

HL External Assessment Criteria- Paper 1: Literary commentary

Criterion A: Understanding and Interpretation		0 Marks	1 Marks	2 Marks	3 Marks	4 Marks	5 Marks
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How well does the student's interpretation reveal understanding of the thought and feeling of the passage? How well are ideas supported by references to the passage? 		<p>The work does not reach a standard described by the descriptors below</p>	<p>There is basic understanding of the passage but virtually no attempt at interpretation and few references to the passage.</p>	<p>There is some understanding of the passage, with a superficial attempt at interpretation and some appropriate references to the passage.</p>	<p>There is adequate understanding of the passage, demonstrated by an interpretation that is supported by appropriate references to the passage.</p>	<p>There is very good understanding of the passage, demonstrated by sustained interpretation supported by well-chosen references to the passage.</p>	<p>There is excellent understanding of the passage, demonstrated by persuasive interpretation supported by effective references to the passage.</p>
Criterion B: Appreciation of the writer's choices		0 Marks	1 Marks	2 Marks	3 Marks	4 Marks	5 Marks
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To what extent does the analysis show appreciation of how the writer's choices of language, structure, technique and style shape meaning? 		<p>The work does not reach a standard described by the descriptors below</p>	<p>There are few references to, and no analysis or appreciation of, the ways in which language, structure, technique and style shape meaning.</p>	<p>There is some mention, but little analysis or appreciation, of the ways in which language, structure, technique and style shape meaning.</p>	<p>There is adequate analysis and appreciation of the ways in which language, structure, technique and style shape meaning.</p>	<p>There is very good analysis and appreciation of the ways in which language, structure, technique and style shape meaning.</p>	<p>There is excellent analysis and appreciation of the ways in which language, structure, technique and style shape meaning.</p>
Criterion C: Organization and development		0 Marks	1 Marks	2 Marks	3 Marks	4 Marks	5 Marks
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How well organized, coherent and developed is the presentation of ideas? 		<p>The work does not reach a standard described by the descriptors below</p>	<p>Ideas have little organization; there may be a superficial structure, but coherence and development are lacking.</p>	<p>Ideas have some organization, with a recognizable structure; coherence and development are often lacking.</p>	<p>Ideas are adequately organized, with a suitable structure; some attention is paid to coherence and development.</p>	<p>Ideas are effectively organized, with very good structure, coherence and development.</p>	<p>Ideas are persuasively organized, with excellent structure, coherence and development.</p>
Criterion D: Language		0 Marks	1 Marks	2 Marks	3 Marks	4 Marks	5 Marks
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How clear, varied and accurate is the language? How appropriate is the choice of register, style and terminology? ("Register" refers, in this context, to the student's use of elements such as vocabulary, tone, sentence structure and terminology appropriate to the commentary.) 		<p>The work does not reach a standard described by the descriptors below</p>	<p>Language is rarely clear and appropriate; there are many errors in grammar, vocabulary and sentence construction, and little sense of register and style.</p>	<p>Language is sometimes clear and carefully chosen; grammar, vocabulary and sentence construction are fairly accurate, although errors and inconsistencies are apparent; the register and style are to some extent appropriate to the commentary.</p>	<p>Language is clear and carefully chosen, with an adequate degree of accuracy in grammar, vocabulary and sentence construction despite some lapses; register and style are mostly appropriate to the commentary.</p>	<p>Language is clear and carefully chosen, with a good degree of accuracy in grammar, vocabulary and sentence construction; register and style are consistently appropriate to the commentary.</p>	<p>Language is very clear, effective, carefully chosen and precise, with a high degree of accuracy in grammar, vocabulary and sentence construction; register and style are effective and appropriate to the commentary.</p>

Candidates should be encouraged to:

- ☑ Make time to read for pleasure and read widely. ☑ Remember the task: a close reading and commentary.
- ☑ Look at, but not slavishly follow, good examples of literary comment and criticism, and develop their own styles and approaches.

Understanding

- ☑ Keep an open mind when reading, do not make a snap decision to do the poem because it is shorter or focus on safe things like imagery.
- ☑ Read the whole passage at least twice before rushing to establish an overview.
- ☑ Read and re-read the passage/poem to ensure understanding before putting pen to paper – remember that if there is something they do not understand it is probably better to acknowledge it than ignore it.
- ☑ Read poems sentence by sentence; at least notice the sentences. ☑ Trust the words on the page.
- ☑ Appreciate the text for what it is, rather than feature spotting.
- ☑ Ask independent questions about unseen texts, thereby developing their own responses through a understanding of the themes, tone, and so on. Questions such as "what is the passage about?", "who is the narrator?" and "what are the images used?" may enable students to approach, and appreciate, an unseen passage without feeling that they have to focus on sophisticated literary features.
- ☑ Consider what the writer wants to communicate. ☑ See the text in terms of thought and feeling rather than 'hidden meanings'
- ☑ Experiment and practise the optimum time for studying the chosen passage, digesting it, underlining key details, with annotations, identifying key

Interpretation

- ☑ Remember that the poem/prose is a work of art and an artefact rather than having to be related to real life.
- ☑ Ground their commentaries in the texts themselves rather than imposing external ideas upon them.
- ☑ Work with what is there rather than seeing it as a puzzle of hidden meanings or the chance to practise some amateur psychoanalysis of the speaker/narrator without any evidence for their assertions. ☑ Establish literal action or content before offering abstract interpretations.
- ☑ Test any interpretations they may develop for their logic and relevance. ☑ Qualify and substantiate their assertions.
- ☑ Understand that evidence for each point is crucial and is often more convincing when provided in the form of quotation rather than paraphrase.
- ☑ Provide a short quotation from the text, clearly embedded into the commentary, and then explore this quotation in detail, rather than provide a lengthy list of quotations which are then left behind as they go on to explore a new point. ☑ Explore rather than avoid words they don't know.

Appreciation of literary features

- ☑ Identify specific literary techniques and define their effects in the course of the commentary, as relevant to meaning, rather than listing in intro
- ☑ Show how techniques work; identify and comment on their effects, not merely their presence.
- ☑ Use technical terms with discretion, and focus more on explaining the effects or implications of words rather than on identifying lit terms/words
- ☑ Understand the importance of basic structural components in poems and how they support content.
- ☑ Consider forms of poems and structural techniques in prose.
- ☑ Identify narrative perspective and remember that the author is not necessarily the narrator/speaker.
- ☑ Distinguish between motif and theme, mood and tone. ☑ Consider ambiguity a rhetorical choice, rather than a problem that needs to be fixed
- ☑ Learn to identify irony and ironic humour in literature. ☑ Think how sound and form can contribute to meaning and effect in poetry.

Presentation

- ☑ Plan a commentary before starting the task of writing. ☑ Remember that a commentary has to be essentially analytical and not narrative.
- ☑ Plan a coherent response, focusing on beginnings, a well paragraphed middle main section with linked topics/ideas, and an ending which re-states the most important points succinctly. ☑ Think for themselves and avoid formulaic answers which often list literary features in the introduction but fail to deliver convincing examples of these. ☑ Think of constructing responses on ideas rather than devices.
- ☑ Plan a structure that responds with sensitivity and logic to the passage and their line of argument.
- ☑ Adhere to the structure outlined in the introduction, and proofread carefully for errors in spelling, punctuation and grammar.
- ☑ Remember that this is an essay about literature, and that it is not necessary to introduce the essay with a long paragraph that focuses on some aspect of sociology that they believe relates to the literature - go straight to the literature.
- ☑ Make a clear statement of understanding of the essence of the text at the beginning. What is the text about?
- ☑ Write well-shaped and thoughtful introductions in which they offer an overview and note a few of the crucial techniques.
- ☑ Follow through, building a clear argument. ☑ Keep supporting quotations short. ☑ Embed quotations where possible.
- ☑ Understand the simple, basic conventions of integrating quotations in the body of their responses.
- ☑ Give line numbers when quoting anything of substance from the text.
- ☑ Organise ideas using paragraphs and transition from one point to another.
- ☑ Write a brief summative evaluation and appreciation, not a recapitulative conclusion.
- ☑ Develop editing and proof reading skills. ☑ Practise writing timed essays and sharpen time management skills.

Expression

- ☑ Work on formal written prose style, choosing the apt word and good vocabulary, avoiding sloppy phrases and slang terms.
- ☑ Use the basic terms for each genre, e.g. for fiction: author, narrator (1st, 2nd, and 3rd), narrative, dialogue, point of view.
- ☑ Use basic language terms such as noun, active/passive verbs, adjective, adverb, phrase, clause, parenthesis, simple/complex sentence, syntax, statement, question, exclamation, paragraph. ☑ Learn accurate use of the apostrophe.

Candidates should be encouraged not to:

- ☑ Write summaries. ☑ Repeat content. ☑ Offer far-fetched and unsupportable assertions which often take over the commentary.
- ☑ Guess historical context or make sweeping philosophical comments which have no connection with the text are other problematic areas.
- ☑ Settle on an interpretation until it has been tested against a number of details in the text.
- ☑ Look for messages, life-lessons, and hidden meanings. ☑ Think a 40 line passage creates sufficient proof for historical or cultural generalizations.
- ☑ Imagine that the only reference points were their own lives and the other texts they had studied during the course.
- ☑ Use the text as a springboard for speculation on life, the universe and everything.
- ☑ Impose a reading based on one or two keywords. ☑ Assume that the writers have one intent, or that there is one reading to the piece.
- ☑ Make reference to outside works. ☑ Write endless rough drafts. ☑ Use a formulaic essay structure based around literary devices.
- ☑ Use 'he/she' or 'they' to identify a main character or narrator/speaker.

Paper 1: Literary commentary (2 hours;

20% of IB English; 20 pt rubric; expected length = around 1000 words or 6-11 sides)

- Paper 1 contains two previously unseen passages and students are instructed to write a literary commentary on one of these passages. One passage will be poetry; the other passage will be taken from works such as a novel or short story; an essay; a biography; a journalistic piece of writing of literary merit. The passages for commentary may be either a complete piece of writing or an extract from a longer piece.

What is a commentary?

The term “literary commentary” is used to refer to a close reading or detailed examination of a passage that is presented in the form of an essay. Students need to explore aspects such as content, technique, style, structure, theme and language, and they are assessed on their ability to 1) demonstrate understanding of the thought and feeling in the passage through interpretation that is supported by detailed references to the passage; 2) analyse and appreciate how the passage achieves its effects. 3) identify language usage, structure, technique and style used by the author; 4) present their ideas in a formally organized and coherently developed piece of writing.

- The exercise of commenting on a piece of literature involves: close reading; literary appreciation; reading between the lines; an understanding of the effects of literary features. A commentary should not be a line by line explication.
- Commentary is “a literary composition with a definite subject consisting of a systematic series of comments or annotations on the text of a literary work.” (OED) OR is an analysis of the words on the page OR a commentary is much like an essay question, but you have to create the question. This gives you control over your response, and, unlike an essay, you have the advantage of having text right in front of you.
- The most useful answer is to be found under the term used by the French: *explication*, which can be defined as: “a formal and close analysis of a text: its structure, style, content, imagery - indeed every aspect of it.”
- Here are some quotations that might help you to think about your task in writing a commentary or presenting an oral commentary: “To give a reading of a work which increases my understanding of it.” OR “Throw light upon the process of artistic making.” W. H. Auden OR One of the critic’s functions: to “convince me that I have undervalued an author or work because I had not read them carefully enough.”

Preparing to Write a Commentary

- 1) Read the passage 3 times: once for a quick overview or first impression of the total effect, a second time to get a feel for the language & note shifts of pattern, thought, voice, tone, flow, etc. and a third time after having planned your paper to see if it still works or to adjust your impressions of the poem.
- 2) Plan your paper. How are you going to structure your ideas? What key lines must you talk about? How does the beginning of the passage connect to the ending?
- 3) Find a focus. It should fit the passage rather than making the passage fit it.
- 4) Introductions and conclusions frame your paper. Try for swift incisive entries and thoughtful exits.
- 5) Avoid narration. Remember analysis rather than summary. Show how meaning is created. The reader needs to be led to see “the hand of the writer”.
- 6) Assess effects of literary features. Be sensitive to the effect created by the author’s choice of words.
- 7) Use language appropriate to the discussion. Be conscious of the difference between prose and poetry.
- 8) Adopt a neutral objective voice without losing your own personal flair.
- 9) Use specific references and integrate them seamlessly.
- 10) Edit and revise as much as time allows.

Three Possible Approaches to Writing a Commentary

There is no “one” formula. All work depending on the passage and the student.

- 1) Passage will provide you the structure (Example – line by line or section/stanza by section progression)

Tips – Look for the sections in the passage & Give logic for why you let the structure set it up that way

- 2) Analysis of the passage itself element by element (or techniques)

Example – movement through discussion of imagery, formal elements, language, the ideas, etc.

- 3) Find a key image or idea and work your commentary outward from that idea to all areas of the passage

Something else <----- Idea (your unifying principle) -----> something else

Structuring a Commentary

- ❖ There are many acceptable ways of approaching and structuring a literary commentary, but a good commentary explains/asserts, rather than merely summarizing content or listing effects. The keys to writing good commentaries are clear organization, an understanding of literary techniques, and the ability to explain how the author uses these techniques to affect the reader. All commentaries should be continuous and developed; commentaries comprising unrelated paragraphs will not merit a high achievement level. Discussing the effectiveness of the writer’s choice of literary techniques is even more important; mere listing and naming of literary terms will not attract high marks.
- ❖ Organize the essay logically. You might choose to organize your essay by techniques used by the writer. For example, your introduction might focus on the writer’s use of ironic contrast to develop a theme. Subsequent paragraphs might then in turn identify and illustrate contributing contrasts or ironies, contrasting settings, contrasting voices, or deliberate shifts in pattern or structure.
- ❖ Students are expected to display an understanding of the complexities of a passage and to develop a convincing argument using the text to support interpretations and judgments. There is no answer that is a formulaic “correct” answer and students are encouraged to explore their own ideas and insights with subtlety—but also to support these with textual evidence so that they are

not merely guesses. Any form of structuring to the commentary will be rewarded if it is effective and appropriate. Different conventions are in operation and therefore all approaches (including the linear, line by line analysis) are acceptable and will be judged on the basis of their effectiveness.

- ❖ NOTE - there is no requirement for students to make reference to other texts that may be associated with the genre of the prose passage or poem chosen. The literary commentary (HL) requires students to make inferences based on the available evidence, as the prose passages and poems on the examination paper are not likely to be ones that students will have studied in class.

The Introductory Paragraph

- ✓ Be brief and avoid banal phrases such as, “Throughout the history of mankind people have . . .” ... Avoid vague, general introductions. Begin with an argument which is based on an analysis of the passage, and stay tied to it. Your introduction should have some sort of angle or some kind of unifying principle for the commentary response.
- ✓ Move promptly and concisely into your task, which is to assess WHAT the text is doing and provide an analysis of HOW it does it.
- ✓ Introductions should get to the point; waffling or striving to universalize seldom create reader interest. Instead, first impressions of the piece, a hypothesis about the meaning, a striking entrance to ideas is a far better course of action.
- ✓ Introductions and conclusions proved problematic for many. Unable to summarise an understanding of the prose or poem to begin with, candidates went on to write in an unfocused, disjointed way, jumping from detail to detail or from isolated literary feature to isolated literary feature, not forming a coherent argument. Conclusions were very often repetitions of introductions or summaries.
- ✓ throughout the commentary.
- ✓ The first paragraph for A **POEM** might include the following: 1) A statement of the poem’s central idea of intended effect 2) An identification of the “situation” of the poem and its voice and tone (if relevant) 3) A focus on the craft of the writer and the most significant and pervasive of his/her techniques
- ✓ The first paragraph for **PROSE** might include the following: 1) An identification of the type of prose and its intended effect 2) An identification of voice and tone of the persona (if relevant) 3) A focus on the central idea 4) The primary emphasis or direction of your commentary

The Body Paragraphs

- ✓ Develop the body of your analysis around evidence supporting the central effect or idea that you have identified in your introduction.
- ✓ Provide an analysis that reflects a close study and analysis, and is not a mere listing or “clumping” of details.
- ✓ Say what you think, not what you think you are supposed to think, and support your ideas.

The Concluding Paragraph

- ✓ Remind the reader of the central effect or idea to which all the evidence has been directed, but do not attempt to summarize what you have already said. This is insulting to the reader.
- ✓ Focus on the intention of the writer and the purpose of the piece of writing.
- ✓ If anywhere, this is where you might comment on the effectiveness of a technique or on the theme.

Examiner Instructions: Applying the criteria (2012)

- What is sought by “personal response” is an individual voice and engagement with how the text works. Engaged and individual commentaries will usually make themselves clear by the depth of insight into the text and the quality and interest of the details cited in support.
- The first person singular does not automatically constitute a personal response and conversely an impersonal academic style does not necessarily indicate a lack of personal response.
- “Awareness” and “appreciation” of literary features are the key elements under this criterion. The mere labelling, without appreciation, of literary features will not score the highest marks. Reminder: the term “literary features” is broad and includes elements as basic as plot, character etc., attention to which is valid and must be rewarded as appropriate.
- Mechanical accuracy is only part of this criterion D. Examiners must ensure that all the other elements are considered. Judgment needs to be used when dealing with lapses in grammar, spelling and punctuation; examiners must not unduly penalize. It is possible to score highly on this criterion D even if candidates have scored in the lower levels on other criteria, and vice versa.

MISC TIPS

- ✚ Teaching commentary cannot be done overnight, not even in a month. It needs continual practice with a wide range of texts during the two years of the course. In order for students to learn how to analyse texts, they must do it for themselves. It is like riding a bike—even if someone repeatedly tells you how to ride, you will never manage it until you climb on and try to do it for yourself. This means that the primary method of teaching commentary should be through discussion and group work.
- ✚ Remember, the author had an enormous range of possibilities when writing this piece, but they choose this specific approach and this form for the final product for some definite reason and intended effect. You must APPRECIATE!
- ✚ Use the author’s name to introduce each idea (also mention “the reader” frequently).
- ✚ **Respect the text!!!!** Respect what the author has put on the page; consider his intent, words, and structure. There is a reason why IB chose to use this passage. Decide which details are most interesting
- ✚ **Respect the reader!!!!** This includes both the reader of the passage (YOU) and the reader of your commentary (IB). Your commentary allows the text to live as a work of art.
- ✚ Show an appreciation of aspects such as content, style, structure, and language of the passage.

IB Commentary: Vital Advice from Examiners

* Candidate commentaries can be divided into two groups. In the first group are those who understand that literature is a creation which needs to be examined. The idea that a poem or a prose passage might present a moment or situation is not alien to such candidates, and they discuss the ways the situation is fashioned. They understand that the writer creates a speaker or a narrator. They look at structure. They can discuss the meaning of passages without assuming it is only to be found during a treasure hunt or must inevitably become a lecture about life. And then, in the second group, there the students who see the poem or the prose passage as a slice of life which is to be retold while inserting some mentions of strange phenomena called literary features, before asserting a Higher Meaning. The first group can – and do – write good commentaries on almost anything. The second group cannot, because for such students, identifying and asserting take the place of analysis, if they advance past paraphrase at all. **BE IN THE FIRST GROUP!**

What the better commentaries should do:

- ✓ The ablest candidates presented a *coherent* reading of the *entire* text. Students are not required to produce an exhaustive critical discussion so much as to provide a *valid and consistent reading*. To do that requires a certain flexibility, a willingness to attend to the language and style of the passage in order to establish its characteristic manner and to be guided by awareness of that.
- ✓ Those who concentrate on the way in which a character is presented or a scene is set or an image is developed – in other words, identify an element, explain its meaning, and then connect it to their treatment of the central concerns of the passage – performed admirably.
- ✓ There are candidates who read carefully and construct commentaries which show not only an understanding of the subject matter of the poem or prose passage but also an appreciation of how the writer has used the elements of expression to create meaning .. the purpose of the commentary is not to present a philosophical tract, or a sermon, or a summary. It is to balance close textual analysis and interpretation. It is to show that you can read and understand what is creating your experience, but to do that you have to read with care, treat what is on the page, and be open to the concept of ambiguity
- ✓ Strength comes in the integration of an interpretation of the content, with a discussion of the technique, going on to assess the effects achieved. The best commentaries offer a personal (not autobiographical) interpretation of the passage or poem, but justify the interpretation with close argument making use of the text for support.
- ✓ The better candidates showed a clear enthusiasm for the text chosen and an ability to appreciate the thought and feeling expressed.
- ✓ The best commentaries show mature views on literature and literary issues with thoughtful, lively, observant responses.
- ✓ The better commentaries showed knowledge of the means writers use and the issues writers raised in their work.
- ✓ The best commentaries were those which had been clearly well-considered before setting pen to paper.
- ✓ Of course, the best commentaries were a pleasure to read, demonstrating close attention to language and style, imaginative insight and critical acumen.
- ✓ The ablest candidates responded to the **SUBTLETIES** of the texts
- ✓ Some candidates produced eloquent, intelligent and thoughtful and pieces that showed real engagement with the text.

Warnings:

- Weaker candidates often seemed rushed in approach; it would be good to emphasize the need to read the chosen piece at least twice and preferably three times before writing. Time is well spent re-reading and thinking about the piece
- Several examiners commented that many students failed to formulate a clear statement, summarizing their understanding of the passage or poem, before launching into an effort to comment. This led to a randomly organized (or disorganized) series of assertions, sometimes without examples, analysis and argument, and a lack of any overall interpretation and grouping of concepts. ... Those who retell the passage are producing superficial commentaries.
- Too many candidates looked for deeper implications before they thoroughly explored the more obvious meaning of the piece.
- Examiners commented on the relative lack of ‘the technique of commentary, guiding the reader through an interpretation of the passage or poem in a systematic way.’
- For commentary, the descriptors do not reward outside references and thus there is very little to gain from making comparisons to other works. In other words, remain focused on analyzing the words on the page before you.
- The two most common approaches to Commentary were line-by-line analysis OR the statement of a major point which was said to be made through three literary features. Able students used the line-by-line approach to build an analysis; for the less able, it took the place of analysis. A concern is that both approaches often lose their energy. The opening stanzas of the poem and the first half of the prose passage are often carefully examined, while the candidates rush along through the last stanzas and paragraphs or skip them entirely.
- Some of the major difficulties were the result of: 1) failing to move to a level beyond summary or paraphrase; 2) leaping to a discussion of a generalized theme (often imposed on the text) rather than examining the text closely; 3) neglecting to provide support in succinct quotes; 4) presenting speculation as assertion; 5) not relating content to form in a convincing manner
- A disconcerting number failed to treat the poem as a poem... A disheartening number of candidates simply assumed that the poet was the speaker.
- Candidates should be discouraged from turning their essays into lengthy, personal, pseudo-philosophical musings.

Literary Features/Devices

- ❖ *POSSIBILITIES for interpretations*: The students' commentaries demonstrated that both the poem and the prose passage offered events, clear settings, strong narrative voices, relationships, themes, and structure for the students to examine.
- ❖ The emphasis needs to be less completely centered on what emotional response a literary feature evokes in the reader, and more on what the use of this literary feature causes in and contributes to the text.
- ❖ The ideal commentary treats literary techniques as inseparable from meaning (with a focus on how the features develop meaning). Greater effort should be placed on the effect of the literary feature on the meaning of the passage. Mere naming of features will not gain high marks with examiners.
- ❖ The mention of the literary qualities too often remains unconnected to an interpretation of the passage. The devices, once located, are not examined. They are not linked to an overarching reading. It is as if the legs, arms, and head of an animal are carefully noted, but the animal remains unnamed and its living, breathing self is never considered worthy of discussion.
- ❖ The commentary is not an exercise for simply cataloging all the literary "devices" the student has memorized.
- ❖ Grandiose yet naïve statements about the importance of diction in conveying theme still take the place of a careful examination of particular words.
- ❖ Most seem now to have learned not to offer a formulaic opening paragraph in which they say that the passage features a, b and c, in order to achieve x. Instead the better ones sum up their general understanding of the piece and proceed to demonstrate how they have arrived at it (Nov 06).

The Problem of Focusing on the "One" Thing

- Students should continue to strike a balance between literal reading and over-interpretation. Many students believe that it is necessary to find a hidden or a higher meaning. This leads them to present readings which cannot be supported except by ignoring or distorting the evidence of the texts. For example, once a student decided the speaker of a poem was "really" talking about Death or Satan or the Soul or Environmental Concerns any consideration of the full poem was left behind in pursuit of the lines that fit the chosen limited interpretation.
- In the commentary, many candidates latch on to details and squeeze everything into a 'symbolic' reading: passages and poems are not chosen because they have a single, 'secret' meaning. Teachers need to break down the belief that the passage or poem is a kind of puzzle with a definite solution... Students need to be guided to focus on what is actually on the page before them, not searching desperately for 'messages' in a text beyond what they naturally see. They also need to be brave enough to acknowledge the possibility of interpretations other than their own.
- Several examiners commented on the effectiveness of those papers in which candidates acknowledged the possibility of several interpretations of a piece, arguing in a balanced fashion in support of each. This is often far more impressive than a highly assertive but unconvincing argument in support of a single perhaps ill-founded interpretation
- The better responses allowed the passages to speak to them, instead of imposing views on a piece. Instead of resorting to paraphrase they had to unearth complex hidden meanings, they had noted detail such as particular words, phrases and images and looked for movement, change, and development as aids to establish meaning.
- Those who treat one aspect and only one aspect (for example, symbolism) exhaustively are treating the passage or poem as a whole superficially.

Length Issues

- Candidates producing only one or two pages of writing were ordinarily not outstanding in their responses & Two sides of a page in two hours does not measure up.
- Finally, those students who seemed to feel compelled to write 15 to 20 sides, often scrawled illegibly, did themselves no favors (often they were breathless, thoughtless and lacking direction/precision. Quantity does not substitute for high quality close analysis in a reasonable form. Legibility helps too.

Using Text Quotations

- ❑ Help students to check that the text supports their arguments, and that they then give concrete evidence by citing the text. Again and again, examiners voiced discontent with sloppy quotations, no quotations or insufficiently discussed quotation.
- ❑ Quoting from the text is crucial for supporting student assertions. However, many students either failed to use quotation marks or only referred to line numbers. Others quotes large sections to no purpose.
- ❑ A good technique is to make the comment, offer textual proof, and then show how that point fits in with the understanding of the whole passage.
- ❑ Support must be presented to accompany each assertion. Students must integrate quoted material fluently with their ideas

Final Tips

- Stronger candidates stated a kind of overview of what the piece was about, and then set about showing how this was achieved. The strongest candidates produced extremely sensitive and persuasive readings of both prose and poetry. Their understanding of how a writer puts elements together to create a work of art was impressive.
- There is an importance in balancing a treatment of the structure of a given extract (prose) with an understanding of its role in a longer work (for example, as the opening of a novel).
- You can be humble or contemplative about the areas where you may be uncertain, but still propose some individual thought (don't just say, "I don't know about ..."). What this means is that you are willing to consider alternative responses and interpretations often seen through a sense of questioning and challenging in your writing.
- Encourage students the read the ENTIRE text carefully and thoughtfully (May 2004).
- Consider how a text develops. Candidates should come to see that commentary is not some alien activity. It is reading.

Commentary Subject Report Comments (phase 3)

* Students should be encouraged to read both pieces once, then to read the chosen piece slowly and methodically, seeking a cohesive understanding of the whole. Planning time is time well spent if it leads to an introduction in which an overview is offered, followed by close analysis of details linked clearly to that overview. This approach permits the student to range freely among parts of the text rather than taking a linear sequence, and it allows treatment of content and technique in tandem (rather than a chunk of summary followed by a list of literary features, usually without noting their effects).

Candidates should be encouraged to:

- consider the context of the piece and make a decision whether the narrator/persona is masculine or feminine if the gender is unclear; thereafter throughout the commentary use pronouns appropriate and consistent with that decision. This will avoid the inappropriate use of 'themselves', and 'theirselves', or the creation of new hybrids such as 'themselves' and 'theirselves'.
- think of the prose extract as having a beginning, middle and end, but not as a piece complete in itself.
- make sure to read and absorb the whole passage before writing anything. The commentary must treat the entire passage or the entire poem.
- address the form of the passage; that is, the prose as a piece of prose and the poem as a poem.
- put down the pen and re-read the first paragraph after writing it. Is it a good overview of what the passage is saying and the means by which it is said?
- give line references.
- pay attention to the text and analyze what is there, rather than looking for meanings and —messages! beyond what is naturally seen. Even if there is some misinterpretation, close reading and analysis will score higher marks than unsubstantiated interpretation.
- develop an accurate sense of the meaning of terms such as *theme*, *motif*, and *tone*. Remembering that a *theme* is a central idea raised in the text, and that a *motif* is a recurrent element (which may develop the theme), might help.
- Practise differentiating atmosphere from tone and sound qualities; understand that tone is the attitude of the author/speaker to his/her subject matter; words denoting volume, pace or mood – (loud, soft, fast, slow, calm, eerie...) cannot be used to describe tone
- Develop a wide/accurate vocabulary to use when writing about literature, and ensure that they know how to spell the terms they use
- Read both passages carefully before making a choice
- Think carefully and plan their commentaries before they begin writing so that they have a confident, well supported, interpretation ready to develop
- Substantiate all points, rather than leaving them as vague assertions.
- Use quotations more liberally from the text in order to justify points
- Be ready to acknowledge ambiguities, changes within a piece and so on
- o What distinguished candidates was their ability to discuss the effect of a range of features, and to do so in relation to meaning rather than in isolation.

Candidates should be encouraged NOT to:

- build an entire reading around one small detail.
- be determined to find a 'message' or an allegorical meaning which the writer apparently wishes to convey.
- adopt a line-by-line approach to the commentary unless the nature of the poem/prose indicates that there is a very good reason for doing so. A linear approach means that the writer is controlling the approach to the text, rather than candidates controlling their responses to it.
- use the passage as a springboard to personal or general philosophical reflection. The commentary is an exercise in literary appreciation, not a sociological exploration.
- make obvious comments such as 'This passage conveys its meaning through language and diction' (How else?) or 'This passage uses punctuation'. (While on rare occasions particular uses of punctuation may be deemed to be a literary device and worthy of comment, far too many students seem to feel that this is *the major literary device*.)
- use the abbreviation 'quote' as a noun in formal writing.
- conclude a commentary by repeating in miniature what has already been said at length. If there is nothing new to say or no ends to be tied up, just stop.
- start with a list of techniques (Too many include a list of three literary features in the introduction, never offering a holistic view of passage)
- make links to other texts they have read unless they are really pertinent.
- write a complete rough copy and then a good one - this almost inevitably limits the depth and detail possible
- use ampersands in formal writing
- begin sentences with "Also...."
- avoid using a formula or template when writing a commentary
- use a "rote checklist" approach (ie. listing in the introduction that "theme, symbolism, diction.... Etc" will be key features to be examined and sticking rigidly to this formula).
- begin writing without first establishing what it was they are to address
- use "one-size-fits-all" faux-analytical statements like: —the rhyme and enjambment make it flow, or —the author uses visual imagery so that the reader can see more clearly what she's talking about
- assume that anything can represent anything
- write conclusions which reiterate the introduction - a conclusion may not be necessary because a commentary may move organically and naturally to a close

STRUCTURE

- Examiners reported that many candidates appeared to have been drilled to identify literary devices and to organise their commentaries around these. The weakness of this approach was twofold: not only did many candidates merely name the literary devices they found, without explaining how the devices impacted meaning, but structuring a commentary around literary devices often meant that the meaning of the text was not deeply examined other than in relation to these, with candidates apparently seeing chosen text simply as an embodiment of literary features.
- Many candidates seemed to follow a pre-taught structure: an introduction containing reference to literary techniques (no matter how general); a body consisting of several paragraphs and often following a rather linear treatment of the passage, and a conclusion, including a personal response or evaluation. The resulting essays often proved mechanical and lifeless, and sometimes unfocused and rambling despite their apparent structure.
- Very few were unable to offer their ideas in a logical structure, and only the best could sequence an argument confidently. Examiners commented that candidates needed to spend more time organizing ideas before launching into a ramble in search of meaning.
- Many candidates were unable, as one examiner put it, “because of stock response and approach...to display independence of thought and originality - two qualities at the heart of being an IB student. Such candidates never seemed engaged with the material in a personal or meaningful manner.
- Students who set out to look at three literary features often fail to demonstrate an adequate understanding of the effect those features have in the passage or the poem. They also often fail to treat what the poem or passage is actually about.

Miscellaneous

- o Many candidates appear to have gone into the exam with a preconceived “plan of attack” or template. Although this ensured that there was a basic structure to their commentaries, it was often too formulaic and inhibited exploration of the text.
- o Students need to be reminded to use apt (and brief) quoted examples (not mere line numbers) and to proceed to close analysis of their meaning and effect. It may help to use the mnemonic of —Point/Evidence/Analysis as a means of encouraging such an approach.
- o Perhaps the two greatest difficulties encountered this year were, as one examiner put it, “reading carefully to pick up on subtle shifts and nuances as well as balancing the commentary to cover the whole text both in breadth and depth”. **CLOSE READING IS A PRE-REQUISITE FOR A COMMENTARY.**
- o There was no evidence in many commentaries that the candidates had done any planning before beginning to write. A single question, two-hour examination is long enough for some time to be devoted to planning the structure of the commentary. It does not matter if that structure is later modified, but an initial structure gives security and a sense of direction for the candidate as the commentary progresses.
- o Most students made a creditable attempt to engage with the text at some level and were able to identify areas of significance and focus and to utilise context clues, collect evidence and construct an interpretation with varying degrees of success. The most successful candidates provided perceptive and, at times, delightful insights into the texts, providing a convincing personal response that was closely linked to ideas presented in the passage. They picked up on many nuances in the text and supported answers well with suitable evidence.
- o Always tie technique to meaning. Don’t do a paragraph on imagery when you haven’t put the function and role of imagery into perspective with the larger aims of the author/passage.
- o Several candidates relied on generalisations that took them away from the language of the text and led them to neglect a thorough analysis of the writer’s craft.
- o Most responses followed the text from starting point to end without any ‘stepping back’ to view the shape of the whole. Thus, the writer of the text, rather than the candidate, was in control of the commentary. There was minimal sense of the writers’ craft.
- o Those candidates who knew that poetry could be light and witty and cynical had an advantage over those who did not, and stronger candidates saw a more serious message (but not a tragic one) beneath the surface.
- o Of the many challenges commentaries present for students, one of the greatest difficulties occurs when candidates decide that there must be a —theme- (a term which is often misused) or a —message- in the passage. They jump to a conclusion based upon one or two minor points, and from there develop a whole thesis, ignoring large parts of the passage which do not fit w/ their idea.
- o Tone ... or tone of voice, to use a longer formulation, is the narrator’s or speaker’s attitude. It is perfectly possible for the tone to be dispassionate while the events described have a strong impact. As the term and the concept form such a trap for students, and as it is possible to discuss the works quite well without reference to tone, perhaps students would be well advised to avoid mentioning it unless they understand what the term actually means.
- o Candidates who worked through the text in a linear fashion tended to run out of time, especially where ideas had not been fully thought through at the planning stage... in writing about the text as it unfolded, a few candidates spent unnecessary time on speculating what had been taken from the woman (line 12) when the answer was clearly given later in the extract, in lines 28& 36.
- o Like IB essays, write with control and calm deliberate confidence. Do NOT use too casual a register – this is a critical literary experience.
- o If you feel yourself guessing or “stretching” an idea in order to make it work you are probably over-interpreting. Most passages are not extended metaphors with symbolic levels. **WORK WITH WHAT YOU CAN BEST PROVE FROM THE WORDS/THINGS IN THE PASSAGE ITSELF.**
- o Some adopted a rigid interpretation and mercilessly bent the poem to fit it – **THAT’S BAD**
- o The way for the candidate to approach Paper 1 is with an open mind.

Reading Poetry

- 1) Read the poem several times so as to hear the sound of the words in your mind.
- 2) Listen for recurring sound patterns.
- 3) Determine the central purpose of the poem.
 - a) To tell a story (narrative)
 - b) To reveal character (dramatic)
 - c) To impart a vivid impression, mood, or emotion (lyric)
 - d) To teach or convey an idea or attitude (didactic)
- 4) Determine how the poet's purpose is achieved.
- 5) Identify the speaker.
 - a) Who is speaking? To whom?
 - b) What is the speaker's attitude?
 - c) What kind of person has the author created?
- 6) Identify the setting.
 - a) Where does the poem take place?
 - b) When does the situation occur?
- 7) Determine tone.
 - a) What is the tone or attitude of the poem toward the subject matter?
 - b) Is the speaker objective, subjective, ironic, bitter, etc.?
- 8) Determine mood.
 - a) What is the mood or atmosphere the poet is trying to create?
 - b) What key words, images, etc. give evidence of and support the mood?
- 9) Determine theme.
 - a) Is the theme explicit? What lines of the poem contain the theme?
 - b) Is the theme implicit? What lines of the poem suggest the theme?
- 10) Pay close attention to words and word choice.
 - a) Look at the title. How is it significant? What aspect of the theme or mood does it illuminate?
 - b) What are connotations of certain words? Are there any ordinary words used in an extraordinary way? Are any words repeated, and for what effect?
- 11) Consider imagery, allusions, symbols, and figures of speech.
 - a) Are there any allusions that should be checked? Why did the poet include these allusions?
 - b) What is the purpose of the figures of speech (metaphors, similes) in the poem? Why does the author compare these items?
 - c) What senses does the imagery appeal to and how? Why are the images presented in the order in which they occur?
 - d) What is the significance of the symbols?

- 12) Consider the sounds.
- a) Do you notice any alliteration, assonance, onomatopoeia, rhythm, or rhyme that is used to create a particular effect in the poem?
 - b) Does the rhyme scheme or metrical patterns in the poem have a purpose?
- 13) Consider the form.
- a) Did the author use a specific form, such as an Italian sonnet? Why?
 - b) What is the poet's focus of attention?
- 14) Determine the literary value.
- a) What lines appeal to you and why?
 - b) What emotions does this poem evoke?
 - c) If you do not understand this poem, what causes this?
 - d) How skillful is the poet?

Reading Prose

This is a guide to analyzing prose. To analyze prose, you should be familiar with the elements of poetry.

- 1) **Read the passage carefully three times:**
- a) Be aware of the first impression.
 - b) Read the piece aloud for shifts of pattern, thought, voice, tone, and flow.
 - c) Underline anything that strikes you.
- 2) **Locate and identify function in the whole piece:**
(Remember that a prose passage is likely to be part of a long work.)
- a) Assess for genre of work (such as a novel, short story, non-fiction, memoir)
 - b) Determine how the excerpt fits into the whole piece.
 - c) Determine the passage's primary function.
- 3) **Analyze the piece critically using the following questions to guide your analysis:**
- a) WHO is the speaker, voice, and person?
 - b) WHERE and WHEN does this take place?
 - c) WHAT is happening? Place the excerpt in context of the literary whole.
 - d) WHY does this happen? What is the author's purpose (to inform, explain, describe, tell a story, create a mood, argue, or persuade)? Pay close attention to rhetorical strategy.
 - e) WHAT is the dominant effect?
- 4) **Identify how the dominant effect is achieved by observing the following:**
- a) Structure and form of the excerpt, paragraphs, sentences, and syntax
 - b) Order of ideas, sentences, and details
 - c) Word choice, connotation, and arrangement
 - d) Literal and figurative images
 - e) Tone of writer/speaker, to material, to audience
 - f) Special effects, such as irony

Rules for Close Readings

The author may have written the text, but it is you who awaken new meanings in the text and make it come alive. There is no *one* objective meaning. Look for the conflicts, the strange tensions, and the juicy details of a passage. Close readings are inherently a messy process, but if you've stirred up a majority of the passage up in your analysis you're doing it right.

- 1) **Minimize or eliminate paraphrase and summary.** Presume the audience knows the text fairly well, stick almost entirely to your arguments and analysis.
- 2) **Control your essay; don't let the text control it.** YOU take a position about the text, and use the text to prove that position. Line by line extrapolations work fine in poetry or drama, but with prose passages the text can be used however you want as long as you are supporting and exploring your positions.
- 3) **Give a coherent reading of the entire passage.** Think unity and focus.
- 4) **Avoid broad, sweeping introductions and conclusions.** There is no one formula for a successful introduction. However, your introduction should make it clear that you have understood the significance of the passage or poem as a whole, and you have found some unifying principle in it (an object, an experience, an emotion, a technique) that gives structure and focus.
- 5) **After you have written your analysis, review each paragraph.** Does each paragraph have quotations from the text? Have you overanalyzed shallow issues and forgotten to "agitate the obvious meanings"?
- 6) **Don't quote more than one sentence or line at a time (in those cases, reference line #s instead).** When analyzing at this level of depth, big quotations add little and are difficult to explain in anything other than broad terms.
- 7) **The author is not always right or the supreme authority.** Feel responsible for questioning the author.
 - ❖ *A sense of questioning, challenging, considering alternate responses or interpretations and giving personal responses can most effectively distinguish a mediocre commentary from a good one.*

Close Reading Questions to Ask:

- Who is speaking? To whom? What is the text about? How was it written? Why was it written?
- What? Why? (the situation, the purpose) Where? When? (setting)
- How? (style, tone, techniques, narrative) Patterns? (structure, form)
- Conflict? (contrasts, ironies, dialogue)
- So what? (what is the dominant effect of it all?)
- Does the style match the content?
- For prose, try to identify the nature of the whole: what kind of prose work is it (fiction, nonfiction? The audience? The purpose?)? Then ask, what is this excerpt doing on its own? What is it doing in relation to imagined whole?
- What sort of world does it construct?
What are the structural, rhetorical, and stylistic elements of the passage?
- What are the central concerns of the passage? OR What is the primary significance/dominant effect of the passage?
What's the major event/conflict in the passage?
Does it develop a character, relationship, setting, social argument, internal or external conflict, symbol/image?
- Which words do you notice first? Why? How do the important words relate to one another? Do any words seem oddly used to you? Why? Do any words have double meanings?

Other Questions to Consider in Approach to Analysis of an Extract

- 1) From what point of view is the passage presented? What is the effect of this point of view?
- 2) Are there any obvious contrasts or oppositions at work in the passage which might throw light on the work as a whole? [These contrasts might be between characters or they may be more abstract (between fantasy or appearance and reality, between male and female roles, between moral qualities such as sincerity and deviousness, between innocence and experience, etc.)]
- 3) Why was this piece/passage picked? (It was picked for a reason; it does stand on its own.)
- 4) What is the author doing (technically with devices) and what is the effect created on the reader?
- 5) What is your personal response to this passage? (This includes your emotional, gut, or intellectual reactions.)

ALWAYS CONSIDER:

- The concerns of the character/narrator/speaker & The movement of thought and emotion through the passage
- The ending!! & The title!! (if one is given)
- If you choose the poem: Look for oppositions and similarities within the poem. Are there significant shifts?
- Always examine the poetic closure or how the poem ends. Is there a break from the established poetic structure towards the end? (Many poets set up a structure so they can break from it.)
- Consider what the poem does NOT do as well as what it does do.

Point of View and Characterization: How does the passage make us react or think about any characters or events within the narrative? Are there colors, sounds, physical description that appeals to the senses? Does this imagery form a pattern? Why might the author have chosen that color, sound or physical description? Who speaks in the passage? To whom does he or she speak? Does the narrator have partial or omniscient viewpoint?

Symbolism: Are there metaphors? What kinds? Is there one controlling metaphor? If not, how many different metaphors are there, and in what order do they occur? How might that be significant? How might objects represent something else?

Discerning Patterns: Does an image here remind you of an image elsewhere in the book? How might this image fit into the pattern of the book as a whole?

What is the sentence rhythm like? Short and choppy? Long and flowing? Does it build on itself or stay at an even pace?
 Look at the punctuation. Is there anything unusual about it?
 Is there any repetition within the passage? What is the effect of that repetition?
 How many types of writing are in the passage? (Narration, description, argument, dialogue, rhymed or alliterative poetry, etc) Can you identify paradoxes in the author's thought or subject?
 What is left out or kept silent? What would you expect the author to talk about that the author avoided?
Observe the shape of the poem; the breaks between lines, the length of lines, the presence or absence of rhyme. Think about how these aspects help you notice the "sense" and the "turns."
Notice the "turning" words (but, so, yet ...) or the "turns" if no word is used to mark them. Make an asterisk beside these.
Devices that discover shifts: Key words (but, yet, however) OR Punctuation (dashes, periods, colons, ellipsis) OR Stanza or paragraph divisions or line/stanza length changes (structure) OR Irony (sometimes hides shifts) OR Changes in diction (slang vs ?)

MNEUMONIC DEVICES

For a prose commentary, consider **SNAP**:

S etting
 N arrator
 A ction/conflict
 P rotagonist

DRIFTS (good with poetry comm)

Diction
 Rhythm/Rhyme
 Imagery
 Figurative Language
 Tone
 Speaker

SATTT (for prose/narrative work)

Setting: when and where is the event occurring? any symbolic significance to setting?
 Action: What is occurring? Why did the author choose those actions?
 Time: How much time elapses? How is the passage of time (if any) depicted? How is it significant to the text?
 Tone: What is the author's attitude toward the subject? What does that suggest about the author? the topic?
 Theme: What message is the author trying to convey?
 What lesson is being taught?

SOAPS (address immediately)

Subject
 Occasion
 Audience
 Purpose
 Speaker

See other handout for **DIDLS**

What to Notice in Close Readings – see last pg BLUE ORAL HANDOUT too

FOCUS IN (techniques, lit/poetic devices, structural/rhetorical/stylistic elements, word choices, etc.):

What is actually said but also HOW it is said (and perhaps also what has been left *unsaid* in this moment)
 What the dialogue says about each character [The style of language used by each character]
 Rhyme / Meter / Diction / Syntax / Sentence Structure / Verb choices / Punctuation / caesura / enjambment / pronunciation
 Stanza (poem) or Paragraph (prose) structure significance
 Imagery (colors, objects, etc.) – What are the most dominant images?
 TONE (also: the atmosphere created)
 Figurative Language (alliteration, metaphors, similes, personification, allusions, etc.)
 Engagement of the other senses / **sensory** images/phrases/objects : sight – colors; touch; smell; sound; tastes; body
 Foreshadowing Humor (often sadly overlooked)
 THE CONTENT (in the passage itself); its subject matter; (for prose) the passage's placement inside the PLOT & THEME
 CHARACTERIZATION (Traits of the characters that are evident in the passage)
 Awareness of levels of meaning (literal/figurative/symbolic) & Symbolism
 Psychological, emotional, intellectual developments occurring in the passage
 The speaker OR construction of the narrator or persona in the poem
 How the passage shows the nature of the relationships (and its evolution) between characters & consider role reversals
 Who is the intended audience? [Relationships between the speaker and the audience]
 Relationships between the speaker and the animal/natural world
 Relationships between the internal and external worlds of a character (public vs. private faces of a character)
 Areas/targets of social commentary (Power/gender issues; Class issues)
 Misperceptions (appearance vs. reality) & irony - dramatic, situational, verbal & coincidences, doubles, parallels, symmetry
allusions / historical or mythological references or **religious references** – gardens, crosses, paths, blood, bread, lambs, lions, etc.
 time - day of the week, time of the day, seasons, clock, watches
 weather – rain, wind, dust, sun, shade
 BINARY OPPOSITIONS: sane vs. insane; innocence vs. experience; light vs. dark; hot vs. cold; sight vs. blindness

FOCUS OUT

Appreciation of the 1) total effect 2) primary significance 3) author purpose with this passage
 The overall action/conflict of the passage
 The historical context (don't do too much on this)
 Your personal experience and reflections (your favorite line/image; your views on the weaknesses of the passage; what you appreciate most about how the passage was written; the title (of the poem); your view on the key words)
 What is the role the poet has taken? (philosopher, voice of protest, an objective reporter, to warn, to comfort, show personal experience)
 What are the writer's attitudes towards the issues he or she has raised?