

THE COMMENTARY

Preliminary to the commentary

Step 1. Read the poem/passage carefully three times:

- *silently, for first impression of total effect
- *aloud, noting shifts of pattern, thought, voice, tone, and flow
- *again, to reinforce or adjust first impression

Step 2. Usually for prose (likely to be part of a longer work), and sometimes for a piece of a longer poem

*Try to identify the nature of the whole: what kind of a prose work?

Fiction? Non-fiction? Type, purpose, audience?

*Try to assess the function of THIS part: what is this excerpt doing on its own? In the whole?

(In the Exam or Oral, ask yourself **why** the teacher/examiner chose it.)

Step 3. Go through your CLOSE READING questions:

WHO is speaking?

TO WHOM?

WHAT? (situation) WHY? (purpose)

WHERE? WHEN? (setting)

HOW? (tone, style)

PATTERNS? (structure, form)

TENSION? (conflicts, contrasts, ironies)

SO WHAT? (dominant effect)

Composing the commentary

Step 4. Look again at "SO WHAT?" and taking this dominant effect as your thesis, select relevant details of evidence to support your argument and to include in your commentary. Be sure to include no detail without relating it to its specific effect and place in the whole.

NOTE, however, that if several details observed in Step 3 do NOT support your idea you need to think again and explore further. Don't force a point of view.

Organize your commentary in any way that suits your argument, but let the passage or poem guide you to the shaping of your commentary. There is no formula.