

This presentation reports on a study of how top-scoring responses in the NSW HSC Legal Studies examination construct persuasive authority through a distinct sub-genre of persuasive essay, marked by strategic deployment of interpersonal meaning and high semantic density. Drawing on a corpus of examination scripts sampled across five-mark bands (20%–100%) in the areas of Crime, Family, and World Order, the study undertakes fine-grained, clause-by-clause analysis of the highest-performing responses. Findings indicate that success is characterised not simply by greater ideational knowledge display, but also by the skilled orchestration of interpersonal resources. Drawing on the Appraisal framework, the study demonstrates how students mobilise Attitude, Engagement, and Graduation to evaluate the legal system and align with the anticipated examiner. Additionally, a Genre-based analysis shows how these texts instantiate a recognisable and contextually effective persuasive sub-genre suited to the examination setting. Semantically dense nominal groups and discipline-specific references combine function both ideationally and interpersonally, presupposing shared expertise and construing solidarity with the marker. Integrating insights from Legitimation Code Theory, the study argues that high achievement reflects mastery of the “rules of the game”: the capacity to combine strong epistemic control with appropriate evaluative positioning. By rendering visible the interpersonal, ideational, and semantic practices associated with higher marks, the paper contributes to disciplinary literacy research and offers implications for more equitable pedagogy in high-stakes assessment contexts and supports teachers in explicitly teaching the evaluative and semantic resources associated with higher marks.