



## HOW TO WRITE A LITERARY COMMENTARY

Literary analysis means **closely studying** a text, **interpreting its meanings**, and exploring **why the author made certain choices** and used literary devices to create effects and convey ideas.

### What is a commentary?

- ☞ It is NOT an essay. DON'T write a general essay about the work from which it was taken.
- ☞ It IS an analysis of the given passage, its function and its characteristics. It should examine the key themes and stylistic devices of the passage, showing how the language works to convey its content.
- ☞ It should relate the passage to the rest of the work, while remaining focused on the passage itself (when the text is an extract from a longer work)
- ☞ It should cover the **WHOLE** passage.

## 1. BEFORE WRITING

**Understanding the text is essential.** READ it carefully more than once, while asking yourself these questions:

- ☞ 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 a particular theme, characters or events narrated?
- ☞ Are there any special stylistic features worth mentioning? To what extent are these literary devices relevant to 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 the reader's reaction to such a text be?

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

## 2. WRITING

**Literary commentaries entail a thematic and stylistic discussion of the main features of the text.** It is essential to come up with a thesis statement to keep your essay focused. As you write, follow the standard structure of an academic essay:

- ❶ **Introduction** that tells the reader what your essay will focus on.
- ❷ **Main body**, divided into paragraphs, that builds an argument using evidence from the text.
- ❸ **Conclusion** that clearly states the main point that you have shown with your analysis.

### 2.1. INTRODUCTION: elements you might want to add:

- a hook (general statement about the text and author or the main theme of the passage, a quote...)
- situation of the extract in the work to put the passage into context
- a thesis statement
- an outline of your main points (*annonce de plan*)



Avoid summing up the plot or giving irrelevant details on the author's life or the historical period. The person who is going to read your commentary has read the text so you they do not need a retelling.

## 2.2. DISCUSSION of the main features of the text:

### a) CONTENT

≈ Very often the text is organized around a **MAIN SUBJECT** or **IDEA**. If so, **start by stating clearly what that idea or main subject is 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, you will have to consider the **CHARACTERS** which appear in the passage. **Concentrate on the characterization 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, 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)

≈ You **need to concentrate on NARRATIVE TECHNIQUES**. Consider, for example, the **type of narrator**, the **point of view**, the use of flashbacks...; 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 fortuitous; therefore you should **pay attention to the VOCABULARY** used (semantic fields, concrete or abstract vocabulary, synonyms, imagery, etc).

≈ Try to **pick 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.).

### c) PARAGRAPH STRUCTURE of your commentary:

≈ **Each paragraph** should focus on **one topic or area of analysis**. Don't try to include everything you can think of to say about the text—only analysis that drives your argument.

☞ To keep your points focused, it's important to use a **topic sentence at the beginning of each paragraph**. A good topic sentence allows a reader to **see at a glance what the paragraph is about**. It can introduce a new line of argument and connect or contrast it with the previous paragraph. Transition words like "however" or "moreover" are useful for creating smooth transitions:

☞ A key part of literary analysis is **backing up your arguments with relevant evidence** from the text. This involves **introducing quotes** and **explaining their significance** to your point. It's important to contextualize quotes and explain why you're using them; they should be properly introduced and analyzed, not treated as self-explanatory.

**NB:** It is not always necessary to use a quote. Quoting is useful when you're discussing the author's language, but sometimes you'll have to refer to plot points or structural elements that can't be captured in a short quote. In these cases, it's more appropriate to describe the relevant part in your own words.

**NB2:** The ideal essay structure consists of three main parts, each of which can be divided into two or even three sub-parts.

### **2.3. CONCLUSION**

It should **NEVER** be A **MERE REPETITION** of what you have already explained. It should not introduce any new quotations or arguments either. Instead, it is about wrapping up the commentary by providing a clear answer to your issue question. Here, you summarize your key points and try to emphasize their significance to the reader. You should also reflect on what the passage reveals about the broader text.

**NB:** Avoid rushing your conclusion due to time pressure. The conclusion is the final impression you leave on your examiner, and it should clearly and confidently summarise your argument. Ideally, you should draft your conclusion before you begin writing the body of your commentary.

### **ASPECTS TO CONSIDER WHILE WRITING:**

☞ Try to connect your ideas using appropriate **LINKING WORDS**. A commentary is not a shopping list or a juxtaposition of disentangled ideas. Write **COHERENT PARAGRAPHS** which follow a logical order. Generally, one starts with what is obvious or more important. One paragraph should logically lead on to the other.

☞ **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**. Avoid vague words and expressions.

☞ Use a **FORMAL REGISTER**. Remember that this is academic writing not a conversation between friends.

☞ Avoid verbosity or inaccurate terminology. Clarity and precision are top priorities.

### **3. AFTER WRITING**

**Proofread** 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 reading a coherent and complete commentary.

### **4. USEFUL EXPRESSIONS**

This extract/excerpt is taken from ...  
from ...

This excerpt belongs to ...

This passage appears in ...

The text/passage under study is extracted

This fragment is part of ...

The novel/ poem/ play is entitled ...

The passage is set/ takes place in ...

The novel dates from/ was written in ...

The extract is characteristic of ...

The extract narrates/ explains/ deals with/ makes reference to ...

The extract is related to ...

The passage consists of ...

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 Act III/ In the third act...

In the second stanza ...

On page 22 ...

At the beginning/ end of the extract/ chapter ...

Throughout the novel...

novel...

Therefore, it could be said 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...

At the top/ bottom of the page...

In this chapter/ scene/ episode of the

This implies 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, ...