

3. Writing the Commentary

How should I organize the commentary? In a: 'linear' or 'thematic way', or by some other principle?

Students often ask this question. There is no one way that is right. As the IB is *international* it embraces different approaches. The French, the Germans, the British, the Americans, and so on, may have somewhat different methods, but the commentaries are all assessed according to the same criteria.

The structure of your commentary will be determined to a large extent by the characteristics of the poem or passage itself. Is this a tightly developed poem or passage with an argument or sequence of events that requires a disciplined 'linear' commentary following the argument or sequence stanza by stanza or paragraph by paragraph? Or is it a passage characterized by several areas of significance, for example: content; description; chronology, contrasts, which might best be treated accordingly, in 'chunks'? Perhaps the linear and "chunks" approaches can be merged to some extent, as in the student sample commentaries on "The Black Lace Fan" and *The Horse's Mouth* that follow.

The linear approach is often used and can be very effective, but a plodding, line-by-line analysis needs to be avoided. The difference between the effectively linear and the plodding is one of engagement and imagination. If you enter into the life of the passage/poem, understanding it, as it were, from the inside, it is unlikely you will plod. Sometimes when students read examples of a linear treatment, they think that it is just paraphrase. But description of content, response to the content, and interpretation can be intertwined.

A related question is: *If I use the linear approach, should I discuss techniques as I go along, or deal with the meaning first and then add further paragraphs on important literary features?* Because meaning and language are so closely intertwined, especially in poetry, it is often necessary to describe the content by interpreting the language. It is possible, having dealt with the development of the poem's idea (which may involve several paragraphs), to expand on some of the significant effects in subsequent paragraphs, but beware of 'tacking on' bits in a non-integrated way.

Should I give my commentary a title?

There is no need to do this (though it seems that some teachers suggest that their students should provide one) and no credit is given for the practice.

What should go into the introduction?

There is no one formula for a successful introduction. However, your introduction should make it clear that you have understood the significance of the passage or poem as a whole, and have found some *unifying principle* in it (an object, an experience, an emotion, a technique) that gives structure and focus. It can also indicate some of the ways in which you are going to develop your commentary, which often means pointing to salient literary features. Here is an example of a 'minimal' introduction.

In his poem "The Heron", Vernon Watkins describes the striking sight of a heron standing on a rock by the sea. Through his descriptive images, metaphors, alliteration, complex rhyme scheme, and suggestions of Greek mythology and the Bible, Watkins gives the bird almost epic significance, completely transforming this simple occurrence. (H Level, May 1997)

Here the candidate shows grasp both of the surface content of the poem (the sight of the heron by the sea), *and* of the poet's individual, transforming vision that provides the 'meaning' and interest of the poem (the 'epic significance' of the bird). It is this perception of the 'transforming vision' that makes this commentary good rather than merely satisfactory. In the second sentence he identifies literary techniques that specifically in this case help create both the meaning and the effect of the poem. Many candidates vaguely refer to 'language' rather than identifying the techniques that specifically characterize the chosen text. He is now set to show how this is accomplished, in the body of his essay.