

5.3 The function of specific words and phrases

Name: _____ Class: _____ Date: _____ **Total: 18 marks**

KEY WORDS understatement 低调陈述 • hyperbole 夸张
• hyperbole and understatement 夸张与低调

Objective

Build the skills to explain **hyperbole and understatement** 夸张与低调.

You must be able to:

- state what descriptive words do to a reader's interaction
- define hyperbole and understatement
- state what exaggerating or minimising does
- explain why understatement can be stronger than exaggeration

1 Worked examples

Study these first. Each one shows the method for a task used later.

■ **Descriptive words**

Adjectives and adverbs qualify or modify the things they describe and affect readers' interaction with the text.

■ **Two devices**

Hyperbole exaggerates while understatement minimises. They are opposite operations on the same scale.

■ **What both do**

Exaggerating or minimising an aspect of an object focuses attention on that trait and conveys a perspective about the object. The same two effects from opposite means.

■ **Why understatement can be stronger**

Saying less than the case invites the reader to supply the rest, and what a reader supplies is felt more sharply than what they are told. "It was not a good year" after a death does more than an outburst.

2 Practice

2.1 Define hyperbole and understatement. [2]

2.2 State the two effects that both produce. [2]

2.3 Understatement can be stronger.

(a) Explain why. [2]

(b) State what adjectives and adverbs do to a reader. [1]

3 Exam-style questions

3.1 Hyperbole and understatement are [1]

- **A** the same operation
- **B** opposite operations on the same scale
- **C** unrelated
- **D** forms of rhyme

3.2 Both focus attention on a trait and convey [1]

- **A** a perspective about the object
- **B** the date
- **C** the genre
- **D** the metre

3.3 A speaker calls a catastrophe “a bit of trouble”.

- (a) Name the device. [1]
- (b) Explain the effect on the reader. [2]

3.4 Full free-response task. A comic novel’s narrator says of a minor character: “*He had been described, by people who loved him, as difficult.*” Two pages later, the same narrator says of a disaster that has destroyed a family: “*It was, everyone agreed, a shame.*”

Write an essay that analyses how the novel's use of hyperbole and understatement conveys its attitude to its characters.

Marked on the AP 6-point rubric: **Row A — Thesis (1), Row B — Evidence and Commentary (4), Row C — Sophistication (1).**

[6]

Solutions

2.1 hyperbole exaggerates; understatement minimises.

2.2 they focus attention on the trait and convey a perspective about the object.

2.3 (a) saying less invites the reader to supply the rest, and what a reader supplies is felt more sharply than what they are told. (b) they qualify or modify what they describe and affect the reader's interaction with the text.

3.1 B. opposite operations.

3.2 A. a perspective about the object.

3.3 (a) understatement. (b) the reader measures the gap between the words and the event, and the effort of supplying it makes the catastrophe more present than a direct statement would.

3.4 Row A — Thesis (1). A defensible claim about **attitude** produced by the scale of the language. **Earns it:** “The novel reserves its understatement for catastrophe and its exaggeration for trivia, so that the reader learns to hear the size of an event in inverse proportion to the words spent on it.” **Does not:** “The author uses understatement and hyperbole to be funny.”

Row B — Evidence and Commentary (0–4). Both figures must be read for **effect**, not identified. “*Described, by people who loved him, as difficult*” is understatement twice over: the qualifier concedes that his defenders could manage no better, so the reader supplies the true adjective and is complicit in the judgment. “*It was, everyone agreed, a shame*” uses the same construction on a disaster, and the mismatch is the point — the language of mild social regret cannot hold the event, so the gap becomes the reader's to feel. The 4-point response connects the two: the novel uses one register for everything, and it is the reader who must supply proportion. Responses that treat the second quotation only as irony, without noticing the repeated construction, cap at 3.

Row C — Sophistication (1). Earned by recognising that the technique implicates the community as well as the narrator — “*everyone agreed*” makes the understatement collective, so the novel's target is not one voice's coldness but a whole social vocabulary that has no word for what happened.