

Task for The Garret: Don Watson

Letter to the editor: response to 'Hellcat, 12, locked away'

Your address	25 Bushlands Parade, East Brisbane, Q 4169.
Date	27 th May, 2018
Newspaper address	The Editor, <i>The Cardiff Bugle</i>
Salutation	Dear Sir/Madam,
Issue identified and your position clarified.	I am writing to you to express my disquiet at the way in which your newspaper has chosen to represent a disturbed young girl as an 'out of control' criminal. ("Hellcat', 12, locked away").
Discourses mentioned (law and order; mental health) but not named.	As even Sinead McIntyre, the journalist who wrote the news report acknowledges, the girl is more in need of psychiatric care than imprisonment. Your newspaper has a responsibility to represent people in the news in a fair and balanced way.
Position statement (your thesis.)	
Attitude: Affect	I would have thought that this was a story which would arouse a lot of emotions: anger, fear, fury and so on. Instead, only one feeling word, the 'desperation' of the girl's mother, is used in the report. My assumption is that the writer has avoided using words which express emotions which might humanise the girl in favour of using language to make negative judgements and evaluations of her.
Attitude: Judgement	Many of the words used to describe the girl's actions and thus to make judgements about her behaviour are already scaled-up to add to the force of what the reporter is telling readers. She writes that the girl hurled 'a brick', 'smashed windows', 'bombarded police' and scratched and bit them. Surely less intense words could have been used to inform readers without positioning them so much against the girl. It is almost as if McIntyre is trying to prove that the girl is indeed a 'hellcat'. You should remember that a newspaper's role is to inform the reading public, not to judge people. We have courts to do that.
	The words which you have used to evaluate this girl are quite extreme. Your journalist has chosen to use the metaphor 'hellcat' in the headline to the story. Immediately readers are positioned to regard the girl as not so much troubled as a

Attitude: Appreciation	<p>devilish creature from Hell. She is then referred to as a ‘thug’, a word which is usually applied to violent criminals. Even ‘delinquent’ would have been a less intense word. Another evaluative word used early in the report to position readers is ‘notorious’ which adds to the negative impression created.</p>
Graduation	<p>As I have said already in this letter, Sinead McIntyre has used extreme language in this news report to prejudice readers against the girl in the story. This is especially true in the first two columns which readers are most likely to read. McIntyre’s language is then scaled down in the rest of the story where some background is given to the girl’s problems. In fact, by the end of the report the girl is simply described as ‘the youngster’, a lot milder word than ‘hellcat’.</p> <p>Apart from the ‘voice’ of the writer there are at least four other ‘voices’ in this news report. Predictably, though, the reporter privileges the ‘voice’ of the neighbours who labelled the girl a ‘hellcat’ and that of the prosecutor who lists her offences. What the girl’s mother and the magistrate have to say (she has problems and needs help) is pushed to the end of the story.</p>
Engagement	<p>Of course, this is typical of the structure of a news story. The core of the story is given in the first few paragraphs, then the writer will elaborate and finally other information will be given if there is sufficient space. The information about the girl’s problems may not even have been included if a sub-editor had decided that there was not enough space on the page. Why could Sinead McIntyre not have foregrounded this material to position readers in the girl’s favour? It is not just that your reporter used language deliberately to position readers to have a certain attitude to the young girl. The very shape of a news report also contributed to the distorted representation of her. If McIntyre had chosen to do so, some of the material sympathetic to the girl which was backgrounded at the end of the story could have been moved to the beginning of the report and the more damaging information could have been left until later.</p>
Refer to text structure	<p>I understand that newspapers like to sensationalise the news to sell newspapers and that representing a troubled girl as a threat to law and order is part of that strategy. However, I believe that newspapers must be ethical and try to represent people in the news in a balanced way.</p>
Conclusion: reiterate your position statement (thesis).	