**What is literary commentary?**

As used in the language A: literature course, the terms “commentary” or “literary commentary” refer to literary analysis: a detailed examination of a piece of literature. The exercise of commenting on a piece of literature involves:

* close reading
* literary appreciation
* reading between the lines
* an understanding of the effects of literary features.

Students are expected to display an understanding of the complexities of a prose passage or poem and to develop a convincing argument using the text to support interpretations and judgments. There is no answer that is a formulaic “correct” answer and students are encouraged to explore their own ideas and insights—but also to support these with textual evidence so that they are not merely guesses. The teacher is instrumental in encouraging the student to be analytical and explore the subtleties of the text. Good commentaries typically show independent engagement with the text and a keen understanding of the effects of the author’s use of various literary techniques.

In whatever language students are studying language A: literature, they are expected to use language appropriate to literary discussion, and this will usually include accurate reference to commonly used literary terms. Discussing the effectiveness of the writer’s choice of literary techniques is even more important; mere listing and naming of literary terms will not attract high marks.

In the assessment criteria for paper 1, there is **no** requirement for students to make reference to other texts that may be associated with the genre of the prose passage or poem chosen.

**The literary commentary (HL)**

At HL students are required to structure their literary analysis in the form of an essay (also referred to as a “commentary” or “literary commentary”). The prose passage or poem on the examination paper is unlikely to be familiar to the students, so this exercise is often referred to as an “unseen commentary”. Conventions for the formal organization of ideas naturally differ widely between, and even within, countries and languages, so it is not possible to be prescriptive about how a commentary should be organized. However, the best commentaries will put forward a persuasively organized argument that is coherently developed and effectively structured.

Students are assessed on their ability to:

* show they understand the prose passage or poem through well-supported interpretation
* identify language usage, structure, technique and style used by the author
* discuss the effects that arise from the author’s choices
* present their ideas in a formally organized and coherently developed piece of writing.

**The guided literary analysis (SL)**

The SL guided literary analysis requires the same skills as the HL literary commentary, the difference being that, through two guiding questions, SL students are supported in their interpretation of the passage. In addition, they are not asked to produce a well-constructed commentary (or essay) as part of the assessment. There are two reasons for this difference.

* SL students have 1 hour 30 minutes, compared with 2 hours at HL, and responding specifically to the guiding questions enables them to devote their time to literary analysis.
* Paper 1 is an area of the language A: literature course where attention is paid to differentiation between SL and HL—SL students are **not** required to construct a persuasively argued commentary and nor do they need to present their own perspective on the prose passage or poem.

**Differences between written and spoken literary commentary**

The same questions need to be answered in both types of commentary.

* What is the text about?
* How was it written?
* Why was it written?

In order to be successful, both types of commentary require careful thought and planning beforehand. Fundamentally the exercise is the same, with the following differences.

* The literary commentary (HL) or guided literary analysis (SL) in paper 1 requires students to make inferences based on the available evidence, as the prose passages and poems on the examination paper are not likely to be ones that students will have studied in class. The oral commentary, on the other hand, is based on extracts taken from works that have been taught in detail and the student must demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the writer’s work through close analysis of the specific poem or extract.
* Speaking and writing require skills that overlap but are not the same. Before an individual oral commentary, students need to take notes and arrange them in the order in which they will deliver them. They should have learned how to speak clearly and fluently and be able to respond confidently to questions on interpreting literature. It is much harder to cover up a lack of knowledge in an individual oral commentary, and thorough revision of the part 2 works is important for success.

**Teaching commentary**

Students who are starting a language A: literature course will vary considerably in their ability to read and write but the likelihood is that most of them will need considerable practice before they can confidently engage in close literary analysis either verbally or in writing. Teaching commentary cannot be done overnight, not even in a month. It needs continual practice with a wide range of texts during the two years of the course. In the early stages it is a good idea to devote one lesson a week to commentary work.

Short extracts are particularly useful in providing a quick introduction to elements of literature, literary terms, genre study or to introduce a new genre or text. Giving students the opportunity to comment on short texts is also helpful in developing their own use of language by encouraging a careful choice of words and the use of an appropriate formal and literary vocabulary.

In order for students to learn how to analyse texts, they must do it for themselves. It is like riding a bike—even if someone repeatedly tells you how to ride, you will never manage it until you climb on and try to do it for yourself. **This means that the primary method of teaching commentary should be through discussion and group work.**

**Suggested activities**

* Begin with texts with hidden messages that are easy to decode such as advertisements, nursery rhymes, pictures and short newspaper articles.
* Ask students to bring in their own material for the class to discuss.
* Ask students to make inferences based on titles and/or first lines.
* Structured prompts can be used to develop students’ confidence in articulating their thoughts about literature. For example, short passages are distributed to the class and students respond using prompts such as: “This line is unsettling because …”
* Encourage creative writing by asking students to bring in their own writing and discuss it with their peers. A good method of understanding how styles can vary is to ask students to write pastiches. For example, ask them to choose an event in the school year and write a description in the style of some of the writers in their course of study.
* Expose students to as wide a variety of writing as possible: from colloquial to very formal, from poetic to technical, from different time periods and from simple to complex.
* Create cloze passages by removing key words from prose passages or poems. Students work in groups to locate the words and share them with the class. The class selects the most appropriate words, commenting on the choices. Each group then analyses the strategies they used to arrive at their conclusions. Groups share their learning, evaluate their strategies, and select the most effective ones.

**Developing a “Paper 1” Literary Commentary (2 hours)**

*First 15 minutes*:

* Spend time **annotating the text**
* Pose questions in the margins
* Make comments and connections
* Observe motifs, themes, punctuation, format, and other details
* Consider language chose for its connotation or denotation
* Discuss imagery and other aspects of style

*Next 5 minutes*:

* **Organize** your ideas either by chronological order (emphasis on progression of ideas)
* OR by topic (this is likely centered around literary techniques the writer used, e.g., imagery, symbolism, language, tone, theme, structure, etc.)
* Develop a 3-pronged thesis statement

*Next 1 hour and 30 minutes*:

* Start with your **thesis statement** (this is likely a 3-pronged thesis, which outlines your essay)
* **Develop** your essay with clear topic sentences, context, examples, and explanation
* Paragraph length and number will vary depending on your topics and examples
* Use formal, academic language with active voice verbs

*Final 10 minutes*:

* Write a conclusion which is **an evaluation**, a critique of the writer’s choices and the effects of those choices.
* This is the What? How? And Why? Section of your essay!