**Writing a Chapter Analysis/Commentary/Essay**

* *Consider what the author has chosen to do artistically to present his/her material. Consider, “****What is the function/effects of*** *…?” This is the basic question students should be asking when planning their commentary/essay.*
* *Consider why the examiner chose this particular passage.*
* *The commentary can be organized according to various elements (theme, tone, style…), chronologically, section by section.*
* *There is no such thing as a formula for a good commentary. The following are issues that can provide stimulus to your own active, critical thinking. Try to balance sharp-edged critical analysis with personal impression. Throughout your commentary avoid merely stating the obvious. A sense of* ***questioning, challenging, puzzling through ambiguity, considering alternate responses or interpretations****, and giving personal responses can most effectively distinguish a mediocre commentary from a good one (or, more accurately, the other way around!)*

**I. Central purpose of passage**

* What are author’s views on a particular issue or a character/narrator? Is character/narrator a “voice” for the writer, same moral values, or does the writer establish a moral distance (ironic) from the character/narrator?
* Are these views clear-cut? ambiguous? (complex, unresolved ironies and tensions.) If ambiguous, explain how this ambiguity or irony works. Are the ambiguities fruitful or confusing? Effect?
* Try to consider what the passage does not do (as well as what it does). Consider the passage as one specific approach amongst a range of possible approaches: a selection of literary tactics amongst many possibilities.
* If passage is part of a text studied in class, assess how key an issue this theme is (compare to another passage)
* *Sample introduction: “This passage clearly works primarily as an expression of an unwritten story of pain and alienation. All elements of the poem: rhyme, rhythm, diction, structure, and imagery, reflect this unified effect. Yet equally, and more subtly, there are undercutting ironies, emotional subtleties, and unspoken feelings which provide tension.”*
* Consider the passage in terms of whether it reinforces or challenges conventional assumptions (stereotypes). How much does it reinforce conventional stereotypes we might have of, for example, pretty ladies, success, war, springtime, the ocean, lonely wanderers, melancholy artists, abandoned lovers, assertive males, Christmas, insanity? Or, does it challenge these stereotypes?
* Title: Consider how much the passage depends upon the title, whether there is a kind of dynamic difference between the title and the poem: whether there is a subtle sense of the title complementing [supporting], undercutting [ironically], inducing misleading expectations, setting up assumptions, establishing mood.

**II. Literary features and effects**

* Assess the effect and effectiveness of these features. If problematic, compare to another text: offer alternative approach.

1. **Setting**

* Includes geographical/historical/culture
* Actions of character must be seen in context of setting
* Effects of setting on plot, character, theme?

1. a) **Tone**

* This is the writer’s attitude to his/her subject. Always consider tone (“voice”) and whether it shifts.

1. **Mood**

Mood is dependent on tone, but not necessarily the same. The tone, for example, can be ironic, but the mood sombre: mood really refers to the emotional atmosphere of the whole poem rather than the quality of voice. Remember, however, that it, like tone, can shift.

1. **Character**

* Is there one main protagonist or several?
* Are secondary characters round (developed) or flat (undeveloped) and effect?
* How well does reader get to know characters and how credible are they?
* How are they presented (methods of characterization)?
* **How does writer persuade reader to sympathize with or dislike various characters?**

1. **Narrative point of view**

a) From whose point of view is the passage told? (Do not assume the narrative voice is the   
writer’s: better to refer to it as the speaker’s). Does it shift?

b) How intimate is the voice?

c) Is the narrative voice reliable or not: effect? Is it overheard, or projected towards a   
consciously calculated audience?

6. **Narrative Structure**

* How are ideas or events structured? Pay close attention to any patterns.

a) Is the development:

1. Linear (chronological)
2. Circular (framed: end echoes beginning with some variation). Note first and last words of lines, sentences, and chapters.
3. Psychological (flashbacks, flashforwards, dream sequences)
4. Echoing motif?
5. Juxtaposed (consider ironic juxtaposition)

b) Can passage be viewed as a whole, or is it divided into distinct parts (this does not mean chapters)

c) Sub-plots

d) How important and effective is the ending? Are there unresolved issues and to what effect?

e) What period of time is covered: Short or long (“epic”) and effect?

f) In a poem, consider:

* Traditional patterns (eg. ode, sonnet) and effect
* Regular stanzae with rhyme, or longer units with loose or no rhyme
* end stopping or enjambement
* Regular sentences? effect?
* “Grammatical”
* Syntax: are sentences simple, complex, fragmented, elliptical, rhetorical? Questions used?

6. a) **Imagery.** Do not list images. No one is interested in lists. Begin by asking yourself how much the passage depends on images. Is it, in fact, primarily a conceptual (abstract) passage, for example, or primarily a visual one (or both or neither)? Do the images cohere? Do the images come from related or diverse sources? Are images complemented by other sense-related words? (Be alert to synesthesia) Does imagery (sensory references) modulate into simile, metaphor, personification? Are these figures of speech effective?

b) **Symbolism.** Be careful not to over interpret. All writers are not really trying to say something else instead of what they actually do say. Do elements of a passage suggest further implications? If they do, they can fairly accurately be called symbolic. If they are symbolic, are they archetypal/traditional/literary? Are they structural or incidental? Are they literal or figurative? Are they concrete or abstract?

7. **Diction**

Do not merely describe: consider effects, success, your impressions.

Consider:

* level: formal/informal (colloquial, slang, dialect)
* word choice:
* level: formal/informal (colloquial, slang, dialect)
* “connotation” (emotional overtone)
* strong verbs for action? or colloquial words for mundane tone?
* sound: be sensitive to sounds of words (eg. onomatopoeia) including repeated sounds and appropriateness to content. Do not assume that a particular sound will always have same effect. Avoid mentioning alliteration that really does not have much effect. Note how successfully sound parallelism connects words to create a meaning otherwise unclear.