

What kinds of things should I talk about in my commentary?

In many ways, the individual oral commentary is quite similar to the Paper 1 written commentary covered in Chapter 4. You are expected to explore features of **content**, **language** and **style** in considerable detail, demonstrating an ability also to organize your ideas and show some sense of independent thinking.

The key difference, of course, is that you will know the work from which the extract comes, and part of what you comment on (unless it is a complete poem) might be the place of the extract in its immediate **context**, as well as its relationship to the whole work.

Another key difference from the unseen extract for your written commentary will be that the extract is significantly shorter. Therefore, you will have room to talk about it in significant detail, and this is something you should take full advantage of.

The key areas you will be expected to show proficiency in are as follows:

- **Understanding the content:** what does the extract reveal about matters such as character, relationship, theme, action and setting? Are there elements of conflict, contrast or development? Why is it an *important* extract?
- **Understanding the style:** what key features of language and style are present in this extract? The crucial thing to remember, as we said before, is to explore the effects of these features. How do they affect our reading of the material?
- **Organization of ideas:** there needs to be a sense of structure to your commentary, an attempt to present your ideas with some degree of purpose. It would perhaps be unreasonable to expect the same kind of structural rigour in an oral, with 20 minutes preparation time, as a full 1.5 or 2-hour exam, but nevertheless, there should be some evidence of structure.
- **Language:** once again, although the demands on your use of language might be slightly less formal than in written work, there is an expectation that you maintain an appropriate register, and avoid lapsing into unhelpfully colloquial expression.

How do I prepare and deliver my commentary?

In the 20 minutes of supervised preparation time, you should make sure you are fully prepared by undertaking the following tasks:

- Read the extract and guiding questions through extremely carefully.
- Following the advice you have been given in Chapter 3 about annotating extracts in preparation for Paper 1, take time to explore the extract in terms of content, style and context. Read and re-read for different purposes.
- After 10–15 minutes, you should be in a position to decide on what the important features of the extract are. Use these as a means to organize your ideas and write down the order of your main points on a separate piece of paper.

One of the most important things to remember in your commentary is the requirement that you **refer in detail back to the text**.

There is no excuse for not doing this as the extract is right there in front of you.

Experience suggests that the majority of your ideas should be written on and around the extract itself. The reason for this is that if you write them on a separate piece of paper, you will then have to keep looking back at the extract in search of the supporting text details. This will be difficult to do and time consuming. That being said, writing down the main sections of your commentary, perhaps in bullet-point form, on a separate sheet is a helpful way of reminding yourself of what you have covered and where you are going next.

Keep calm! It is likely that you will feel a little nervous, so slow down and take time to think about what you are saying. If you make mistakes, just carry on. To get top marks, you do not need to deliver a flawless commentary.

You will be expected to talk for around eight minutes, during which time your teacher should not interrupt. At the end of that time, they will ask you some questions on such things as details you may have missed, points that could use some further elaboration or aspects of style or content that you need to show you have fully understood. Unless you have already done so in the commentary itself, your teacher might also ask you about the context of the extract, or the relationship between the poem and others you have studied by the same author. Try to answer the questions as fully as you can, and don't be frightened to ask for clarification if you are asked something that you do not fully understand.

Introductions and conclusions are important means of creating a sense of structure. Any **introduction** to an individual oral commentary ought to cover some or all of the following:

- Your name, candidate number, and details of the extract that you have in front of you, such as title and author.

- A brief summary of the context. What is going on in the extract and what has just happened? If it is a poem, you could perhaps say something about its main subject.

- Briefly state the main features of content and language/style that you think are the most important in this extract.

- It is also not a bad idea to explicitly state the structure you intend to follow. There is nothing wrong, for instance, in saying something like: "In this commentary, I would first like to talk about x, and then go on to cover y and finally explore the significance of z." This will force your brain to process and hopefully remember the structure you intend to follow.

It is also important to bring your commentary to some kind of end. A **conclusion** should be brief, and could address all or some of the following:

- A statement as to what is the most important element of the extract – either an aspect of content or style, or both.

- A summative statement as to where the extract's importance lies in terms of the rest of the writer's work, or the text as a whole.

- Some kind of comment about the main way the extract or poem influences the reader.

Let's now turn our attention to various extracts and think about how you might prepare to deliver a commentary on them. There is obviously a strong possibility that you won't know the works from which they come, so commenting on context will be difficult, but at least you can gain a sense of where the majority of marks are earned.