the reporter's use of superlative also portrays the athlete as a 'demi-god': "Few have ever exerted that kind of domination over the greatest athletes on the planet".

While reporters use language to praise the male athlete, the same treatment is not given to the female athletes.

For reporters, female athletes are almost seen as sex objects. Even when their athleticism is acknowledged, this is almost presented as a 'by the way'.

For female athletes the real attention is on their private lives, their feelings, and their 'figures'. If you ask me, this is highly sexist, considering that whether male or female it takes determination to win a medal at the Olympics.

The following headline proves my point: "*Exclusive: GB golden girl Jessica Ennis talks to FEMAIL about her dreams of being a chef, her big wedding plans – and her Royal fan club*".

Just by reading this headline from *the Daily Mail* (August 21, 2012), we see that the reporter is not focusing on, or giving any sort of credit for her athletic

achievements. Which is surprising given that in London 2012 Olympics, she won the gold in heptathlon.

Even though the article highlights her achievement later on saying: “For the 26-year-old national treasure, winning gold on home turf”, and give her credit for her achievements, this is not evident throughout the article, and is only mentioned on a few occasions.

The reporter talks about her ‘abs’, and says: “Try typing the term ‘Jessica Ennis’ into Google. Two of the top suggestions are ‘bum’ and ‘hot’ and with a sculpted and toned body reflecting the discipline and determination of her training, it is not difficult to see why”.

This use of language is outrageous. It is highly sexist and Jessica Ennis is being portrayed as a sex symbol, an image that undermines her athletic achievements.

This shift of focus from her achievement in athletics carries on in the description: “She has rapidly become a household name synonymous with outstanding athletic ability, unrivalled abs and the most humble demeanor in the Olympic village.” Key point here being “abs”. What is the point?

Through this focus on her ‘figure’, is the reporter suggesting that a woman cannot be athletic and look good at the same time?

Fair enough, the article does say that Jessica’s win is a “culmination of more than 15 years of rigorous scrupulously planned training”, but undermines this by referring to her wedding plans in the headline.

If you think the report on Jessica Ennis is outrageous, perhaps you missed out on the report on Gabby Douglas, the two-time Olympic gold medallist in gymnastics.

After her successful Olympic performance by winning a gold medal, the following report appeared in the newspaper: *“Gabby Douglas, who faced cruel criticism of her hairstyle while competing in the London games, has been filmed having her hair coiffed by a celebrity stylist in behind-the-scenes footage from a soon-to-be-published shoot” (Daily Mail, August 24, 2012).*

Why the obsession with her appearance? Earlier, Gabby Douglas had said that: *“I’m not a model. I don’t focus on looking good when racing...”* In my opinion, this reporter crossed the line.

Focusing on Gabby’s appearance, just like in Jessica Ennis’ case takes away attention from her achievement of winning a gold medal in London Olympics.

I know I have proved my point, but just to make sure that I do not leave you in doubt about sports reports that seem to undermine female professional athletes, consider the following headline: *“Olympic gold cyclist Victoria Pendleton loses her lycra in revealing photoshoot” (Daily Mail, May, 29, 2009)*

By focusing on women’s appearance, as seen the examples provided in this article, biased sports reports seem to undermine achievements made by female athletes.

Sports reports should use language that focuses on athleticism, just as in Mo Farah’s case, and less on women’s looks.

Word count - 908

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