

Individual Oral Commentary

What are the guiding questions?

Extracts will be accompanied by one-two guiding questions, designed to focus your attention on some key elements. Often, one question will focus on an aspect of content and the other style, but not always. Guiding questions are reasonably specific, without giving things away. They will not:

- provide you with points of explanation or interpretation for which you can then gain credit
- focus on the **effects** of particular words, phrases, or literary features, thereby limiting your ability to demonstrate independent response to the extract's details.

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

In many ways, the individual oral commentary is quite similar to a written commentary. 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.

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. Therefore, you will be able 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 rigor 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.

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.

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.
- Take time to explore the extract in terms of content, style and context. Read and re-read for different purposes.
 - What can you say about the text from your **initial glance**?
 - Read through once to get your **initial impressions**. What is striking?
 - Read through for **content**: characterization and relationships, setting, action, themes and ideas.
 - Read through for **style** (literary **craft**): diction, syntax and structure, imagery, figurative language, rhyme, rhythm, and sound

- 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.

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.

[So, make your notes on the extract itself and structure your outline on a separate piece of paper.]

How should I approach the delivery?

Keep calm! It is likely that you will feel a little nervous, so slowdown 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 for clarification if you are asked something that you do not fully understand.

[I will be making notes during your presentation. Don't let this worry you; it's how I listen.]

Should I worry about an introduction and conclusion? Yes.

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.