ACER Certificate in Reading
Sample Question

Reading Level 3
Critique and Review

Snowboarding

The following texts are taken from an Internet blog on winter sports.

Stefan tries to persuade his readers by

A providing objectivity.
B focusing on the bigger picture.
C making a personal attack.
D encouraging debate.

Answer: C. making a personal attack.

Post by *Kat*	8:27 pm

In his earlier post, Thom argued that snowboarding should be restricted to special areas of ski resorts because it is dangerous. The statistics he presented may appear to add weight to his argument, but they fail to give the whole picture.

The increase in accidents involving snowboarders is predominantly due to the sheer popularity of the sport. Although I do not have the figures to back this up, I am sure all users of this blog would agree that the participation rate in snowboarding has increased massively in the last ten years. A natural consequence of this is more incidents on the slopes involving snowboarders.

Another reason is the increase in traffic in general. As the world gets richer, more and more people can afford to spend their money on holidays in the mountains. This means there are now more people on the slopes than ever before; accidents, unfortunately, are inevitable. I agree that something needs to be done to make the slopes safer, but singling out snowboarders is not the answer. A more sensible approach would be for ski lift operators to offer discounted ticket prices to encourage people to visit the slopes at off-peak times. This, perhaps, would reduce the number of people on the slopes at any one time.

Although I do not dispute the accuracy of the statistics presented in Thom's post, I believe he has interpreted them in a way that is most convenient to him.

Post by *Stefan*	8:35 pm

Another explanation for the statistics is the increasing number of skiers who try out snowboarding because they think it looks cool. They have lots of confidence on snow but very little idea about how to handle a snowboard, and their inexperience and reckless approach often puts them into tricky situations from which they lack the skills to safely escape. Accidents involving these code-switchers distort the statistics and give genuine snowboarders a bad name. And it is often these people who, because of bad personal experiences, harp on about how dangerous the sport is. I suspect that Thom is one of these people.

Explanation

This question requires students to recognise a subtle rhetorical device used in a persuasive text. The rhetorical technique used is often referred to as argumentum ad hominem: an argument that attacks a person instead of arguing against the position that person has taken on an issue. Stefan's post is attempting to persuade readers to dismiss Thom's previous post about snowboarding safety because, in Stefan's opinion, Thom is likely to be a 'code-switcher' with 'inexperience' and a 'reckless attitude'.

In order to recognise this subtle persuasive device used by Stefan, the student must first identify that Stefan's argument is based on negatively stereotyping 'skiers who try out snowboarding because they think it looks cool.' Stefan labels these people 'code-switchers' and claims they give 'genuine snowboarders a bad name'. This deliberate negative stereotyping is evident in the divisive language Stefan uses and the generalisations he makes about this alleged sub-category of people who 'harp on about how dangerous the sport is' only because of their 'bad personal experiences'.

After the student has recognised this negative stereotyping, the student must reflect on this information to identify that Stefan is using a personal attack strategically in order to persuade the reader. This realisation leads the student to the only correct answer to the question.

Text complexity

This text takes the form of two comments on a blog about winter sports. Depending on a student's experiences, blogs and winter sports may be unfamiliar contexts. There is additional complexity in the vocabulary and style of the writing. The tone of the first comment is quite formal, and there are many complex sentences. The post is also a persuasive text and is structured accordingly. The second post is less formal, but still includes difficult vocabulary and complex sentence structures. The vocabulary of the whole text is not technical but it is difficult, for example: 'predominantly', 'participation rates', 'code-switchers' and 'inevitable'.

An additional complexity is that the two comments are presented without the context of the original post that they are refuting. They refer to an earlier post by Thom, but the reader can only infer that post's content from what these two comments say about it.