

Vocabulary and language features

Collections 1: Use It Again "Plastic Fantastic?"

The headings help the reader navigate the text. This introductory section summarises the problem.

The first two sentences contrast the past with the present.

The three questions in this opening paragraph encourage the reader to start thinking more deeply about the issue.

The word "but" indicates a change in thinking.

The inverted commas indicate that this term needs to be considered carefully for some reason. The writer could be acknowledging that the term is not yet part of our everyday vocabulary, or she could be signalling that she is expressing her personal opinion.

"They're" refers to the "plastic bags" mentioned in the previous sentence.

The question mark encourages the reader to think more deeply about the title. It suggests strongly that plastic is not fantastic. The question mark here has a similar effect to the use of inverted commas for "national flower" on page 18.

Plastic Fantastic?

by Philippa Werry

What's the Problem?

Do you remember the days of shopping at the corner store, when bread and other groceries were wrapped in paper or put in paper bags? Today we take plastic bags for granted. But is this a problem? They're so light and flimsy, and they make up less than 1 percent of the waste sent to landfills ... surely there are bigger environmental issues to worry about?

Some people think plastic bags are a symbol of our "throwaway society". They're made from petroleum, which is a non-renewable resource - and this means that every plastic bag thrown away is a waste not only of the bag itself but also of the resources used to make it.

And there's more to think about. Most plastic bags are only used for a few hours, sometimes even minutes, but they stay in the environment for much, much longer. Plastic bags are waterproof, so they don't rot away - they're not biodegradable. They can't be burned safely because that causes poisonous gases and pollution.

Instead, plastic bags are photodegradable, which means they slowly break down into smaller pieces with the help of sunlight. This process takes hundreds of years, and the small pieces can still pollute soil and water and get into the food chain, where they poison birds, fish, and animals.

This signals that there are more main ideas to come.

Use of the word "even" here and the repetition of "much" emphasises the contrast between the short time bags are used and the very long time they take to break down.

The dash shows the link between the idea of rotting away and the term "biodegradable".

The word "because" signals an explanation (of why plastic bags can't be burned safely).

A "signpost" for an explanation.

The word "where" acts as a conjunction, linking the poisoning of animals to the fact that bags stay in the environment for a very long time.

The dash and the words both signal that an explanation is about to follow. They serve the same purpose, but the dash adds visual impact.

The language structure "not only ... but also" has more impact than simply using the word "and" to link the ideas.



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Brackets are used here to show that the words inside them are linked to the phrase “starch-based bags”. In this case, they offer additional information.

As on page 15, “where” is used to link ideas in a sentence.

Here, the inverted commas are used for ironic effect. Flowers are generally considered beautiful, but trees or gardens covered in blown-about plastic bags (as in the photograph on pages 14–15) are very unattractive.

Like “but” or “instead”, “Although” acts as a signpost to the reader that they are about to read contrasting information or ideas.

What Are Other Countries Doing ?

Ireland

In 2002, the government introduced the PlasTax. Shoppers now pay 15 cents for each plastic bag they use. The number of bags used has dropped by 90 percent, and the PlasTax has raised millions of dollars for environmental projects.

Norway

Seventy-five percent of Norwegian towns now use starch-based bags (made from potatoes) to collect household rubbish.

South Africa

In South Africa, where plastic bags are often called the country’s “national flower”, the government has banned very thin plastic bags. Shopkeepers caught using them face a fine and even jail.

Although the new, stronger plastic bags are much easier and more profitable to recycle, not everyone supports the new law. Some people make money by turning plastic bags into useful items, such as baskets, hats, mats, and scrubbing brushes.

Bangladesh

Bangladesh has many floods, a problem made worse by plastic bags blocking the storm drains. In 2002, plastic bags were completely banned – and now anyone caught using one is fined on the spot.

Taiwan

In 2001, Taiwan banned not just plastic bags but all plastic utensils, such as cutlery and plates. The ban applies to supermarkets, fast-food outlets, department stores, schools, government departments, and street stalls.

Australia

Coles Bay in Tasmania became Australia’s first plastic-bag-free town in April 2003. Today, at least nine Australian towns have banned plastic bags.

Note: This collage artwork was created using plastic bags, and the outline of countries is not exact.

The structure “not just ... but all” has the same impact as “not only ... but also”. It’s a more dramatic way of saying “and”.

The term “such as” indicates that an example will follow.