

HOW TO WRITE A LITERARY COMMENTARY

Commenting on a literary text entails not only a detailed analysis of its thematic and stylistic features but also an explanation of why those features are relevant according to the context in which the text was produced. The following are some basic steps you can follow:

1. BEFORE WRITING

Understanding the text is essential. READ it carefully more than once, look up the words you do not understand and then underline the main ideas contained in it. Asking yourself these questions may help you:

- What is the main theme or idea of the text?
- How are these ideas expressed?
- Is there a specific structure in the extract? To what extent does that structure affect your understanding of text?
- What is the attitude of the author towards that theme, the characters or the events s/he narrates?
- Are there any special stylistic features worth mentioning? To what extent do these devices determine the way we understand the text?
- What is the importance of the passage in relation to the whole work?
- How does the text illustrate the author's views on a particular topic or any other general characteristic of the period to which it belongs?
- What would be the reader's reaction to a text of this kind?

After these preliminary considerations, write an OUTLINE with the ideas you intend to discuss.

2. WRITING

Even though each extract requires a specific analysis depending on its genre and the period it belongs to, in all cases literary commentaries entail a thematic and stylistic discussion of the main features of the text. Therefore, your commentary should contain at least the following parts:

IDENTIFICATION DISCUSSION OF THE MAIN FEATURES OF THE TEXT CONCLUSION

2.1. IDENTIFICATION: Start by identifying and locating the text in its right literary and historical context. To do so, you will need to specify the following:

TITLE

AUTHOR

DATE of composition, recording, publication or first performance

GENRE

LOCATION of the extract within the whole work

A paragraph should normally be enough to provide all this information. Avoid writing about the plot or giving irrelevant details from the author's biography or the historical period.

2.2. DISCUSSION of the main features of the text

a) CONTENT

- Very often the text is organised around a **MAIN SUBJECT** or **IDEA**. If so, start by stating it clearly and then concentrate on explaining how this idea is presented in the text.

- If you feel the extract refers to several **THEMES**, explain them one by one, by establishing a connection between these themes and the overall features of the work from which it has been extracted.
- Sometimes, as in the case of extracts from plays or novels, you will have to consider the **CHARACTERS** which appear in the passage. Concentrate on the characterisation techniques used by the narrator to describe them and explain in what ways these techniques contribute not only to the portrayal of the character but also to the development of the main themes you have already discussed.
- In some cases, especially when dealing with poems, the text may have a specific **STRUCTURE** through which the author has chosen to convey the main themes or ideas and to which you should pay some attention.

b) FORM (Language and Style)

- When dealing with a narrative text, you need to concentrate on its **NARRATIVE TECHNIQUES**. Consider, for example, the type of narrator (omniscient, first, second or third person), the point of view, the use of flashbacks, or stream of consciousness; that is pay attention to any technique used by the narrator to tell the story or to portray the characters involved in it.
- The author's choice of words is never casual, therefore you should pay attention to the **VOCABULARY** s/he has chosen to convey his/her ideas (semantic fields, concrete or abstract vocabulary, synonyms, imagery, etc).
- Try to locate the specific **STYLISTIC** or **RHETORICAL DEVICES** which appear in the text (metaphors, similes, parallelisms, etc). Each device is used with a clear purpose, so rather than merely listing them, explain what they mean and consider to what extent they contribute to the overall meaning of the text.
- It might also be useful to look at the **TONE** which dominates the text (dramatic, satirical, melancholic, pessimistic, optimistic, hopeful, ironic, detached, etc.) and to what extent there is a connection between the themes of the excerpt and the tone in which they are expressed.
- The **RHYTHM** of the extract is another important issue. Rhythm is determined by several aspects like punctuation, a specific sentence or paragraph structure, or the repetition of words. These elements can create different rhythms (slow, quick, broken, regular, irregular, etc.). In the case of poetry rhythm is created primarily by **METER** and **RHYME**. If you are commenting on a poem, remember to specify the type of **STANZA**, **LINE** and **FOOT** used by the poet.

2.3. CONCLUSION

A conclusion should never be a mere repetition of what you have already explained, but it should serve to:

- ✓ Reinforce the main points of your commentary.
- ✓ Stress the relevance of the extract within the whole work.
- ✓ Establish a connection with other works by the same author or period.
- ✓ Add any additional ideas or comments which you think are relevant.

ASPECTS TO CONSIDER WHILE WRITING:

- ❖ Try to connect your ideas using appropriate **LINKING** words. A commentary is not a shopping list or disentangled ideas taken from your notes. Write **COHERENT** paragraphs which follow a logical order.
- ❖ **EXPLAIN** each idea properly. Do not assume that the reader knows everything.
- ❖ **QUOTATIONS** should be used, not abused. Select only the words, phrases or sentences which illustrate your point accurately. If you decide to use a quotation, explain its significance.
- ❖ Do not **PARAPHRASE** the text.
- ❖ Make use of the specific **LITERARY TERMINOLOGY** applying to each period and text. Avoid vague words and expressions and call each thing by its name.

- ❖ Use a **FORMAL REGISTER**. Remember that this is a piece of academic writing.

3. AFTER WRITING

Re-read your commentary carefully, revise your grammar, spelling and punctuation and take this last chance to clarify any sentence, expression or word which needs to be improved. Remember that your reader should have the impression that s/he is in front of a coherent and complete piece of writing.

HOW TO WRITE AN ESSAY

An essay is a piece of writing in which you will have to reflect on a topic and explain it as accurately and deeply as you can using evidence from the text(s) proposed. As opposed to the commentary, where you do close reading of an excerpt from a longer work, in an essay you will be working with the whole work and sometimes with several poems, plays or novels at once. This means that you will have to do more extensive reading, that is concentrate on aspects like the evolution of the characters, the overall structure of the work, as well as the literary and historical context in which it was produced. These are some basic steps you can follow:

1. **READ** the question carefully and reflect on it. Are you being asked to

- Explain or analyse a specific idea, theme, theory, character, etc.?
- Trace the development of a character or an idea throughout a work?
- Establish a comparison or a contrast between two or more works, characters, topics, periods of time, etc?
- Explain whether you agree or disagree with a statement?
- Give your personal opinion about a topic?

Your answer will depend on the type of question you are given. So read it carefully and decide what you are being asked to do before setting out to write your essay.

2. Decide on the **STRUCTURE** of your essay. This entails drafting a list of ideas and organising them according to a coherent plan. This **OUTLINE** will determine the text organisation and the overall tone of your argument.

3. The main point of an essay is to prove an **IDEA** or **MAIN THESIS**. So before you start writing, make sure that you have thought of all the possible sub-themes or ideas you are going to cover in your essay and that you have gathered enough **EXAMPLES** to illustrate those ideas from the text(s) you are discussing.

4. Write your **INTRODUCTION**. This should consist of a first paragraph summarising the main ideas you will be dealing with in your essay. A solid introduction should prove that you have interpreted the question properly and you know how to handle it. You may start with a general statement and then narrow it down to the more specific aspects which you intend to develop one by one in the following paragraphs.

5. Write the main **BODY** of your essay. Even though the number of paragraphs may vary from essay to essay, your material should be organised in such a way that one idea or argument follows the next in a logical way. The reader needs to know where you are taking him/her at all times, so guide him/her accordingly. Make sure you include all the relevant information in each of these paragraphs, but do not waste your time adding unimportant details or talking about other things not directly related to the topic.

6. Write a **CONCLUSION** reinforcing briefly the main ideas, but do not repeat unnecessary information. You can end with a general statement or an original thought related to the topic and which you have not mentioned before. Conclusions are as important as introductions; they are

supposed to leave the reader with the feeling that what s/he has just read is a coherent and complete piece of writing in which each of the ideas you have explained makes complete sense.

ASPECTS TO CONSIDER WHILE WRITING:

- Write coherent **PARAGRAPHS**, with coherent punctuation. An essay should consist of a number of paragraphs, each of them containing several related sentences. Remember a single sentence doesn't usually make one paragraph, unless it is very long.
- Develop each idea you state fully. Do not expect the reader to guess what you mean. Try to find a balance between stating the obvious and ignoring important **INFORMATION** which the reader needs to know in order to follow your discussion.
- When writing an essay students often assume that summarising the plot is a good way to answer the question, but it is not. You are being asked to **ANALYSE** not to summarise.
- Use the appropriate **KEY CONCEPTS** seen about each specific literary or historical period, when relevant.
- If you want to support your explanation with textual evidence from the work(s), make sure you follow the **STYLE GUIDELINES** below. In the exam, you will not have the work(s) in front of you. In this case, you are not expected to know page numbers by heart, but you should at least have an idea of where in the text(s) the examples you are referring to are located.
- Don't use informal words or expressions. Remember that an essay is a piece of academic writing, and its style should be as **FORMAL** as possible.

7. **RE-READ** your essay carefully to make sure it does not contain mistakes and that all your ideas are properly developed. Ask yourself a few questions before handing it in:

- Does it make sense?
- Do the ideas flow smoothly from one paragraph to another?
- Have I omitted any relevant information?
- Will the reader understand what I want to say?
- Does the essay reflect how much I know about this topic?
- Does this essay contain grammatical or spelling mistakes?

Although the contents of your essay are the most important thing, keep an eye on grammar and style. A well-developed essay will be spoilt if the language used is poor and contains lots of mistakes.

STYLE GUIDELINES

1. HOW TO REFER TO A LITERARY WORK

Before you mention the name of a literary work in any of your written assignments, you must always take into account which type of text it is:

- If it is a novel, a play, a long narrative poem, a collection of poems or short stories, or a work of criticism, that is, if it is a **COMPLETE WORK**, its title must appear underlined or in italics. Newspapers also follow this convention. For Example: *Moll Flanders*, *Dubliners*, *Beowulf*, *The Spectator*, *The Rise of the Novel* (or *Moll Flanders*, *Dubliners*, *Beowulf*, *The Spectator*, *The Rise of the Novel*).
- If it is a poem, a short story, a critical essay or an article, that is to say, if it is a **SHORT TEXT** inserted within a longer work, then its title must appear between inverted commas. For example: "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard", "The Miller's Tale", "The Dead", "The Flea".

2. HOW TO INSERT REFERENCES AND QUOTES

- When writing essays or commentaries, you can support your explanation by quoting literally specific words, phrases or sentences from the text. These must always appear between inverted commas. For example:

In the prologue, Shakespeare refers to Romeo and Juliet as “a pair of star-crossed lovers”.

In this scene the sense of tragedy is conveyed through words like “blood”, “darkness”, “death” and “sorrow”.

- You can also quote from other sources, critical or literary, in the same way. In this case you will also need inverted commas since you are reproducing literally someone else’s words. For example:

As Ian Watt suggests, “Defoe’s novels lack both the consistency in matters of detail of which many lesser writers are capable, and the larger coherences found in the greatest literature” (Watt 2000: 130)

- If you choose to explain ideas or opinions given by another author using your own words, inverted commas are not needed. But you must bear in mind that whenever you use a source, that is, whenever you give information which is taken from a specific work (be it expressed literally or paraphrased), you must acknowledge it, by stating the author’s surname, the year of publication and page number, as shown in the example below:

As Ian Watt suggests, Defoe’s novels are inconsistent regarding detail, something not found in many unimportant writers, and also regarding the general coherence present in great literature (Watt 2000: 130).

Not doing so, that is, using other authors’ written words or ideas as if they were your own, without acknowledging they have been taken from another text, would be **PLAGIARISM**, which is considered a serious offence in the academic world.

- Short quotations, whether from the text or from any other critical work, must appear inserted in the paragraph, but if the quotation is more than three lines long, it should appear indented and separated from the main body of the text, with no inverted commas. Compare the following examples:

Behn explains that Oroonoko “had nothing of barbarity in his nature” (1994: 11).

Behn describes Oroonoko in detail, providing the reader with information about his physical appearance as well as his behaviour:

He know almost as much as if he had read much; [...] He had an extreme good and graceful mien, and all the civility of a well-bred great man. He had nothing of barbarity in his nature, but in all points addressed himself as if his education had been in some European court. (Behn 1994: 11)

- For each of the references to other sources and authors which appear in brackets in your essay there must be a bibliographical entry in a separate section at the end. This is usually called the ‘Works Cited’ or ‘Bibliography’ section and must contain all the different sources used listed in alphabetical order. Each of these entries must include the full name of the author, the title of the work, the year of publication of the edition you are using, and the original date of publication. Remember that websites also need to be included in your bibliographic section and in this case, you should also specify the exact date of access to the page. Here are some examples:

Arthur, Ross G. 2004: “In Parentheses”. <http://www.yorku.ca/inpar/>. 12-12-2004.

Behn, Aphra 1994 (1688): Oroonoko, or, The Royal Slave. A True History. In Salzman, Paul (ed.) Aphra Behn. Oroonoko and Other Writings. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Defoe, Daniel 1994 (1722): Moll Flanders. London: Penguin Popular Classics.

Watt, Ian 2000 (1957): The Rise of the Novel. Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding. London: Pimlico.

3. EXTRA ADVICE ON WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

- Words like “Anglo-Saxon”, “Norman”, “Viking”, “Old English”, “Celts”, “Christians”, “Protestants”, etc. should appear with their initial letters CAPITALISED.
- Centuries and decades in English should be written as follows: the 16th century, the 20th century, the 1740s, the 1920s.
- Do not use inverted commas unless you are quoting.
- Do not try to convey emphasis by underlining or circling words, by using asterisks, or by any other formal device.
- Do not state the obvious; avoid irrelevant sentences of this type: “I am going to talk about Beowulf”, “I have to comment on this extract”, “This novel we have read in class...”

4. USEFUL EXPRESSIONS

This extract	is taken/ extracted from ...
excerpt	belongs to ...
fragment	is part of ...
passage	appears in ...

The novel/ poem/ play/ episode/ scene	is entitled ...
	is set in ...
	takes place in ...
	dates from ...
	was written in ...

The extract	narrates/ explains/ deals with/ makes reference to ...
	is characteristic of ...
	is related to ...

consists of ...

An example of this can be found in ...

This idea can be observed in ...

This is clearly reflected in ...

This is an example of	
how the poet/ narrator/ author	deals with ...
	understands the idea of ...
	introduces the topic of ...
	develops the theme of ...
	expresses the feeling of ...
	establishes a contrast between...

In line 6 / in the sixth line / in the second stanza ...

In Act III/ in the third act...

On page 22 ...

At the beginning/ end of the extract/ chapter

...

At the top/ bottom of the page...

Throughout the novel...

In this chapter/ scene/ episode of the novel...

Therefore, it could be said that...

This implies that...

The aforementioned ideas could explain how...

Taking into account all these aspects, it could be said that...

This would justify/explain the fact that...

Stylistically, the poem/ text presents several features ...

As regards form/ stylistic features/ rhetorical devices, ...

As far as rhetorical devices are concerned, ...

As for stylistic devices, ...

With regard to stylistic features, ...

To sum up, ...

To conclude, ...

In conclusion, ...

In my opinion/ view, ...

All in all, ...

On the whole, ...