

Here is an example of a linear analysis in the main body of a commentary; it works stanza by stanza (imagine that you are speaking the text in the right-hand column):

TEXT		LINEAR COMMENTARY
'TIS the year's midnight, and it is the day's Lucy's, who scarce seven hours herself unmasks; The sun is spent, and now his flasks Send forth light squibs, no constant rays; The world's whole sap is sunk;	5	The poet starts by establishing the time when the action is taking place. The cosmic imagery of the sun, using personification, is powerful and simple. The use of consonance ('sap is sunk') furthers the rhythm of the first stanza that overall depicts a derelict place, void of life.
The general balm th' hydroptic earth hath drunk, Whither, as to the bed's-feet, life is shrunk, Dead and interr'd; yet all these seem to laugh, Compared with me, who am their epitaph.		Here the poet reinforces images of death with the idea of a shrunken life, the symbol of the bed (sleep as a metaphor for death) and goes on to use a metaphysical conceit in describing his own grief as much worse than what is effectively the death of the entire earth.
Study me then, you who shall lovers be At the next world, that is, at the next spring; For I am every dead thing, In whom Love wrought new alchemy. For his art did express	10	Here the poet speaks directly to the reader and implores him/her to study him. This interpolation creates immediacy in the relationship between the reader and the 'I' speaker. He also invokes through the third person the presence of someone who has 'ruined' him, possibly God. The atmosphere is becoming increasingly desolate and dark and by this point the poet comes across as wretched and alone.
A quintessence even from nothingness, From dull privations, and lean emptiness; He ruin'd me, and I am re-begot Of absence, darkness, death—things which are not.	15	
All others, from all things, draw all that's good, Life, soul, form, spirit, whence they being have; I, by Love's limbec, am the grave Of all, that's nothing. Oft a flood Have we two wept, and so Drown'd the whole world, us two; oft did we grow, To be two chaoses, when we did show Care to aught else; and often absences Withdrew our souls, and made us carcasses.	20 25	The poet compares himself to 'all others' to compound his isolation by expressing his utter difference with the masses. The symbols and imagery of death continue to be used ('grave', 'drown'd', 'chaoses', 'carcasses'). He now evokes the presence of his lover and speaks of the emotional turmoil of their time together using the natural imagery of a flood.
But I am by her death—which word wrongs her— Of the first nothing, the elixir grown; Were I a man, that I were one I needs must know; I should prefer, If I were any beast, Some ends, some means; yea plants, yea stones detest, And love; all, all some properties invest. If I an ordinary nothing were, As shadow, a light, and body must be here.	30 35	Here we understand that the poet's lover has died. He goes on to explain how he has been born as an elixir (a type of potion) from nothing. This is a typical example of the poet's use of the metaphysical conceit, where a difficult, unlikely idea is communicated through strong and often oxymoronic imagery. Hyperbole is used to reinforce his grief and he desperately asks to be almost anything but himself in his current state of grief.
But I am none; nor will my sun renew. You lovers, for whose sake the lesser sun At this time to the Goat is run To fetch new lust, and give it you, Enjoy your summer all, Since she enjoys her long night's festival. Let me prepare towards her, and let me call This hour her vigil, and her eve, since this Both the year's and the day's deep midnight is.	40 45	Carrying on with the idea of himself compared to the many, he concludes that he can be none of these other things and therefore must remain in his self and suffer the loss of his loved one accordingly. He ends the poem with a comparison of his love that seems to transcend life and death to the 'lesser love' of those that are drawn to each other through physical attraction, symbolized by the satanic/pagan goat of lust. He ends the poem with a clear parallel between the microcosm (his grief) and the macrocosm (the winter solstice).
John Donne, 'A nocturnal upon St Lucy's Day, being the shortest day of the year'		

The second approach is **thematic**. This is when you extract the themes, stylistic choices, messages, ideas and developments of the text, and then use them to discuss the work using your own organized structure. The thematic approach implies a different way of performing the commentary therefore, one that requires you to re-organize the ideas and techniques in the extract or poem and present them using your own logical structure and sequence, rather than those of the poem or extract itself as it unfolds.

Here is an example of a thematic approach as it might be used in the main body. Note that the student has taken key passages and phrases from the text, colour-coded them and then used the colour-coding system to organize the different paragraphs:

TEXT	THEMATIC COMMENTARY
<p>To be, or not to be; that is the question;  Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer  The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,  Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,  And by opposing end them? To die: to sleep;  No more; and by a sleep to say we end  The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks  That flesh is heir to, 'tis a consummation  Devoutly to be wish'd. To die, to sleep;  <b>To sleep: perchance to dream:</b> ay, there's the rub;  <b>For in that sleep of death what dreams may come</b>  When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,  <b>Must give us pause: there's the respect</b>  <b>That makes calamity of so long life;</b>  For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,  The oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,  The pangs of despised love, the law's delay,  The insolence of office and the spurns  That patient merit of the unworthy takes,  When he himself might his quietus make  With a bare bodkin? who would fardels bear,  To grunt and sweat under a weary life,  <b>But that the dread of something after death,</b>  <b>The undiscover'd country from whose bourn</b>  <b>No traveller returns, puzzles the will</b>  And makes us rather bear those ills we have  Than fly to others that we know not of?  <b>Thus conscience does make cowards of us all;</b>  And thus the native hue of resolution  Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,  And enterprises of great pith and moment  With this regard their currents turn awry,  And lose the name of action. – Soft you now!  The fair Ophelia! Nymph, in thy orisons  Be all my sins remember'd.  – William Shakespeare, <i>Hamlet</i></p>	<p><b>Red</b>  The overarching opposition in this soliloquy is that which opposes life after death to the idea of nothingness after death. Hamlet uses a number of different images to suggest this idea: the metaphor of death being sleep is used to ask the question whether we dream in that 'sleep of death', in other words whether there is a life after death. The opposition implies another dichotomy: that which asks whether life should be tolerated or commanded; whether one should be passive or active in terms of fate and death.</p> <p><b>Blue</b>  A strong theme in the soliloquy, backed by a plethora of different images, is that of the hardships of life. In Hamlet's speech life is not seen as something simple or pleasant, but rather a tumultuous passage of pain and hardship. We cover the spectrum of hardship from the physical (the natural shocks of the flesh, the weary life that makes one grunt and sweat), the social (oppression, pride, insolence in office, unworthiness and injustice), the emotional (love's pangs) and the time-bound (the 'whips and scorns of time').</p> <p><b>Green</b>  These passages make the speaker consider philosophical questions of an immediate and highly significant order. The first of these is suicide. Hamlet evokes the idea of stabbing oneself with a 'bodkin' (dagger) and suggests earlier in the soliloquy that there is something to be desired in the idea of nothing after life, suggesting a type of death wish.</p> <p><b>Black</b>  However, suicide might not be the right answer to the pain of life, since it might be wrong to assume that there is no afterworld and if there is an afterlife, from a Christian perspective, suicide would involve some sort of eternal or hellish punishment for the deed. Therefore, the mind is plagued by doubt and questions that have no clear answer: the 'undiscovered country' makes one think carefully, 'gives pause' and 'puzzles the will'.</p> <p><b>Orange</b>  What this leaves us with is a situation in which we are too afraid to take action and we procrastinate in the key philosophical matter of suicide. Hamlet implies that this makes us cowards and he uses the imagery of sickness to communicate this idea ('sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought').</p>

There is no single best method for approaching the text, but you must make some meaning of the text and formulate a position (what we are calling an 'argument' in this chapter). Furthermore, you need to be coherent and not repeat yourself.

Linear analysis (otherwise known as line-by-line or chronological) can lead to simple paraphrasing (repeating what is said in the text in your own words), and needs to be applied with great care. A line-by-line analysis can cover the poem or extract in great detail, because you have left nothing to chance by following the words as you read them, but there is a chance that you repeat yourself and struggle to go beyond paraphrasing.

A thematic analysis, on the other hand, will allow you to develop a structured argument so that your points flow from one to the next. However, you run the risk of missing some of the details in the text if you use this approach, and you need to be careful about sustaining the all-important close-reading skill as you go about your oral commentary this way.

What is the role of reason in interpreting literature? In the context of literary analysis, does emotion help or hinder the processes of reasoning?



Whether you choose to give a line-by-line or thematic account of the text, you need to make sure that you cover everything in detail.



Whichever method you choose, make sure that you cover the text in detail, substantiate your points with salient examples and give a personal response.

● **Examiner's hints**

Remember that a well-organized presentation has to be coherent and cogent. Make sure that the way you present your ideas is more than a mere series of disconnected facts sewn together.