

In your commentary you have to demonstrate:

- 1 a knowledge and understanding of the extract
- 2 an appreciation of the ways in which the writer's choices shape meanings.

Because you are assessed using these criteria you should structure your commentary in such a way that the examiner is in no doubt that you will fulfil these requirements completely. Good guiding questions ought to lead you to talk about your knowledge and understanding of the text and the writer's choices. Indeed, very often the guiding questions will direct you to cover exactly these two areas. In this case, you can be explicit about using the questions for two of your structuring themes.

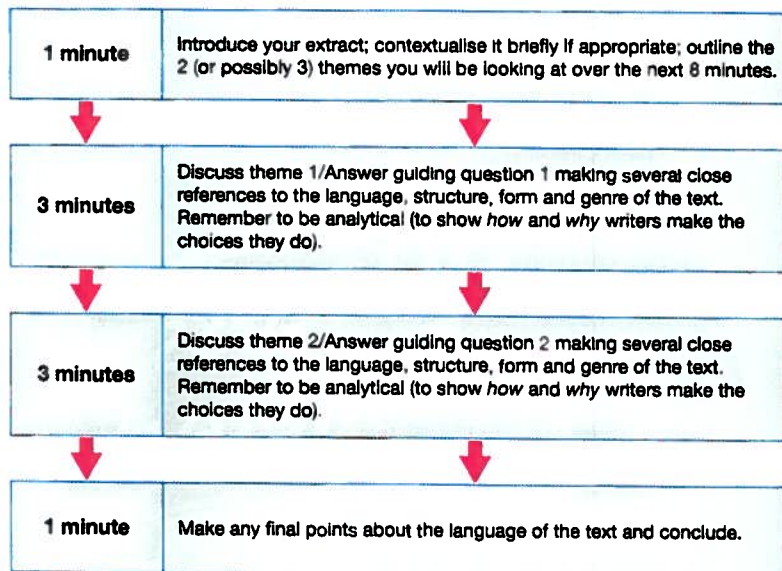


Figure 2.3 A simplified possible structure for the individual oral commentary.

The total time for this assessment is 10 minutes; so aiming for about 8 minutes leaves your teacher time to ask you the compulsory questions as 2 minutes at the end of the IOC.

How should you use the preparation time?

Once you have been given your extract you will have 20 minutes to prepare for your commentary. You should be left to prepare in a quiet room. During this time you will be able to read, mark up and plan. It is vital that you use this time as effectively as possible. You can mark up the passage with whatever notes you want during the preparation time. However, you should remember that writing too many notes may confuse you. Some students find it helpful to write out the first and last couple of sentences of their commentary in order to make themselves feel confident about how they will start and end. We would strongly discourage you, though, from writing out in full any more than one or two key lines that you intend to use in

your commentary. You will need to work from notes, key words and phrases you have written in the margins. Practise talking in detail and at length about texts so that you don't have to read from a script or from overly detailed notes.

We recommend marking up the extract so that the structure of your presentation is absolutely clear to you. If it's not clear to you, it won't be to the examiner either! Later on in this chapter you will find examples of marked up extracts that will help you to understand what you should be aiming to achieve.

During the preparation time, we would advise you to work through the following six stages:

- 1 **Read the text and the guiding questions** carefully and underline the key words and phrases and the aspects of the extract you think are most interesting or about which you think you can talk most convincingly. At this stage it may well be appropriate to identify a range of literary features in the passage – as long as you intend to analyse them in your commentary. If it's an extract, rather than a single poem, make sure you've worked out where it has been taken from the original text.
- 2 **Identify your two or three big themes** (you might use the guiding questions to help you to do this) and write a brief summary of each of them at the top of the extract.
- 3 **Mark up the points that you will use to develop and analyse your themes.** You may wish to use a different colour pen for each of these themes. You may find that you add a brief third point at the end in order to cover any final points that you think are important to make but which don't fit into your big themes.
- 4 **Sequence your points so that you are clear about the order in which you will talk about them.** Make sure that whatever system you use is absolutely clear and is one that you have used in many practice run-throughs. You won't necessarily want to make the points in the order in which they appear in the extract. For instance, you might want to talk about a poet's use of metaphor at the start of your commentary even though the best examples of these come at the end of the poem.
- 5 **Make sure that you have clear notes.** In particular, make sure your notes for what you will say in the introduction and conclusion to your commentary are very clear.
- 6 **Practise:** spend any remaining time working through each of the points, rehearsing your commentary and adding brief marginal mark-ups (usually just one or two words) to remind you of what you want to say.

Clearly there is a lot to fit into your 20-minute preparation time. Do remember, though, that if you have revised effectively, you should know the extract that you have to talk about in detail and you will already have a clear idea about many of the points you want to make. You will need to practise using this preparation time regularly so that you know what it feels like to work for 20 minutes; you want to be confident that you can fit all of the stages of planning and preparation into the time available.

What tone of voice should you use in your commentary?

It is important to recognise that the individual oral commentary is a formal assessment. Therefore, your language should be formal and as technically accurate as you can make it, and you should adopt a register appropriate to a thoughtful discussion of literature. You should model yourself on anyone you have heard who speaks seriously and effectively. Ask yourself: what is it that makes them a powerful or effective speaker?

Having said this, it is equally important that you speak in your own voice. Don't try to put on a voice for the commentary; it simply won't seem natural and will lack the clear sense of personal engagement with the text which characterises effective commentaries. Above all it is important that you speak clearly and relatively slowly. You need to make sure that the examiner can follow every word of your commentary. Listening back to your practice recordings and your teacher's feedback will be important in helping you to improve the ways in which you control your register and tone of voice in your commentary.

In your commentary you are assessed on your use of language. Clearly, this will involve you using technical vocabulary wherever appropriate. Throughout this coursebook we suggest effective ways for you to use technical literary terms to support your analysis; however, as ever, you are reminded that the use of such terms for their own sake will rarely be rewarded. In your commentary you should aim to show how the writer's choices of particular words and literary devices help shape the meaning of the passage. Remember that the Glossary contains a list of all the technical vocabulary and literary terms we have used in this coursebook.

Finally, you should give the examiner a clear sense that you are enjoying both the text and the process of analysing it. A real sense of engagement with and enjoyment of the task will make a very positive impression.

How should you start your commentary?

- Make sure you remember the obvious: state your name, centre number and candidate number at the start of the recording. This will also give you an opportunity to gauge the level and speed of your voice.
- Having done that, it is vital that you make a very good impression in the first few sentences to set the tone for the commentary as a whole. First, identify the extract and the author, and briefly set it in context. This might be as simple as saying what happens immediately before and after the passage. For a poem, you might mention any relevant contextual details, although these should be brief and focused.
- Your next stage should be to outline the main themes you will examine in your commentary. If it helps you to feel more confident about the opening section of your commentary, you might wish to write the first couple of sentences at the top of the extract so that you are absolutely clear about the way you will introduce these important themes. In many cases you will be signalling your intention to answer the guiding questions that have been set. Try to introduce an argument at this stage too which will show the examiner how you intend to engage personally with the extract throughout your commentary.
- This introductory section of your commentary should take no more than about 1 minute.

How should you structure the main body of your commentary?

If you have used the preparation time effectively, you should know which points you want to make and the order in which you want to make them. Ideally, all the points you want to make are covered by the two or three main themes you have used to help structure your commentary.

As you will see when you look at the student sample responses later on in this chapter, effective commentaries are rigorously and consistently analytical and avoid being overly descriptive. These qualities should be true of every literature assessment

you undertake; nevertheless, it is always worth reminding yourself that the focus of your commentary should not be *what* happens in the extract but *how* and *why* it happens. In the main body of your commentary it will always be appropriate to comment on the writer's choices of particular literary features. Remember that, whilst it is important to identify the literary features correctly and accurately, the real credit comes from analysing *how* and *why* you think the writer uses them in this particular text.

For each of the points you make about the writer's choice of certain words or particular forms, you should aim to follow the structure P (point) – E (evidence) – A (analysis). In doing this, you should:

- 1 identify a technique, device or interesting feature
- 2 draw the examiner's attention to where the writer uses this technique (and perhaps quote the key words)
- 3 analyse how this technique works – the key questions you need to answer here are *how* and *why* the writer makes the choices he or she does.

You might include three or four of these smaller analytical points in your answer to one of the guiding questions.

In the main body of your commentary you might want to draw attention to key literary and historical contexts that will help you to appreciate and analyse the extract. Referring to contexts can be important and helpful. However, you need to note that merely mentioning a context won't gain any credit in itself. You might know some interesting facts about the life of the writer of the passage; however, you should only include these if they directly support a point you are making about the passage. Too many students fill too much of their commentary with regurgitated information about the writer or related events. Try to avoid making this mistake. Remember, the main focus for your commentary should be your analysis of the writer's choices of language, structure and form in the extract in front of you.

How should you conclude your commentary?

You will need only a brief conclusion but it is a good idea to draw your commentary to a recognisable end and to finish off as effectively as you started. It is worth remembering that the last thing the examiner hears might have an important bearing on the final decision about how many marks you are awarded. You might choose to conclude by looking at the way the extract ends and the writer's choice of language here; however, any number of different strategies could be effective. The key is that you are clear, focused and assured. Anyone listening to your commentary should have a very clear sense that it has finished. The student sample material later on in this chapter will provide you with some helpful and effective strategies to conclude your commentary.

How long should your commentary be?

The oral commentary lasts 10 minutes in total and you need to include time for your teacher to ask you questions. We would therefore advise that you aim to talk for about 8 minutes. If you practise regularly enough, you will be amazed at how accurately you can get the timing spot-on. Using the structure suggested in this chapter, you might aim for an introduction which lasts about a minute, two or three substantial points each of about 2–3 minutes, and a conclusion that lasts between 30 seconds and 1 minute.

How should you approach the questions at the end of the commentary?

At the end of your commentary your teacher will ask you a series of questions. However, if you have managed to fill 8 minutes, there may well be time for only one or two. Your teacher will aim to ask questions to help you to talk about any important aspects of the extract you have missed in your commentary; equally, your teacher may prompt you to address aspects of the assessment criteria you did not cover. You should see these questions as an excellent opportunity to expand on the points you've already made and to satisfy the criteria as successfully as you can in order to give you the best possible mark.

Remember to be specific and to remain analytical. In other words, don't just answer the questions in general terms; refer back to the extract in your answers and show they are informed by your understanding and analysis of the passage in front of you. It will often be appropriate to quote from the extract in answering your teacher's questions.

How should you approach the discussion at HL?

Both SL and HL students will complete the individual oral commentary; however, HL students will also undertake a discussion about one of the other texts you have studied. The discussion will follow immediately after the commentary (the recording will continue without a pause). Here are some examples of the sort of discussion questions you might be asked:

- Which character from the novel do you find most interesting?
- How does the writer make him or her an interesting character?
- How does the writer use settings in the novel?
- Can you give an example of how settings are important in terms of the narrative?
- Could you give examples of how a writer creates tension between characters in the play you have studied?
- How important are contextual considerations in affecting your appreciation of a particular work?

When answering the questions during the discussion it is important to be as specific as possible. You won't have the book in front of you so it is particularly important that you know your texts as well as you can so that you can make reference to particular scenes and episodes and even, in response to certain questions, quote from memory.

Our general advice for the discussion is to apply the same standards to your answers as you will to your commentary. You will need to:

- talk about the writer's choices
- be rigorous and analytical (the point-evidence-analysis structure will prove helpful)
- be specific and refer to the events and language of the text in answer to every question
- make sure that you demonstrate personal engagement with the text and, wherever possible, show how you enjoyed reading and studying it.