

FR1: GUIDELINES FOR COMMENTARY WRITING

The aim of the commentary exercise is to look closely at what a given passage communicates, and at the ways in which it uses literary and linguistic techniques to achieve its aims. To do this, you need to show sensitivity to the ways in which the French language functions in the passage, particularly in terms of its defining literary features. This document provides worked examples to illustrate ways of analysing such features (section 1), together with further considerations on the nature of the commentary exercise (section 2) and suggested resources (section 3).

1. Examples of close analysis

When analysing a passage in depth, you will need to examine its distinctive features in detail. This will include such elements as:

- **syntax and sentence structure**

TEXT: 'Contre moi-même enfin j'osai me révolter.' (*Phèdre*, line 291)

COMMENTARY: In line 291, Racine's twisted syntax gives expression to Phèdre's sense of dislocation, her split self.

- **use of verbs (tenses, active or passive voice, and the use of the subjunctive mood)**

TEXT: 'Je dis mes principes, et je le dis à dessein : car ils ne sont pas, comme ceux des autres femmes, donnés au hasard, reçus sans examen et suivis par habitude, ils sont le fruit de mes profondes réflexions ; je les ai créés, et je puis dire que je suis mon ouvrage.' (*Les Liaisons dangereuses*, letter LXXXI)

COMMENTARY: Merteuil contrasts the unthinking docility of other women with her own creative self-fashioning by using passive verbs to describe their acceptance of external principles, and active verbs to express her own self-determination.

- **patterns such as repetition and antithesis**

TEXT: 'Tandis qu'on me croyait étourdie ou distraite, écoutant peu à la vérité les discours qu'on s'empressait à me tenir, je recueillais avec soin ceux qu'on cherchait à me cacher.' (*Les Liaisons dangereuses*, letter LXXXI)

COMMENTARY: The contrast between external perceptions of Merteuil and her true motivations is heightened by the balanced opposition between 'qu'on s'empressait à me tenir' and 'qu'on cherchait à me cacher'.

- **frequency and position of adverbs and adjectives**

TEXT: 'Il rabattit le col de sa chemise et regarda la plaie dans un méchant miroir de quinze sous accroché au mur. Cette plaie faisait un trou rouge, large comme une pièce de deux sous ; la peau avait été arrachée, la chair se montrait, rosâtre, avec des taches noires ; des filets de sang avaient coulé jusqu'à l'épaule, en minces traînées qui s'écaillaient. Sur le cou blanc, la morsure paraissait d'un brun sourd et puissant ; elle se trouvait à droite, au-dessous de l'oreille. Laurent, le dos courbé, le cou tendu, regardait, et le miroir verdâtre donnait à sa face une grimace atroce.' (*Thérèse Raquin*, chapter 13)

COMMENTARY: Zola's use of adjectives of colour draws attention vividly to the physical presence of the wound, sole trace of Laurent's crime; the motivations for this crime are drawn together in the juxtaposition of adjectives of colour, foregrounding the flesh, and descriptions evoking money. The two come emphatically together twice: in the sizing of the wound in comparison to a low-value coin, and the cheap greenish mirror, whose colour anticipates the sight of Camille's body in the morgue.

- **sound patterning, such as assonance and alliteration**

TEXT: 'Tout m'afflige et me nuit, et conspire à me nuire.' (*Phèdre*, line 161)

COMMENTARY: Is Phèdre's suffering fated, preordained by the gods? Racine's striking use of assonance certainly yokes together her present affliction and the suggestion of conspiracy.

TEXT: 'Je ne sai pas s'il le fist s'amie,
Car n'i fui pas, ne n'en vi mie,
Mais non de pucele perdi
La dame dalés son ami.' (*Le Bel inconnu*, ll. 4815-18)

COMMENTARY: The insistent alliteration, rhyme and assonance in these playful lines remind us that the narrator is fully in control of the narrative, despite his claim to only partial knowledge of the story he is relating.

- **versification (e.g. rhyme and metre)**

TEXT: 'Je respirais, Œnone ; et depuis son absence

Mes jours moins agités coulaient dans l'innocence.' (*Phèdre*, lines 297-8)

COMMENTARY: Continuing this moving passage of self-analysis, Racine pairs 'absence' and 'innocence' in a couplet governed by the imperfect tense. The geographical distance between Phèdre and Hippolyte was able to restore her longed-for equilibrium and a sense of her own moral probity. The fluid *enjambement* works with the verb 'couler' to communicate the temporary easing of tension.

TEXT: 'Li rois apiela Beduier :
« Alés tost a cel chevalier,
A celui qui me quist le don ;
Demandés lui coment a non.
— Bien li dirai, » dist Beduier.
Il est venus au chevalier.
« Sire, fait il, li rois vos mande,
Et si le vos prie et comande,
Que vos me dites vostre non;
Vos n'i avrés ja se preu non.' (*Le Bel inconnu*, ll. 105-14)

COMMENTARY: Our attention is drawn to the crucial connections between names, naming and social function within this passage (and the romance as a whole) by the reiteration within the space of 10 lines of the same two rhyming sounds, 'ier' and 'on'. The proper name 'Beduier' is rhymed twice with the common noun, 'chevalier', emphasising the unknown knight's namelessness in contrast to Arthur's other knights. The second rhyme in 'on' is a *rime équivoque*, stressing both the urgent need for the knight to have a name (a need evident in the rhyme in 'mande', which reiterates the King's authority in ordering that it be divulged); and that his name is (for now) only understood as a lack.

- **manipulation of genre conventions (e.g. sonnet, letter, speech)**

TEXT: 'Ores l'effroy et ores l'esperance,
De çà de là se campent en mon cuœur,
Or l'une vainq, ores l'autre est vainqueur,
Pareilz en force & en perseverance.
Ores douteux, ores plain d'assurance,
Entre l'espoyr & le froyd de la peur,
Heureusement de moy mesme trompeur,
Au cuœur captif je prometz delivrance.
Verray-je point avant mourir le temps,
Que je tondray la fleur de son printemps,

Soubz qui ma vie à l'ombrage demeure ?
Verray-je point qu'en ses bras enlassé,
De trop combatre honnestement lassé,
Honnestement entre ses bras je meure ?'

(Ronsard, *Les Amours* (1552),
41)

COMMENTARY: This poem is in the traditional Petrarchan sonnet form, used extensively by French poets in the Renaissance. It consists of two quatrains, with the same rhyme scheme (abba abba), followed by two tercets based on three rhymes, in this case ccd eed, though other combinations are possible. In this sonnet, Ronsard exploits this 8 + 6 structure to present two moments in his experiences of love. The first (ll. 1–8), in the present, and emphasised by the frequent and contrasting repetition of the temporal adverb *ores* ('now'), presents the antithetical feelings (hope/fear, doubt/certainty, etc.) experienced by the poet as a result of his love. The second moment (ll. 9–14) is set in a hypothetical and doubtful future ('Verray-je point', ll. 9 and 12), in which the poet will reach his goal of finally possessing the beloved, expressed in two traditional images: flower plucking (l. 10), and the Petrarchan *piccola morte* (little death, l. 14), referring to the post-coital state which he hopes to achieve.

- **use of dialogue**

TEXT: '— Je n'ai pu me procurer de la glace, répondit sèchement Thérèse.

— C'est bien, je ne boirai pas, reprit Laurent.

— Cette eau est excellente.

— Elle est chaude et a un goût de bourbe. On dirait de l'eau de la rivière.' (*Thérèse Raquin*, chapter 28)

COMMENTARY: As Laurent's evocation of river water recalls the criminal origins of his relationship with Thérèse, the deterioration in this relationship is captured in the antagonistic rhythm of their exchange.

- **irony**

TEXT: 'Ce n'est pas de Madame de Tourvel dont je veux vous parler ; sa marche trop lente vous déplaît.' (*Les Liaisons dangereuses*, letter XCVI)

COMMENTARY: Valmont's statement is a good example of preterition: he does precisely what he says he is not going to do. His deference to Merteuil

undermines itself neatly, as Tourvel is the object not just of this sentence, but of the entire subsequent paragraph.

Look also at how these work in tandem with other literary techniques, such as:

- **use of themes, symbols, and imagery**
- **methods of characterization**
- **narrative voice and perspective**

2. Further considerations

1. The commentary offers an opportunity for you to identify the features you see as important in a given passage, and to explain their significance. So the details you describe should not just be listed: they should be discussed in terms of the effects they create.

2. There is no need to ascribe to the text a definitive meaning or structure. It is fine to problematize the text; indeed, good commentaries will often point out ambiguities or inconsistencies.

3. A commentary should not be a précis or an exhaustive account of the passage. Rather, you can afford to emphasise particular themes and facets. Try to structure your commentary so as to present your analysis of these in the most effective way possible. In other words, you don't need to proceed line by line!

4. It may at times be helpful, when demonstrating the significance of a given passage, to refer to material beyond this passage, such as elements of the wider work from which the extract is taken, or the literary or historical context of this work. Please note, though that any references you make to such material should be concise, and should serve to illuminate the passage in some way. A commentary is not an essay on a text as a whole: it is a focussed account of the operation of a specific extract.

5. It is not necessary to write out quotations from the passage. Passages for commentary in examinations always have the lines numbered and it is easier and more economical to refer to extracts by citing these.

3. Suggested resources

Michael Hawcroft, *Rhetoric: Readings in French Literature* (Oxford University Press, 1999): A helpful work containing several examples of commentaries, as well as a glossary of literary terms such as those found in our examples above. Although the more technical terms of classical rhetoric need not necessarily be applied to a commentary passage, Hawcroft's examples offer a useful guide to ways of engaging with texts at this level of detail.

For a useful glossary of literary terms in French, see: <http://www.etudes-litteraires.com/figures-de-style/index.php>. For a similar list in English (bearing in mind that some of these terms may be relevant only to literary works in English), see: <http://www.english.cam.ac.uk/classroom/terms.htm>.