

Part IA Commentary Guidelines

OVERVIEW

A Basic Definition

For the purposes of Part IA Cambridge French, a commentary can be defined as a short analysis (1,200-1,500 words) of a literary passage which aims to elucidate how, in literary and linguistic terms, the passage achieves its effects. Normally the passage will be a short poem, or a dramatic or prose text of 30-40 lines in length, taken from an Fr1 set text.

Why write commentaries?

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. By doing this you indicate your grasp of those aspects of the passage that mark it out as specifically literary. In addition, you show sensitivity to the ways in which the French language functions in detail and in context – an essential skill for any modern linguist.

What the passage communicates will vary from case to case. A passage may be conveying a purely personal emotion; this might be the case, for instance, in a lyric poem. A piece of non-fictional argumentative prose may be communicating a general view, for instance, of politics, society, or human nature, that the author thinks is true, and that he or she gives reasons for thinking true. A passage from a narrative work or a play may express the viewpoint of an individual character, rather than that of the author.

In all such cases a commentary can be a good way of getting into the principal ideas of the text, and can give you a chance to get to know its style, tone, register and vocabulary. The techniques you learn for commentaries can also be very useful in writing essays: you can use these methods of close reading to give examples to illustrate your argument.

Who am I writing my commentary for?

Imagine that you are writing for somebody who is broadly familiar with the work from which the passage is taken, its background, and the language in which it is written (e.g. Anglo-Norman, seventeenth-century or modern French) and who simply wants to understand the extract better. What would they want to know? Conversely, what can you take for granted? Try to keep these questions in view irrespective of who will *actually* be reading your commentary (e.g. your supervisor, your supervision partner, your examiners). Bearing your imagined reader in mind will help you focus

on the essentials of the passage and, for instance, avoid explaining unnecessary details (for more on this, see ‘DOs and DON’Ts’ below).

Questions you might ask yourself

The list below is far from exhaustive, but is a good place to start:

- What kind of literary genre is this? How do I know?
- Who is speaking, and to whom?
- Whose point of view is being expressed?
- What do we learn?
- What surprises the reader / makes us laugh / frightens / puzzles / angers / intrigues us?
- What changes?
- What is repeated?
- How would I describe the pace and rhythm?
- What assumptions are made?
- What is left out?

SOME COMMENTARY DOs AND DON’Ts

The Commentary Exercise

- ***DON’T write an essay when you should be writing a commentary***

Commentaries should be more narrowly focused than essays. It may at times be helpful, when demonstrating the significance of a given passage, to refer to material beyond the extract, such as elements of the wider work from which the passage is taken, or the literary or historical context of that 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; nor is it even required to develop an argument as such. It is a focused account of the operation of a specific extract.

- ***DON’T paraphrase...***

Your task in a commentary is to show how literary and linguistic devices contribute to the effect of the passage. This goes far beyond a straightforward paraphrase of its meaning. Remember that your imagined reader already knows more or less *what* the passage is about (see above, ‘Who am I writing my commentary for?’); what they now want you to show them is *how* it achieves its effects.

- ... **but DO show briefly that you have understood the basic content**

There are a couple of exceptions to the ‘Don’t paraphrase’ rule. For instance, it is a good idea in the introduction to a commentary to state what the passage is concretely about, e.g.:

✓ In this sonnet the poet describes a courtly dance in which H el ene is engaged and his own response to the beauty of her steps.

Note here that the work of interpretation has not really begun: you are simply stating the matter of the poem, at the most basic level. Occasional brief paraphrase is also acceptable as the commentary progresses, for example when introducing a new segment of the passage, e.g.:

✓ In the next paragraph the narrator’s attention turns to the smell of the Maison Vauquer’.

Just be careful that, beyond these basic signposts, commentary rather than paraphrase remains in the driver’s seat.

- **DON’T translate the text**

Because the texts on which you are commenting are written in a foreign language, it is sometimes possible to convince yourself that you have commented on a line or segment when in fact you have merely translated it. Translation, like paraphrase, does not qualify as commentary.

Questions of Emphasis

- **DO introduce the passage; DON’T introduce the work / author / background etc.**

A common mistake in commentaries is to waste time introducing the author, text, historical background or plot rather than the passage itself. This can arise from a desire to showcase a general knowledge of the text that might be better suited to an essay. Padding of this kind should be avoided, not least because general knowledge of this kind can in any case be assumed in your reader (see ‘Who am I writing my commentary for?’ above).

So:

✗ ‘This passage is taken from Pierre Corneille’s play *Horace*, which was first performed in 1640 and tells the story of the duel that the eponymous hero and

his brothers are required to fight against the Curiaces, who etc. etc.'

✓ 'This passage is taken from Act IV of *Horace* and features Camille's furious denunciation of Rome, which will shortly lead to her death at her brother's hands.'

- ***DON'T waste time on routine or unexceptional features of the text***

This point is similar to the previous one. Your emphasis should usually be on the specific features of *this* passage, not on the work in general.

Thus:

✗ 'Like every other sonnet in the sequence, this poem from Ronsard's *Sonets pour Helene* employs alexandrines – that is a twelve-syllable verse line – and an ABBAABBA rhyme-scheme in the quatrains.'

✓ 'Ronsard makes use of this sonnet's unusual CDCDDC rhyme scheme in the tercets to emphasise, in the recurrent C-rhyme, the unavoidable connection between violence and desire.'

- ***DON'T assume the passage is always representative of the work from which it is taken***

Some passages set for commentary are fairly typical of the work as a whole – its style, its images, its thematic preoccupations. But others are not. Do not be too eager to 'tick off' a set of characteristics you would normally expect to find in the work: these may or not be present in the chosen extract (sometimes examiners choose extracts precisely for their peculiarities). Instead try to remain alert to all the features of the passage, whether representative or not.

- ***DO be selective...***

A commentary should not be a précis or an exhaustive account of the passage. It should not proceed line by line. Rather, you can afford to emphasise particular themes and facets.

- ***... but DON'T miss too much out for the sake of one or two details!***

A common indication that a student has failed to grasp the overall sense of a passage is a heavy emphasis on just one or two details, however significant, at the expense of all the rest. Try to avoid leaving yourself vulnerable to this suspicion (especially if you *have* understood the whole passage!) and make sure you are not depending on an excessively narrow selection of words or images.

- ***DO focus on form as well as content, and (where appropriate) show that you are aware of the origin of the passage.***

The ideas or events conveyed in a passage are always conveyed in a particular form – e.g. the theatrical form, sonnet form, a descriptive realist novel. Explain how that form reinforces the content (or perhaps undermines it).

✘ The wife in *Laüstic* laments the death of the nightingale.

✔ Since the *lai* form involves so many appeals to performance and orality, the lady's soliloquy, 'Lasse, fet ele, mal m'estait !' is all the more poignant, since she is only able to address herself, rather than speaking directly to her lover.

Different literary forms do different work for the reader. For instance, in drama, we are only presented with speech, and we have to perceive the action and motivation of characters for ourselves (a novel might tell us why a character is saying something, and describe what they do as they say it).

Some texts will have been more obviously edited than others. For instance, an editor may have made certain decisions about spelling or punctuation. This is especially true for medieval texts, which have originally been transcribed by hand in a manuscript, with little or no punctuation and no consistency in spelling.

✘ The guillemets emphasise the husband's ability to command his wife through direct speech; and the exclamation mark shows us the force of his order.

✔ The punctuation added by the editor to the couplet '« Dame, fet il, u estes vus ? / Venez avant, parlez a nus ! »' reinforces the husband's conviction that his speech carries unquestioned power.

- ***DON'T just point out features or devices; DO explain their effects***

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.

✘ Line 16 features an instance of the rhetorical device of *aposiopesis*, in which the character's speech suddenly breaks off mid-line.

✔ The occurrence of *aposiopesis* in l. 16 indicates the character's uncertain state of mind, or perhaps his unwillingness to follow his train of thought to its logical conclusion.

Commentary Structure and Presentation

- ***Do adapt your commentary structure to the structure of the passage***

Line-by-line commentaries are neither engaging or informative, since lines themselves (even verse lines in poetry) are rarely in themselves meaningful units of sense. Instead try to organise your commentary in one of the following ways:

- (i) **Thematic.** Choose those elements of the passage that seem most important and structure your commentary around these. You might devote a paragraph to the representation of a particular psychological state (e.g. hallucination, oblivion, or awakening), a cluster of images, a particular phonetic or syntactic effect such as assonance or disjointed phrasing etc.
- (ii) **Sequential.** ‘Chunk’ the passage in a way that respects its own structure and then work through it, chunk by chunk. For instance, a sonnet divides naturally into two quatrains and two tercets; a piece of narrative prose is often grouped into paragraphs; a dramatic work might switch speakers or, inside a single monologue, exhibit shifts of emphasis or tone. Proceeding sequentially in this way avoids the tedium of the line-by-line approach while remaining faithful to the linear experience of reading (that is, to the fact that readers encounter *c* only after and in the light of *a* and *b*).

The choice between thematic and sequential models is partly personal; partly it depends on the kind of structure a given passage invites. The sequential model *always* works for sonnets; beyond that there remains considerable latitude.

- **DO** use line numbers to refer to the text

It is not necessary to write out long 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 (in the form e.g. l. 5, ll. 15-18).

Thus:

✘ Rousseau uses a concessive tone when making the case for speculative thinking: “J’avoue que les évènements que j’ai à décrire ayant pu arriver de plusieurs manières, je ne puis me puis déterminer sur le choix que par des conjectures.”

✓ Rousseau uses a concessive tone (‘J’avoue que [...]’, l. 11) when making the case for speculative thinking in ll. 11-13.

EXAMPLES OF CLOSE ANALYSIS

Syntax and sentence structure

TEXT

Si nous suivons le progrès de l'inégalité dans ces différentes révolutions, nous trouverons que l'établissement de la Loi et du Droit de propriété fut son premier terme; l'institution de la Magistrature le second; que le troisième et dernier fut le changement du pouvoir légitime en pouvoir arbitraire; en sorte que l'état de riche et de pauvre fut autorisé par le premier Epoque, celui de puissant et de foible par la seconde, et par la troisième celui de Maître et d'Esclave, qui est le dernier degré de l'inégalité, et le terme auquel aboutissent tous les autres, jusqu'à ce que de nouvelles révolutions dissolvent tout à fait le Gouvernement, ou le rapproche de l'institution légitime.

Discours

COMMENTARY

This sentence falls into three parts. The first two parts themselves fall into three parts, which conveys the sense of a tightly-controlled and comprehensive argument. The first part recapitulates three stages in the development of societies. The first two might appear to be positive, but the third is negative (legitimate power being replaced by arbitrary power, a development that undermines the first development, the institution of laws). The second part (beginning 'en sorte que') sets out the unequal social relationships that belong to each stage. Here there is a negative progression evident in the second term, from 'pauvre', to 'foibles', to 'esclave'. The sentence-structure thus conveys an overall negative view of the apparently inevitable development of societies towards despotism. The final part, beginning 'jusqu'a ce que', has a different binary structure, indicating two possible routes out of despotism, one to anarchy, the other to the establishment of a law-governed society. This opens up a possibility of hope which the first two sections seemed to eliminate.

Use of verbs

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

TEXT

Les premiers développemens du cœur furent l'effet d'une situation nouvelle qui réunissoit dans une habitation commune les maris et les Femmes, les Peres et les Enfans; l'habitude de vivre ensemble fit naître les plus doux sentimens qui soient connus des hommes, l'amour conjugal, et l'amour Paternel. Chaque famille devint une petite Société.

Rousseau, *Discours*

COMMENTARY

Rousseau here uses the imperfect to describe a new situation (men and women, fathers and children living together) and the *passé simple* to narrate the emotional developments that result from that situation.

TEXT

Covercle i ot tres bien asis.
Le laüstic ad dedenz mis,
Puis fist la chasse enseeler.
Tuz jurs l'ad fete od lui porter.

Laüstic, ll. 153-6

COMMENTARY

Verbs are placed in the rhyme position in these consecutive couplets, with past participles in line 153-4 giving way to infinitives in 155-6. These verbs emphasise the activity of creation, portraying not only the lady's commissioning of the ornate chest in which the nightingale is sealed, but also the process of creating a lai using the building blocks of language and sound.

Patterns such as repetition and antithesis

TEXT

Tous coururent au devant de leurs fers croyant assûrer leur liberté; car avec assés de raison pour sentir les avantages d'un établissement politique, ils n'avoient pas assez d'expérience pour en prévoir les dangers.

Discours

COMMENTARY

Antithesis is essential to Rousseau's portrayal of the state of mind of the human beings who founded the first societies in the full sense of the term. It enables him to contrast what they hoped to achieve by this step (security and freedom: 'assûrer leur liberté', 'avantages') with the end-result (insecurity and slavery: 'fers', 'dangers'). Repetition ('assés') helps him to explain this paradoxical outcome: they have enough reason (capacity for abstract thought) to conceive the advantages of putting an end to their current state of conflict; they do not have enough experience to foresee that the positive gains of living in societies may be accompanied or outweighed by negative results.

TEXT

J'ai le laüstic enginnié
Pur quei vus avez tant veillié.
Des or poëz **gisir en peis** :
Il ne vus esveillerat meis. »

Laüstic, 105-110

COMMENTARY

With cruel irony, the husband repeats the lady's words back to her. 'Gisir en peis' has a double meaning here: the lady's sleep will no longer be disturbed by the nightingale, but this phrase also foreshadows the death of the nightingale and of the love between the lady and her neighbour.

Rhythm and Sound Patterning

TEXT

Le col li **rumpt** a ses deus meins.

De ceo fist il ke trop vileins !	<i>Laüstic</i> , ll. 113-116
COMMENTARY	
The narratorial intervention clearly signals the position taken by Marie de France; her audience are consequently encouraged to sympathise with the wife of the violent man who kills the bird in the brutal monosyllable ‘rump’t’.	
TEXT	
Je sens de veine en veine une chaleur nouvelle, Qui me trouble le sang et m’augmente le soing.	
<i>Sonets pour Helene</i> , I.49, ll. 1-2	
COMMENTARY	
Line 2 draws together the physical and psychological effects of the poet’s love by means of rhythmic symmetry (the 3+3 // 3+3 pattern) and phonetic echoing, with the similar words ‘sang’ and ‘soing’ both occurring on the main stress.	
TEXT	
Mon plaisir en ce mois c’est de voir les Coloms S’emboucher bec à bec de baisers doux et longs, Dès l’aube jusqu’au soir que le Soleil se plonge.	
<i>Sonets pour Helene</i> I.27, ll. 9-11	
COMMENTARY	
This is a rare example of onomatopoeia in Ronsard, in which the sounds of the words directly mimic their sense. Thanks to their repeated plosives (the [p] and [b] sounds) ll. 9-11 not only describe but perform the act of the kissing turtle doves.	

Allusion / Intertextuality

TEXT	
Je ne sçay ny moyen, remede ny maniere De sortir de vos retz, où je vis en langueur: Et si l’extreme ennuy traine plus en longueur, Vous aurez de ce corps la despouille derniere. Yeux qui m’avez blessé, yeux mon mal et mon bien, Guarissez vostre playe. Achille le peut bien. Vous estes tout-divins, il n’estoit que pur homme.	
<i>Sonets pour Helene</i> , I.24, ll. 5-11	
COMMENTARY	
In ll. 9-11 the poet refers to the legend according to which Achilles was able to heal injuries using the same lance he had used to inflict them. The comparison is with Héléne’s eyes: whereas once these wounded the poet, now they might cure his pain. Although the allusion to Achilles’s lance is somewhat conventional (Ronsard may have found it in Petrarch), the poem plays on other associations with the Greek hero. Having defeated the Trojan Hector in battle, Achilles notoriously dragged his corpse around Troy, attached to the back of his chariot. This episode is possibly suggested in ll. 7-8, with the reference to way ‘l’extreme ennuy <i>traine</i> plus en longueur’, leaving only the poet’s flayed remains (‘la despouille derniere’). Unpacked in full the allusion is psychologically suggestive: the Greek captive Helene has become her heroic compatriot Achilles, while the poet takes on the role of the defeated Trojan	

prince.

Orality and Performance

TEXT

Oiez cum il est bien vengiez!

Bisclavret, 1.234

COMMENTARY

At this crucial moment of violent retribution, the narrator addresses the audience directly: the verb ‘oiez’ signals an oral performance, involving us even more in the action.

Multiple Features

TEXT

CURIACE:

Il est vrai que nos noms ne sauraient plus périr.
L’occasion est belle, il nous la faut chérir.
Nous serons les miroirs d’une vertu bien rare;
Mais votre fermeté tient un peu du barbare.

Horace, Act II, scene 3, ll. 453-6

COMMENTARY

The self-contained alexandrines, regular caesurae and emphatic punctuation of Curiace’s reply demonstrate his now more orderly state of mind. In lines 453-5 he gives us a series of three careful statements that are in perfect accordance with those of Horace; indeed he is appropriating Horace’s earlier language. This makes the rejection of Horace’s ‘fermeté’ in line 456 all the more sudden and striking. The rhyming couplet (‘vertu bien rare’ – ‘barbare’) works to redefine Horace’s exceptionalism as brutality.

TEXT

CAMILLE:

Ne cherche plus ta sœur où tu l’avais laissée,
Tu ne revois en moi qu’une amante offensée
Qui comme une furie attachée à tes pas
Te veut incessamment reprocher son trépas.

Horace, Act IV, scene 5, ll. 1283-6

COMMENTARY

Aristotle says in his *Poetics* that familial bonds are the most poignant subject matter for tragedy. Here, we see those attachments spectacularly broken as Camille reconfigures her own identity. The sister of the past makes way for the bereaved lover of the present. Her future can only be mythologized: she becomes a ‘furie’ or goddess of retribution, the devoted sibling transformed into a vengeful ghost ‘attachée à tes pas’.