

The Literary Commentary – Paper 1

A commentary is an exercise in the close reading of a text, in the analysis and appreciation of its significance and form (structure and style), to produce a certain effect or to create meaning.

Questions to ask of a prose passage

1. What TYPE OF PASSAGE is it in general (narrative, oratorical, dramatic, lyrical, descriptive, or other)?
2. What is the MAIN IDEA or purpose? Does the text have any special qualities that are immediately striking?
3. What is the STRUCTURE of the passage? Is it organized in a certain way? Can its various parts be clearly delineated? What are they?
4. Do any STYLISTIC FEATURES stand out? Are there peculiarities of word order (syntax)? Of punctuation? Are there repetitions of words? If so, for what effect?
5. What are the results obtained by such DEVICES as simile, metaphor, irony, understatement, hyperbole, symbolism, and so on?
6. How may the DICTION be characterised? Is it abstract? Concrete? Are there allusions, proper names, archaisms, words used in special, technical terms, words that reveal a regional context?
7. Does the author use IMAGERY? What's the point of it?
8. Is the RHYTHM of the passage of interest? What expressive purpose does it serve? Is there intentional rhythmic monotony? Do the sentences produce an effect of rhythmic harmony and balance, or the contrary? How?
9. If IDEAS are of paramount importance in the text, what are they and what do they mean? How are they presented? Is it necessary to summarize them for clearer understanding? Does the author attempt to influence the reader by logic and facts, or by some other means of persuasiveness?
10. Does the passage have a pervading TONE (comic, ironic, tragic, or other)? Does the author convey his/her own attitude to the subject? Where and how?

Questions to ask of a poem

1. Is the poem cast in a fixed form (sonnet or other)? If so, does the poet work easily within the confines of the predetermined framework, or does he/she modify the form somewhat? Why?
2. If not a standard form, what form has the poet chosen? Free verse? How would you characterize the poem's structure, and to what effect does the poet employ it? Is there a rhyme scheme...internal rhyme, slant rhyme, etc.?
3. Can the poem be logically divided into a certain number of parts? What type of transition exists between them (smooth, abrupt)? Does the poem, in its general organization, move in a linear, ascending-descending, or circular manner?
4. Are there allusions—mythological, historical, literary, or other? Are there examples of punning or word-play? Is the vocabulary predominantly abstract or concrete? Is it possible to group together concrete or abstract words into certain categories?
5. Do some words have more than one meaning? Is the ambiguity deliberate or unintentional?
6. Do certain types of words predominate (nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, etc.)? Do the adjectives and adverbs used seem particularly effective?
7. Is any special use made of verb tenses or changes from one tense to another?
8. Is the syntax regular, or are there inversions or other types of syntactic dislocation? For what reason do they occur?
9. Does the poet seem particularly concerned with relationships between sound and meaning? In what specific instances? Do certain vowels or consonants predominate? With what effect? Are examples of the following to be found: alliteration, assonance, onomatopoeia, etc.? What is their function?
10. What is the basic rhythm of the poem (slow, fast, heavy irregular)? Is it impacted by the poet's use of caesura and/or enjambment? What effect does the use of particular words have upon maintaining, hastening, or slowing the movement of the poem?

Writing the commentary

The commentary should consist of a brief statement of interpretation, a detailed study of the text, and a conclusion.

1. Opening Statement

After you have performed the analysis of the text (see above), write a clear, concise statement of your interpretation of the text with the evidence you wish to discuss.

Keep in mind that, since you have no context for the extract (aside from the author's name and the title of the work, and possibly the publication date), you should avoid generalities and simply comment on what you see before you. One or two sentences will suffice.

Example (assume the extract is the first paragraph of *Metamorphosis*):

“In this extract from *Metamorphosis*, Kafka uses an inventive narrative technique, suggestive words and phrases, and a detached tone to show Gregor Samsa as a fragmented individual whose troubled inner life has taken control of his physical body.”

It is doubtful that you will recognize the author or poet, and even less likely that you will recognize the work from which the abstract is taken, or the poem. If you do, be careful not to read in thematic or larger ideas that are external to the text you are writing about.

2. Detailed study of the text (the main part of the commentary)

Go through the text commenting on any features of content or style that you find noteworthy, in topical order (per your introductory statement), or in the order in which they arise in the text. You may find it helpful to number lines for ease of reference.

This is where you plug in the details that support your opening statement. In what ways, for example, does Kafka reveal Gregor as fragmented by using an inventive narrative technique? The first sentence in the text suggests an omniscient third-person narrator. But it soon becomes clear that Kafka shifts to interior monologue—the reader can now get into Gregor's mind, even though the narrator maintains control. The effect of this is to allow the reader to identify with Gregor's plight, and to note the disconnect between what he is describing and how he interprets it. You would note every instance this occurs in the text. As you do, consider the diction, syntax, imagery, etc.—all of which contributes to your point that Kafka wishes us to understand how Gregor has become broken.

3. Conclusion

Your conclusion should be brief, just like your opening statement. What can now be said about the passage that was not obvious at the outset? In other words, explain how your close reading reveals *how the author has made the meaning that occurs to you*, a particular reader, as you interact with the text.

Commentary Writing: A “Reader Response” Approach

Reader Response Criticism is an approach to reading that is nicely suited to IB Commentary writing because it emphasizes the work of the reader in bringing meaning out of the text. The idea is that, without the reader’s interpreting activity, the text itself has no inherent meaning at all. Once you interact with it, the text, in a sense, comes alive. This is more or less what we are doing with Paper 1, because whatever the author or poet may have intended is irrelevant to the assignment—there’s nothing to bring in from outside the text to influence our interpretation of it. All we have are the words on the page before us.

One of the major figures in Reader Response Criticism is Peter J. Rabinowitz of Hamilton College (PhD in Comparative Literature, The University of Chicago). In his book, *Before Reading* (1987), he gives four “Rules” for interacting with literature that might serve you well in preparing to write your commentary. Here they are, and how they can help you:

- *Rules of Notice*: What stands out as significant as you read the text? Do certain details seem important? Note them. (Gregor’s rather calm response to his situation seems strange...)
- *Rules of Signification*: How do you make sense of the stuff you notice? (Gregor’s odd reaction to his plight suggests he is not in touch with reality...)
- *Rules of Configuration*: How do you logically go about the task of relating your interpretation to the text, or, what possibilities must exist here? (Gregor has somehow reached a breaking point; something has ruptured his sense of self...)
- *Rules of Coherence*: Upon reflection, what unifying principles must be true about the text when you consider all this stuff? In other words, what does it mean? (Gregor’s troubled dreams have transformed into a waking reality; his interior life is now exterior; he has become what he imagines himself to be.)

You can use these principles in a dramatically simplified way to produce a nicely structured commentary, filled with supportive detail from the extract:

- What stands out to me as I read this? Symbols, images, structure, style, etc.
- What do such details normally suggest when we read literature?
- What do these details have in common? What do they seem to indicate?
- What conclusions can legitimately be reached about the meaning of the text, based on these details, taken together?