

# Bonobo Handshake


Exploring the way authors use different non-fiction styles.

It's true: English exams chop up your experience of reading and writing into little packages that can seem a bit random. You're thrown a text you might never otherwise touch and you have to make some kind of sense of it. In real life, it's not like that: you read something because you have a particular purpose or interest, because you love a writer or someone recommended them, because you're bored or on a train or need to know something for a job. Whatever's going on, you have a rich context for understanding what you're reading, and for responding to it.

You don't have that context in the exam, but you do have the context of everything you've ever read. By now, that's a ton of stuff, even if you don't think of yourself as a great reader: magazines, websites, posters, song lyrics, school books, bus tickets, text messages. You might not walk round

with a book in your pocket, but you're reading all the time, and you have a lifetime of reading experience in your head. The trick is to draw on that, and to use what you already know to help you with the unfamiliar text there on the desk in the exam hall.

Look at the excerpt from *Bonobo Handshake* here. This is the kind of narrative non-fiction you're most likely to see in a GCSE English exam. Love it? Loathe it? Try binning those questions and asking instead, "How is this similar or different to related stuff I've read?" This will give you some points of comparison that will help you "see" what's going on in the text in front of you. Try it here with two other kinds of writing about bonobo chimps: a zoo webpage and an encyclopaedia entry. By thinking about what it's *not*, you can often find a lot more to say about what your exam text is.

A bonobo chimpanzee is shown from the chest up, holding a white rectangular sign with both hands. The bonobo has dark brown fur and is looking directly at the camera with its mouth wide open, as if speaking or shouting. The background is a plain, light blue sky. The sign it is holding contains text about bonobos.

Can you imagine living in an all-you-can-eat salad bar? When it comes to finding food, bonobos have it pretty easy in their rain forest home. They are nimble climbers and can swing from tree to tree searching for tasty fruit. Bonobos forage for food during the day in small groups, often sharing the food they've found, then gather together in larger groups to build their sleeping nests. These clever apes fish for termites with grass stems, gather honey with sticks, crack open nuts with rocks, and sponge water out of tree trunks with leaves. Bonobos also spend hours hunting for earthworms to snack on – a rain forest candy to them!

Food For All from San Diego Zoo's Animal Bytes: Bonobo (Pygmy Chimp) web page.

- **AUDIENCE:** visitors to San Diego Zoo, often young people and their families.
- **PURPOSE:** to give visitors more information about the animals they can see in the zoo.
- **TOPIC:** diet and food habits of bonobos.
- **GENRE:** informative web page, a bit like a children's encyclopaedia.
- **STYLE:** engaging young people in a humorous, friendly and vivid way.
- **LOOK OUT FOR:** rhetorical question, informal vocabulary, descriptive adjectives, links to audience food interests.



Debby and I had been friends for years. I first met her when I was twenty-two and fresh out of college. I was volunteering for Taronga Zoo in Sydney when I heard about the chimp island she had started for orphan chimpanzees whose parents were killed by the bushmeat trade. Part of Debby's conservation program was counting the chimpanzees in Budongo Forest. The world's biggest population of chimpanzees was in Congo, but they were rapidly being butchered and eaten. The Ugandans had traditional taboos against eating apes, and they had the second- biggest population. But no one knew how many chimpanzees were left or where they were. My job was to lead a team of Ugandans on a census, for which I had zero qualifications.

From *Bonobo Handshake* by Vanessa Woods.

- **AUDIENCE:** adult readers (with interests in animals, conservation and/or life-changing experiences).
- **PURPOSE:** to inform and entertain readers with the story of her experiences.
- **TOPIC:** a trip to the Congo to work on a chimpanzee project.
- **GENRE:** narrative of a life-changing experience in a dangerous place.
- **STYLE:** mix of factual background and personal, wide-eyed and emotive feel.
- **LOOK OUT FOR:** I-I-I-I-my-I, emotive verbs about death, techniques for dramatizing her role.

**Bonobo**, smaller of two species of chimpanzee, genus *Pan*. Whereas the common chimpanzee, *P. troglodytes*, lives in forests across most of equatorial Africa, the bonobo, *P. paniscus* (sometimes called the pygmy chimpanzee), is found only in the Congo (Kinshasa) S of the Congo River. The bonobo has a more slender body build than the common chimpanzee, but there is considerable overlap in overall size (head-and-body length and weight) among individuals of the two species.

Bonobos share many behavioral traits with common chimpanzees; e.g., they tend to associate in groups, are day-active, build sleeping nests in trees, and eat mostly fruit and other vegetable matter.

From "bonobo" *The Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia* web page.

- **AUDIENCE:** readers who specifically want to know more about bonobos.
- **PURPOSE:** to provide factual information that the reader can trust.
- **TOPIC:** defining characteristics of bonobos, by contrast with common chimpanzees.
- **GENRE:** encyclopaedia entry.
- **STYLE:** serious and authoritative.
- **LOOK OUT FOR:** Latin words, scientific words and phrases, techniques for comparing species.

## REVISION IN MINUTES



9  
minutes

Find short quotations to back up each of the ideas about style.

17  
minutes

Find a non-fiction text on one of your past exam papers and brainstorm all the other kinds of text you've read that it's *not*. Then write for five minutes about what it is.

next  
week

Exploring an unseen passage step by step.