**Written Task 2 Sample**

The sample written task 2 below has taken its inspiration from a United Colors of Benetton advertisement. Students studied language and taboo in Part 1, with a particular focus on AIDS awareness campaigns. Like many of the ads in the lesson, 'La Pieta', the Benetton ad, was considered very controversial. As you can read in the sample critical response below, an understanding of the context leads to different interpretations of the same text. The question answered in the task is:

"How could the text be read and interpreted differently by two different readers?"

The sample examines two different interpretations of the Benetton: a Christian perspective and a homosexual perspective. Before you read the sample, make yourself familiar with the [assessment criteria for written task 2](http://www.thinkib.net/englishalanglit/written-tasks/criteria.htm), so that you know what to look for as you read it.

**Tip:** For several written task 2 questions, one can easily risk over-generalizing and stereotyping. This question is not an exception. By writing about Christians and homosexuals, the candidate takes a real risk. However, as you will read, careful wording and good research can prevent generalizations.

**Primary Source**

**La Pieta**  
Oliviero Toscani  
1991



**Outline**

*Prescribed question:* “How could the text be read and interpreted differently by two different readers?”

*Title of the text for analysis:* La Pieta

*Part of the course to which the task refers:* Part 1 – Language and cultural context. Language and taboo

*My critical response will:*

* sketch a history of the controversy surrounding the Benetton ad by Oliviero Toscani, ‘La Pieta’
* look at the ad critically from a Roman Catholic perspective
* look at the ad critically from the perspective of an AIDS patient

**Written task 2**

In 1991, Oliviero Toscani, world reknown art director and campaign designer, published an advertisement for United Colors of Benetton that shocked the world. It was called ‘La Pieta’, which means ‘pity’ in Italian. It depicted David Kirby, a homosexual AIDS activist, dying in the arms of his father, with his mother and niece at his bedside, weeping and mourning. To this day the ad has a divisive effect on its audience; people either love it or hate it. This critical response will examine how AIDS patients and Christians have read and interpreted the text differently.

To place the text in its context, it is necessary to sketch a brief history of the ad. First of all, it should be noted that Oliviero Toscani is famous for his controversial ads. ‘La Pieta’ is not his first shocking ad for Benetton. In fact, one could argue that ‘La Pieta’ is only part of a greater campaign by Benetton to raise awareness for AIDS and other controversial, social issues, such as capital punishment, poverty and racism. His ads never depict the actual product, namely clothing. Instead he depicts a real convict moments before his death, a nun kissing a priest, or children suffering from heavy labor. The media hype from his shock ads generates brand awareness and ultimately an increase in product sales. Therefore one could argue that ‘La Pieta’ capitalizes on Kirby’s death.

Secondly, we must understand that Toscani did not even take the photograph used for ‘La Pieta’. The photograph of David Kirby on his deathbed, taken by Therese Frare had already received international attention a year earlier for winning the prestigious World Press Photo Award. The Kirby family had given the photographer permission to publish the image and Toscani permission to turn it into an ad. Much of the initial outrage came from people who felt Toscani and Benetton were capitalizing on the photographer’s work and Kirby’s death. The Kirby family, however, did not feel this way, as they explained in a press conference orchestrated by Benetton in New York, “We don’t feel we’ve been used by Benetton, but rather the reverse: David is speaking much louder now that he’s dead, than he did when he was alive.” So one may wonder, with both the family and photographer’s permission, why was there still so much fuss?

The title of the ad ‘La Pieta’ has offended Christians, as it alludes to a sacred moment after the death of Jesus Christ, when Mother Mary held her son and wept. Michael Angelo depicted this moment quite famously in his statue titled, ‘La Pieta’. Christians were even more offended by Toscani’s insensitive explanation of his ad’s title during the New York press conference. “I called the picture of David Kirby and his family “La Pieta” because it is a Pieta which is real. The Michelangelo’s Pieta during the Renaissance might be fake. Jesus Christ may never have existed. But we know this death happened. This is the real thing.” For Christians, however, the death of Jesus Christ is not considered ‘fake’. What’s more, for many Christians homosexuality is considered a sin. Comparing Christ’s death to Kirby’s death is outrageous for them, because it trivializes Jesus’ sacred act of salvation.

Christians were not the only people shocked by the ad, though. To Toscani’s surprise, homosexuals were also deeply disturbed by the Benetton ad. Their complaints were two fold. Not only did homosexuals speak out against the capitalization of an activist’s death, but also they were upset by the gruesome portrayal of Kirby’s death. The image of Kirby is quite graphic. His wrists are emaciated, his cheeks are hollow and his eyes are glazed over. Kirby’s father’s grief is very visible through his body language, as he leans over his son’s face, helpless and exhausted. The image has frightened many homosexuals for this reason. It seems to say: ‘This could be you if you do not have safe sex.’ What’s more, as one can read on ‘The Inspiration Room’ website, many homosexuals feel vilified by the ad. Oliviero Toscani has responded to these criticisms by claiming that the shocking nature of the ad is necessary in order to generate awareness of AIDS. “In some countries such as Paraguay,” as he explained, “this was the very first campaign to talk about AIDS. And in many countries it was the first campaign to go beyond purely preventative measures and touch upon subjects such as solidarity with AIDS patients.” While it could be argued that Toscani’s intentions are noble, his means are questionable.

In the end, Toscani’s ad received international attention and even appeared in museums around Europe and in New York. His name may be remembered more than the Kirby’s or the photographer’s. What’s more, research by marketing guru Martin Lindstrom suggests that shock advertising is indeed effective. Literally Benetton may have profited the most from this ad. Their profits, however, may have come at the expense of Christians and homosexuals.

**Works cited**

Duncan, 'Benetton Pieta in AIDS campaign', The Inspiration Room, www.theinspirationroom.com, April 7 2007

Lindstrom, Martin. *Buyology: the New Science of Why We Buy*. New York: Currency Doubleday, 2008. Print.

**Examiner's comments**

**Criterion A - Outline - 2 marks**

The outline clearly states the focus of the task.

**1 out of 2** - The outline states basic points. The bullet points do not state much about how the response will answer the question. The task does not look at the ad from a Catholic perspective. In fact it explores the Catholic response to Benetton's ad in 1991. Unfortunately, the last bullet point claims the response will focus on AIDS patients, whereas it really focuses on homosexuals' response to the Benetton ad.

**Criterion B - Response to question - 8 marks**

Student explores all of the implications of the prescribed question chosen. The critical response must be focused on and relevant to the prescribed question. Furthermore, the response is supported by well-chosen examples from the text(s).

**8 out of 8 -** This task explores how two different readers have read the Benetton ad and why they have read it differently. It explains quite carefully, without generalizing, why Christians were offended by the image and its title. It focuses on why homosexuals were offended by referring quite literaly to various details of the ad. The written task 2 refers to the New York press conference, offers quotes from Kirby's family and Oliviero Toscani. These are relevant to answering the prescribed question.

**Criterion C - Organization and argument - 5 marks**

The response must be well organized and effectively structured in order to score top marks for this criterion. The response should make a case and develop it thoroughly.

**4 out of 5 -** The essay follows a clear structure. There are good topic sentences, coherent embedding of illustrations and proper analysis. The development of the argument, that the ad benefits Benetton more than anyone else, is only really introduced and developed in the concluding paragraph unfortunately.

**Criterion D - Language and style - 5 marks**

The response must be written effectively and accurately. Students should use an academic register and strong style.

**5 out of 5 -** The task is effectively written and very accurate in language use. Many sentence structures use multiple clauses effectively, such as, "Not only did homosexuals speak out against the capitalization of an activist’s death, but also they were upset by the gruesome portrayal of Kirby’s death." The language is very clear and to the point.