
WRITING AN IB COMMENTARY

Approaching Poetry and Prose through Analytical Writing

What is a Commentary???

- Also known as literary criticism, commentary is a close study of the elements that contribute to the success of a literary work.
- It is an essential component of Language A1 because commentary skills will be used on:
 - ▣ Your IOC (Individual Oral Commentary)
 - ▣ World Literature Paper Number 2
 - ▣ Exam Paper Number One— an analysis of an unseen text, either prose or poetry.

What do I do in a commentary?

- In any kind of commentary, you need to demonstrate that you:
 - ▣ Understand the text
 - ▣ Can identify and comment on literary features—as well as their purpose
 - ▣ Organize *your ideas* into a coherent piece of writing

What is the Written Commentary?

- In Paper 1 of the English A1 examination, you will be given your choice of two unseen pieces to analyze:
 - ▣ One piece will be prose.
 - ▣ The other poetry.
- For the chosen piece, you will be assessing the quality of the writing by looking at how it has been written, from its meaning, to its use of literary devices, to its structure, to the overall effects of the work.

Approaching an Unseen Text...what to do??

- When confronted with a text you've never seen before, it's helpful to have a 'strategy' in mind to deal with the text. Having a plan will help you:
 - ▣ Not freak out if you are confronted with a confusing text
 - ▣ Minimize your planning time
- The strategy on the following pages is geared at ensuring you examine a variety of literary aspects.

Steps for confronting an unseen text

- Step One: Read the work through once and annotate just any ‘big ideas’—major things that strike you OR you write the initial impression down.
- Step Two: Read it again and annotate the other literary features.
- Step Three: Examine the text and your annotations to determine the answers to the following 10 questions.

Ten questions to ask yourself: 1-3

- 1. What is the text about?
 - ▣ Examine the title—it may give you a hint
 - ▣ Look for clues in the publication date, author's name
- 2. Where is it set?
 - ▣ What country?
 - ▣ Is it inside or outside?
- 3. When is it set?
 - ▣ Is it set in the past, present, or future?

Ten questions to ask yourself: 4-5

- 4. Who is the speaker?
 - ▣ Is the speaker the same as the writer?
 - ▣ Are there other characters in the text?
 - ▣ Who are the other characters?
- 5. Why has it been written?
 - ▣ What are the underlying themes or messages?
 - ▣ How are the themes revealed in the text?

Ten questions to ask yourself: 6

- 6. What is the overall structure of the piece?
 - ▣ How many paragraphs/ stanzas?
 - ▣ Does each deal with a different aspect?
 - ▣ Are layout and meaning related?
 - ▣ Is it written in a recognizable form like a sonnet?
 - ▣ Are the sentences long or short?
 - ▣ Are there caesuras or enjambment?
 - ▣ How do these features/ devices contribute to the meaning?

Ten questions to ask yourself: 7-8

- 7. What do you notice about the words the author has chosen (the diction)?
 - ▣ Is the diction simple or complex?
 - ▣ Are technical or archaic words used?
 - ▣ Are there words, or types of words that reoccur?
 - ▣ Are there any unexpected or out of place words?
- 8. How is Imagery used?
 - ▣ Are there any similes, metaphors, etc...?
 - ▣ How do they contribute to the text?
 - ▣ Are there patterns of images?

Ten questions to ask yourself: 9-10

- 9. Are other literary features used?
 - ▣ These may include rhyme, rhythm, assonance, alliteration, etc...
 - ▣ Does it have a rhyme scheme, and what is its effect?
- 10. What is the tone, mood, atmosphere?
 - ▣ How does the tone etc... contribute to the overall meaning of the piece?
 - ▣ Does the mood or tone play a significant role?

I have my notes, now what?

- ❑ After you have read the piece SEVERAL times and have taken detailed notes on its many features, you need to give your notes structure and analyze the features you have found through close analysis of the PURPOSE behind the feature— you can't just name the feature!!
- ❑ It is not enough to say the author used alliteration, you need to say HOW they used it and WHY they used it.

Basic Structure for a “piece of commentary”

- A literary commentary has three pieces, or stages:
 - ▣ 1. State the point you wish to make
 - ▣ 2. Give a quote—being sure to give context and speaker
 - ▣ 3. Analyze the quote in detail and explaining how/why they are used and to what effect
 - ▣ **Note: Did you notice how much this resembles AIQDC??? It's the same thing, repeated over and over until you have an essay!!

Example of commentary on Alliteration

- **Commentary on an aspect of *Anthem for Doomed Youth*:**
- In *Anthem for Doomed Youth*, Owen states that there will be no proper prayers for the dead soldiers; all that will be heard is the sound of rifles firing. Owen mimics the sound of the rifles in his choice of the words “stuttering”, “patter”, and “rattle” in lines three and four by the repetition of the “t” as it echoes the sound of rifles. The words “stuttering”, “patter”, and “hasty” also suggest that if any “orisons” (prayers) were said they would be skimmed, muttered quickly and even mangled for the person saying them would be too fearful to say them with reverence. In other words, the soldiers are not given the proper funeral rites, and instead are treated as if they were “cattle”.

Structuring a Commentary Essay

- Unfortunately, there is no single structure that will work for every commentary—each will demand a slightly different approach. Holistically, a commentary essay consists of a(n):
 - Introduction
 - Brief outline of the subject, establish context—theme setting, be brief, but lead into the whole.
 - Main Section
 - Discuss the separate elements of the text.
 - SPECS and SLIMS may help with this!
 - With some poems, this may be line by line or stanza by stanza
 - No matter how you organize it, have a clear line of argumentation.
 - Conclusion
 - Explain your conclusions and/or sum up main points
 - Do not repeat introduction

Structure for a commentary: SPECS and SLIMS

- While there isn't a set formula for writing the body (main section) of your commentary, it is helpful to have a plan to structure your response. This is where SPECS and SLIMS comes in!
- S Subject matter
- P Purpose
- E Emotion
- C Craftsmanship—go to SLIMS
- S Summary

SPECS: In depth S-E

□ **S Subject matter**

- What event, situation, or experience does the poem/ prose describe or record?

□ **P Purpose**

- What are the theme(s) the poet/ author is trying to express?
- Why have the characters been created and what do they represent?

□ **E Emotion: mood or feeling**

- What is the predominant mood or feeling of the poem/ extract?
- Does it change as the piece develops?

SPECS: In Depth C & S

□ **C Craftsmanship, or technique—go to SLIMS**

- What techniques has the author used in writing the piece and why has the author used them? (Go to SLIMS—next page)

□ **S Summary—Pull all the elements together.**

- What is the impact of the whole piece for you?
- Does it successfully achieve what the writer wanted, and does it fail in some way?

SLIMS: A way to analyze craftsmanship

- After thinking about what the author is saying, you need to look at how he/she achieved the effect—what techniques they used. This framework is useful for that:
- **S Structure**
 - ▣ Is it conventional (a sonnet, ode, ballad)
 - ▣ Any interesting features?
 - ▣ For prose, look at the plot structure and how it culminates.
- **L Language**
 - ▣ What is the narrative perspective and how does it relate to the purpose?
 - ▣ How would you describe the diction? What effect does the diction have?

The other half of SIIMS

□ **I Imagery**

- Are there any striking examples of similes, metaphors, personification, symbols?
- What is their effect?

□ **M Movement, or rhythm**

- Is the pace/ rhythm regular, does it change?
- What are the implications of the changes?
- Does the poem rhyme, or is it written in blank verse?
- How does the poet's approach relate to the subject matter?

□ **S Sounds**

- Are there any noticeable sound features such as alliteration, assonance, onomatopoeia, or rhyme?
- Is the writer using direct speech—if so, why and to what effect?

Stanza by Stanza???

- If you choose, and the poem merits this, you may organize the body of your commentary by discussing the poem, line by line, stanza by stanza. If this is your intent, here are a few suggestions:
- 1. Make each stanza its own body paragraph
- 2. Be sure for each stanza, you discuss its:
 - ▣ A. Subject
 - ▣ B. Structure
 - ▣ C. Poetic Devices
 - ▣ D. Tone and any shifts
 - ▣ E. Diction

More on Stanza by Stanza

- 3. Then, after you discuss each stanza, be sure you discuss the OVERALL effect in paragraphs after the discussion of each line, and stanza's elements. You need to discuss:
 - ▣ How the separate stanzas, work together to create an overarching theme—or meaning.
 - ▣ You cannot JUST discuss each stanza, the significance of it all must be given.
 - ▣ You need to explain the 'so what?' factor.

Don't forget your conclusion!!!

- If you uses SPECS, your “S”, or Summary may accomplish this for you—but no matter what, be sure you have a brief paragraph giving the final impact and significance of the work.

Homework:

- Read “Mirror” by Sylvia Plath and ‘prewrite’ for the poem. By this I mean, answer questions 1-10 on the poem on a separate sheet of paper. Bring the answers to class with you.