How to write a Commentary
Approaches to Literary Criticism
IB A1 Paper 1

“Our task is not so much to discuss what is being said, rather it is to discuss how it is being said.”

**Theme (The)** – also Topic & Subject
- What is the subject and concern of the text?
  - Within this there may be more than one theme. Try to identify a key theme or themes.
  - What information do you have, eg the writer’s name/date? Does this provide any indication as to what is the main concern and focus of the text?

**Voice (very)**
- Whose voice do you hear in the text?
- Narrative Perspective: 1st or 3rd person (omniscient)? If 1st person, is it the voice of the author (authorial) or are they playing a role (persona)?
- Ascertain to whom the text is addressed: the reader; another?
- Establish the situation in which the text is set: the setting
  - Does the setting reinforce the meaning, message or tone in any way?
  - Does the writer have a particular attitude towards the environment presented?

**Form/Structure (fortunate)**
- Identify the form of this piece of writing: fiction/non-fiction, essay, journalism, travel writing, etc.
- What is the overall structure of the piece (ie: circular or retrospective narrative)?
- Are there any obvious ways in which it could be divided into sections, ie its layout, its meaning or by changes the language and shifts in pace and focus?
- Does the structure reinforce the meaning or the message of the text in any way?

**Messages/Purpose (master)**
- Think about the author’s aims and purposes – what is he/she trying to say?
  - What type of text is it? Informative/descriptive/persuasive?
- Look for ideas which are embedded below the surface of the text (subtext).
- Are there any signs of irony or satire?

**Tone/Atmosphere (teaches)**
- How would you describe the writer’s attitude or ‘tone of voice’?
- Does this create a mood, atmosphere or feeling which permeates the text, such as gloom/joy? This often relates to language & lexical field (word motif).
- If so, what it is about the writing that creates this effect (ie: archaic or technical language; note syntax and cadence as well)?
- Look at the use of setting in time and place – how is this presented and how does this influence the tone and mood?
Imagery (incompetent)

• What kind of visual images does the text present?
• How does the author use simile and metaphor, for example?
• Comment on both individual examples and on patterns of images.
• Always explain and analyse these examples in terms of their contribution to the overall meaning of the text.
• How does the text involve and engage the reader/audience by appealing to THE SENSES (see extended notes on next page for more on the senses)

Diction (deficient)

• What is the lexical field? Is there more than one lexical field? Which is dominant? Are there types of words that recur? (ie different words relating to death/childhood etc)
• What do you notice about individual words and phrases chosen?
• Are there words that seem unexpected/out of place? What effect do they create?

Rhyme/Rhythm/Sound effects (rich)

• In poetry, what effect does the rhyming have (if there is any)?
• Rhythm can be important in prose too: are the sentences flowing or jerky (long, clausal sentences or short and perfunctory)? This can relate to the structure of the text.
• Does the rhythm change at any point? Why?
• Other sound effects are created by devices such as alliteration.
• Remember to comment on the effect of these.
• If you cannot see any particular effect it is better not to mention these features at all!

Conclusion (children)

• Finally, return to an overview of the text. Sum up how the effects and details of style you have analysed come together to create a ‘whole’ piece or writing.
• Do content and style compliment each other?
• What has your reading of it contributed to your understanding of the subject?
• Does it offer a way of looking at things that you had not considered before?
• A good conclusion is not simply a summary of what has been said but a synthesis of your argument and the understanding this has inspired.

Remember: Point (Statement) ➔ Quotation ➔ Comment (Analysis)

Information...

• Paper 1 of the IB AI course will contain 2 unseen texts, one of which WILL be a poem, the other may be fiction - from a novel or short story or a piece of non-fiction such as essay, biography or journalism
• The texts may be extracts or complete pieces
• At Higher Level there will be no accompanying questions or guidelines. At Standard Level there will be guiding questions intended as prompts to help you structure your commentary. You do not have to respond directly to these questions, neither must you simply answer them as individual questions; they should be integrated into your overall response.
**Senses**
- You should examine the text to see if there are any examples of the senses that appeal to the reader & are used to draw them further into the text.
  - Olfactory (smell)
  - Auditory (hearing)
  - Gustatory (taste)
  - Visual/Ocular (sight)
  - Tactile (touch)

**Poetry**
- In poetry analysis refer to the voice as ‘the speaker’ or ‘persona’ not the author or narrator (‘the author’ presumptuously implies there is an autobiographical content and ‘the narrator’ is a term used when analysing narrative). ‘The speaker’ or ‘persona’ is the voice of the poem, which may not necessarily be that of the poet.
- A poem is directed at an audience, not at a reader.

**Prose**
- In analysis of prose, focus on understanding the writer’s style. To establish their style examine their individual combination of literary devices, structure, vocabulary etc that go together to form their style.
- It is by examining *how* the texts are written that we can identify individual style
- Use the diagram below to help you see the many ingredients that make up style and use it in your analysis of prose.
Top Tips...

- The mnemonic written to help you in remembering all key aspects of the commentary is to be used as a means of recalling the features needing to be addressed, rather than the order in which to organise your commentary. It is not designed as a strict formula that you must follow!
  - Having read the text through a couple of times you should have ascertained which are the key features and they should be addressed first. Colour coding may help you to organise and structure your response in a logical and focused manner.
- Do not be daunted by a poem or prose extract.
- There will be good reason why a particular piece has been chosen, you will discover them with close reading - texts about which there is nothing to say are not usually chosen!
- As you begin writing your answer, begin with an overview or general point (eg theme and content) and then go on to study it in detail.
- Read the text through thoroughly at least twice, preferably more like four times!
- Underline key words and phrases. These underlined words represent the ideas that you will need to keep in mind as you plan and write your answer.
- Annotate the text. Annotation helps you remember details and enables you to find them quickly again.
- Note down your initial responses to the effects created by specific words/phrases and then incorporate them into your commentary.
- List the key points that you need to cover in your commentary. Try to arrange them in a logical order so that your answer flows.
- As you analyse ensure that you include referenced quotations to back up your arguments – Point (Statement), Quotation, Comment (Analysis)
- Try avoiding using first person (with the possible exception of your conclusion, where to reinforce an important point, it can be rather effective) since this maintain a critically objective stance rather than a subjective bias.
- Avoid slang!
- Try to be aware of dialect and local usage and avoid using it.
- Avoid the use of abbreviations, eg ‘did not’ is preferable to ‘didn’t’ and avoid ‘etc’.
- Unless the number is very large try to avoid writing numbers in numerical format.
- Try to use the present tense, but more importantly be consistent in your tense use.

Adapted from English for the IB Diploma by Croft & Cross