Charta | LESSON NOTES

Style and tone: read the author's words

Verbal Reasoning

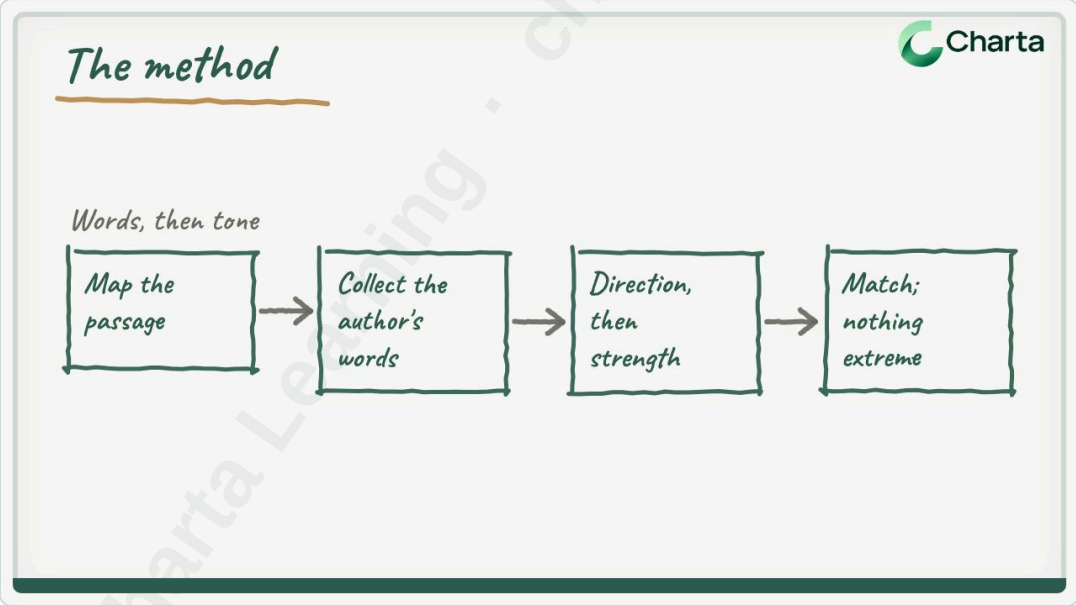
1 What the question asks

- Attitude towards a person, view or finding
- How a phrase is best characterised
- What a few words mainly serve to do
- Evidence: the author's words, not the topic

IN THE LESSON

- Style questions come in three main forms.
- Attitude: the author's attitude towards a person, a view or a finding is best described as.
- Characterise a phrase: the author's description of something is best characterised as.
- Function of words: the words at the start of a paragraph mainly serve to.
- In each case, the evidence is in the author's own words, not in the topic.
- A passage about a war can be calm, and a passage about libraries can be sharp.
- So you look at how the author writes: which words praise, which words criticise, which words soften a claim, and which words connect one point to another.

2 The method



IN THE LESSON

- Here is the method.
- Step one, read and map the passage, noting where the author's own voice appears.
- Step two, go to the exact words the question points to, and collect the evidence: praising words like discovered or new, critical words like mistake, softening words like may or in some hands, and signal words like nor, however or but.
- Step three, decide the direction, positive, negative or neutral, and then the strength, usually mild.
- Step four, test each choice: does its direction match, and is it no stronger than the words allow?
- Why strength?
- Because authors of these passages are almost always measured, and most wrong tone choices are too extreme.

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3 The traps in the wrong choices

- Too extreme: mocking, scornful, enthusiastic
- Opposite direction, or indifferent
- A criticism borrowed from something else
- A hedge overstated, or a ranking never given

IN THE LESSON

- Here are the traps, by name.
- The first is too extreme: mocking, scornful, censorious or enthusiastic, when the author is measured.
- These passages are written by careful scholars, and their tone is rarely strong.
- The second is the opposite direction: dismissive when the author praises, or approving when the author corrects.
- The third is indifferent: it says the author takes no view, when the author clearly does.
- The fourth is the borrowed detail: a criticism the passage makes of one thing, attached to another.
- And the fifth overstates a hedge: it turns not in any simple way into not at all, or adds a ranking the author never gives.

4 Question 1: the wide screen, part one

- Film historians have often told the story of the wide screen in the 1950s as a simple tale of competition. As television sets spread through American homes and cinema attendance fell, the studios, on this account, sought something that the small screen in the living room could not provide, and found it in processes such as CinemaScope, which nearly doubled the width of the projected image relative to its height. Spectacle, in other words, was a weapon in a commercial war.

IN THE LESSON

- Our first passage is the easy one, and a new one, about why films became wide in the nineteen fifties.
- Listen for the words the author uses about the directors at the end.
- Film historians have often told the story of the wide screen in the nineteen fifties as a simple tale of competition.
- As television sets spread through American homes and cinema attendance fell, the studios, on this account, sought something that the small screen in the living room could not provide, and found it in processes such as CinemaScope, which nearly doubled the width of the projected image relative to its height.
- Spectacle, in other words, was a weapon in a commercial war.

5 Question 1: the wide screen, part two

- The account is not wrong, but it is incomplete. Attendance had begun to decline before television reached most households, as returning veterans married, moved to suburbs distant from downtown picture palaces, and spent their money on houses and cars. Moreover, the studios at the time faced a second blow: a 1948 court ruling had forced them to sell the theatre chains they owned, ending their guaranteed outlets for their films. Wide-screen pictures, which required new lenses and larger screens, gave the studios a way to persuade independent theatre owners to invest in the product they were selling, and to justify higher ticket prices.

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6 Question 1: the wide screen, part three

- The commercial explanation also neglects what the new format did to the craft of filmmaking. Directors trained to guide the viewer's eye through cutting and close-ups found that the broad frame resisted such methods; close-ups looked awkward, and rapid cutting across so wide an image could disorient audiences. Some directors, however, discovered that they could stage scenes in depth and across the width of the frame, letting several actions unfold at once and allowing viewers to choose where to look. What began as a marketing device thus became, in some hands, a new visual grammar.

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- What began as a marketing device thus became, in some hands, a new visual grammar.

7 Question 1: map the passage

The wide screen: the map

Paragraph 1	the usual story: competition	**describe**
Paragraph 2	true but incomplete: more causes	**correct**
Paragraph 3	some found a new grammar	**praise**
Tone	discovered; new visual grammar	**positive**

IN THE LESSON

- Here is the map.
- Paragraph one gives the usual story: studios used the wide screen to compete with television.
- Paragraph two says that story is not wrong, but incomplete: attendance was falling for other reasons, and a court ruling had taken away the studios' theatres.
- Paragraph three turns to the craft.
- The wide frame made close-ups awkward and fast cutting confusing.
- But some directors discovered they could stage scenes in depth and across the frame, letting viewers choose where to look, and in their hands a marketing device became a new visual grammar.
- Now collect the author's words about those directors: discovered, letting viewers choose, a new visual grammar.
- All positive.
- Direction: positive.
- Strength: measured praise for what they invented.

8 Question 1: the question

- The author's attitude toward the directors who staged scenes in depth across the wide frame is best described as:
- A. dismissive of their technical skill
- B. appreciative of their inventiveness
- C. indifferent to their methods
- D. critical of their tendency to disorient audiences
- E. sceptical that their work had any lasting value

IN THE LESSON

- Here is the question, and the five choices.
- The author's attitude toward the directors who staged scenes in depth across the wide frame is best described as: Choice A.
- dismissive of their technical skill Choice B.
- appreciative of their inventiveness Choice C.
- indifferent to their methods Choice D.
- critical of their tendency to disorient audiences Choice E.
- sceptical that their work had any lasting value Which choice matches the author's words about these directors?

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9 Question 1: test each choice

The author's attitude toward the directors who staged scenes in ...

A: dismissive of their skill	they made a new grammar	opposite
B: appreciative, inventive	discovered, new grammar	the answer
C: indifferent to their methods	described with clear favour	indifferent
D: critical: they disorient	that was rapid cutting	borrowed
E: sceptical of lasting value	it became a new grammar	opposite

IN THE LESSON

- Choice A, dismissive of their technical skill, is the opposite.
- The author credits them with turning a marketing device into a new visual grammar.
- Choice B, appreciative of their inventiveness, matches the words discovered and new visual grammar.
- Positive, and measured.
- Choice C, indifferent, cannot be right, because the author describes their discovery in detail and ends on a favourable judgement.
- Choice D says the author criticises them for disorienting audiences.
- But in the passage, disorientation comes from rapid cutting across the wide frame, not from staging in depth.
- That criticism is borrowed from something else.
- Choice E, sceptical of any lasting value, contradicts the final sentence.
- The answer is B.

10 Question 2: the early libraries, part one

- In the eighteenth century, books in Britain and its American colonies were expensive enough that few readers outside the wealthy could own more than a handful. One response was the subscription library, in which members paid an entrance fee and an annual charge in return for the right to borrow from a shared collection. Such libraries are often cited as early ancestors of the free public library, and in a narrow institutional sense they were: they established the idea that a community of readers could hold books in common.

IN THE LESSON

- Our second passage is a medium one: the early libraries, which you know from the main idea and inference lessons.
- This time, listen to one phrase in particular: in effect, a club whose members had agreed to share their books.
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- Such libraries are often cited as early ancestors of the free public library, and in a narrow institutional sense they were: they established the idea that a community of readers could hold books in common.

11 Question 2: the early libraries, part two

- It would be a mistake, however, to regard them as democratic institutions in spirit. Their fees, though modest by the standards of the gentry, were well beyond the reach of labourers, and many libraries admitted new members only by vote of existing ones. Their collections reflected the tastes of the merchants, clergy, and professionals who governed them: history, theology, travel, and natural philosophy predominated, while novels were often excluded as frivolous. A subscription library was, in effect, a club whose members had agreed to share their books.

IN THE LESSON

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12 Question 2: the early libraries, part three

- A different institution served readers of more modest means. Commercial circulating libraries, run for profit by booksellers, charged by the volume or by the quarter and asked no questions of their customers. Moralists denounced them for supplying novels to apprentices and servants, and their stock was indeed weighted toward fiction, because fiction was what paying customers most wanted. If one seeks a precedent for the idea that a library should serve whoever walks through its door, the despised circulating library has at least as strong a claim as its respectable subscription counterpart.

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13 Question 2: map the passage

The early libraries: the map

Paragraph 1	ancestors, in a narrow sense	**granted**
Paragraph 2	a mistake: not democratic	**correct**
The phrase	in effect, a club	**sums up**
Tone	brings them down, calmly	**deflating**

IN THE LESSON

- Here is the map.
- Paragraph one grants that subscription libraries were ancestors of the public library in a narrow sense.
- Paragraph two begins, it would be a mistake to regard them as democratic in spirit, and gives the facts: fees beyond labourers, members admitted by vote, collections shaped by the people who ran them.
- Then the phrase: a subscription library was, in effect, a club whose members had agreed to share their books.
- What does the phrase do?
- It sums up the correction.
- It takes away the grand, public spirited status often claimed for these libraries, and calls them simply a club.
- But look at the tone of the words: calm, factual, no insults and no blame.
- Direction: negative about their status.
- Strength: mild.
- A word for that is deflating.

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14 Question 2: the question

- The author's description of a subscription library as "in effect, a club whose members had agreed to share their books" is best characterised as:
- A. mocking, in that it ridicules the members' pretensions to public usefulness
- B. excusing, in that it shows the members' exclusiveness to be an accident of cost rather than a choice they made
- C. censorious, in that it blames the members for deliberately keeping books from the poor
- D. approving, in that it credits the members with a cooperative spirit that foreshadowed public libraries
- E. deflating, in that it withholds the public-spirited status often claimed for such libraries

IN THE LESSON

- Here is the question, and the five choices.
- The author's description of a subscription library as "in effect, a club whose members had agreed to share their books" is best characterised as: Choice A.
- mocking, in that it ridicules the members' pretensions to public usefulness Choice B.
- excusing, in that it shows the members' exclusiveness to be an accident of cost rather than a choice they made Choice C.
- censorious, in that it blames the members for deliberately keeping books from the poor Choice D.
- approving, in that it credits the members with a cooperative spirit that foreshadowed public libraries Choice E.
- deflating, in that it withholds the public-spirited status often claimed for such libraries Match both the direction and the strength.

15 Question 2: test each choice

The author's description of a subscription library as "in effect, ...

A: mocking their pretensions	the tone is calm, not ridicule	**too extreme**
B: excusing: cost, not choice	members voted others in	**opposite**
C: censorious: blames members	no motive is blamed	**too extreme**
D: approving a cooperative spirit	part of the correction	**opposite**
E: deflating a claimed status	calmly brings it down	**the answer**

IN THE LESSON

- Choice A, mocking, is too extreme.
- The sentence is restrained.
- It denies the libraries a democratic label without ridiculing anyone.
- Choice B, excusing, says the exclusiveness was an accident of cost.
- But the passage says members were admitted by vote, so exclusiveness was chosen, and nothing is excused.
- Choice C, censorious, says the author blames the members for keeping books from the poor.
- The words state facts and give no bad motive.
- Too extreme again.
- Choice D, approving, is the opposite: the phrase is part of the correction that follows it would be a mistake.
- Choice E, deflating, matches: the phrase withholds the public spirited status often claimed, calmly and without abuse.
- The answer is E.

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16 Question 3: grammar and evidence, part one

- In English, a speaker can report that it rained last night without indicating how she knows. She may add 'I saw it' or 'apparently', but nothing in the grammar requires her to. In many of the world's languages, from Turkish and Quechua to numerous languages of the Amazon, the matter is otherwise. These languages mark evidentiality: a verb or sentence must carry a form indicating the source of the speaker's information, distinguishing, depending on the language, between what was seen directly, what was inferred from traces and what was heard from others.

IN THE LESSON

- Our third passage is a hard one: grammar and evidence, from the application lesson.
- The question is about three small words at the start of the last paragraph: nor is it obvious that.
- In English, a speaker can report that it rained last night without indicating how she knows.
- She may add 'I saw it' or 'apparently', but nothing in the grammar requires her to.
- In many of the world's languages, from Turkish and Quechua to numerous languages of the Amazon, the matter is otherwise.
- These languages mark evidentiality: a verb or sentence must carry a form indicating the source of the speaker's information, distinguishing, depending on the language, between what was seen directly, what was inferred from traces and what was heard from others.

17 Question 3: grammar and evidence, part two

- It is tempting to conclude that speakers of such languages must be more careful about evidence, or that they think about knowledge differently from speakers of English. The conclusion does not follow as readily as it seems. A grammatical requirement to choose a form is not the same as a habit of scrutinising sources; a speaker can choose the reported form for a rumour as automatically as an English speaker chooses a past tense. Studies of children learning such languages have found that they master the grammatical markers well before they perform reliably on tasks that require them to reason explicitly about how someone knows something, which suggests that using the forms and reflecting on evidence are partly separate abilities.

IN THE LESSON

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- A grammatical requirement to choose a form is not the same as a habit of scrutinising sources; a speaker can choose the reported form for a rumour as automatically as an English speaker chooses a past tense.
- Studies of children learning such languages have found that they master the grammatical markers well before they perform reliably on tasks that require them to reason explicitly about how someone knows something, which suggests that using the forms and reflecting on evidence are partly separate abilities.

18 Question 3: grammar and evidence, part three

- Nor is it obvious that the forms track evidence in any simple way. In several languages, speakers use the direct evidence form to express certainty or personal commitment, even about events they did not witness, and use the reported form to distance themselves from a claim. Evidential grammar, on this view, encodes not only how a speaker knows something but also how she positions herself toward what she says.

IN THE LESSON

- Read on with me: here is the next paragraph.
- Nor is it obvious that the forms track evidence in any simple way.
- In several languages, speakers use the direct evidence form to express certainty or personal commitment, even about events they did not witness, and use the reported form to distance themselves from a claim.
- Evidential grammar, on this view, encodes not only how a speaker knows something but also how she positions herself toward what she says.

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19 Question 3: map the passage

Grammar and evidence: the map

Paragraph 1	some grammars mark the source	**describe**
Paragraph 2	tempting, but first doubt	**doubt one**
Paragraph 3	nor: forms show stance too	**doubt two**
Nor	adds a second, separate doubt	**the job**

IN THE LESSON

- Here is the map.
- Paragraph one: some languages require speakers to mark how they know.
- Paragraph two: it is tempting to conclude that such speakers are more careful about evidence, but the conclusion does not follow as readily as it seems.
- That is doubt number one, resting on children, who master the forms before they can reason about evidence.
- Paragraph three opens with nor is it obvious that, and gives new evidence: adults use the forms to express certainty or distance, so the forms do not track evidence in any simple way.
- Look at the word nor.
- It adds another not to the one before.
- So the job of the words: add a second reason to hesitate, based on different evidence.
- And notice the hedge, in any simple way, which keeps the new claim modest.

20 Question 3: the question

- The words "Nor is it obvious that" at the start of the third paragraph mainly serve to:
- A. qualify the author's own earlier doubt by conceding that evidential forms sometimes do track the source of information
- B. assert that evidential forms do not track the source of information in any of the languages studied
- C. add a second ground for hesitation about the tempting conclusion, resting on different evidence from the first
- D. extend the second paragraph's point about children, showing that adult speakers also master the forms before they can reason about evidence
- E. introduce a ground for hesitation that the author regards as stronger than the first, because it rests on adult usage

IN THE LESSON

- Here is the question, and the five choices.
- The words "Nor is it obvious that" at the start of the third paragraph mainly serve to: Choice A.
- qualify the author's own earlier doubt by conceding that evidential forms sometimes do track the source of information Choice B.
- assert that evidential forms do not track the source of information in any of the languages studied Choice C.
- add a second ground for hesitation about the tempting conclusion, resting on different evidence from the first Choice D.
- extend the second paragraph's point about children, showing that adult speakers also master the forms before they can reason about evidence Choice E.
- introduce a ground for hesitation that the author regards as stronger than the first, because it rests on adult usage Think about what the word nor does, and watch the hedges.

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21 Question 3: test each choice

The words "Nor is it obvious that" at the start of the third ...

A: concede forms track sources	nor adds a doubt; no concession	**opposite**
B: forms never track the source	only not in any simple way	**overstated**
C: a second doubt, new evidence	nor adds; adults, not children	**the answer**
D: adults learn forms first too	acquisition is not mentioned	**invented**
E: a stronger doubt than the first	no ranking is given	**overstated**

IN THE LESSON

- Choice A says the words concede that the forms sometimes do track the source.
- But nor adds a further doubt; it concedes nothing.
- Opposite.
- Choice B says the forms do not track the source in any of the languages studied.
- The passage says not in any simple way, and speaks of several languages, which is much weaker.
- The hedge is overstated.
- Choice C matches: the words add a second ground for hesitation about the tempting conclusion, resting on different evidence, adult usage rather than children's learning.
- Choice D says the paragraph shows that adults also master the forms before they can reason about evidence, but adult learning is never mentioned.
- Choice E says the second doubt is stronger than the first.
- The author gives no ranking.
- The answer is C.

22 Accurate and quick

- Notice praise words, critical words, hedges
- Direction first, then strength
- Expect a measured tone
- Ask what the words do, not only how they sound
- Check every hedge: not simply is not never

IN THE LESSON

- Some habits that keep you accurate and quick.
- First, as you read, notice the author's evaluative words: praise words like discovered or remarkable, critical words like mistake or despised, and hedges like may, some, in a narrow sense.
- Second, for a tone question, decide the direction before the strength.
- Third, expect a measured tone.
- In these passages, choices like mocking, scornful or enthusiastic are almost always wrong.
- Fourth, for a phrase or a few words, ask what they do in the argument, as well as how they sound: sum up, concede, add, correct.
- Fifth, check every hedge in a choice against the passage: not in any simple way is not the same as never.

23 What the three questions taught

- Discovered, new grammar: appreciative
- A calm club: deflating, not mocking
- Nor: a second, separate doubt
- Small words decide; the answer is measured

IN THE LESSON

- Look back at the three questions.
- In the wide screen passage, the words discovered and a new visual grammar showed measured praise, and one trap borrowed a criticism that belonged to rapid cutting.
- In the library passage, a calm phrase took away a grand status, so the answer was deflating, while mocking and censorious were too extreme and approving was the opposite.
- In the language passage, the little word nor added a second, separate doubt, and the traps overstated a hedge or invented a ranking.
- In every case the answer came from the author's own small words, and the right choice was measured.

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24 Quick check

1. Calm, factual language; a choice says scornful. Likely right?
   Answer: No: too extreme.
2. 'Not true in any simple way' versus 'never true'. A match?
   Answer: No: the hedge is overstated.
3. A paragraph begins with nor. What does it signal?
   Answer: A further point of the same kind, often a doubt.

IN THE LESSON

- A quick check.
- Pause after each question.
- Question one.
- A choice describes the author's tone as scornful, but the passage uses calm, factual language.
- Is scornful likely right?
- The answer is no.
- It is too extreme.
- These authors are measured.
- Question two.
- The author writes that something is not true in any simple way.
- A choice says the author thinks it is never true.
- Do they match?
- The answer is no.
- The choice overstates the hedge.
- Question three.
- A paragraph begins with nor.
- What does that word usually signal?
- The answer: an additional point of the same kind as the one before, often a further doubt or denial.

25 Recap: the style method

- Praise, criticism, hedges, signals
- Direction, then strength
- What do the words do?
- Name the trap in each wrong choice

IN THE LESSON

- Let us recap.
- Read for the author's own words: praise, criticism, hedges and signals.
- Go to the exact words the question names, decide the direction, positive, negative or neutral, and then the strength, usually mild.
- For a phrase or a signal word, ask what it does: sum up, concede, add, correct.
- Then test each choice for direction and strength, and name the trap in every wrong one: too extreme, the opposite, indifferent, a borrowed detail, or a hedge overstated.
- Practise noticing small words on every passage, and tone questions will feel much less like guesswork.

Summary notes for the Charta whiteboard lesson. Figures are from the lesson's made-up examples.

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