



It's important to read the extract carefully, highlighting and annotating as you go along

# Preparing for the oral commentary

**Hermione Paddle** provides advice for improving your outcomes in the individual oral commentary for language A: literature

## Exam context



The skills you need for the IOC are similar to those you need to use in paper 1 of your final exam. The close reading; identifying details about language, structure and style; and your analysis of these aspects are all integral to your writing in paper 1. The exam is based on your written commentary (rather than oral) of an unseen text. You are expected to write a fluid, continuous essay that analyses the language and style of the extract. Just like with your IOC, you need to constantly refer to the passages, identifying key moments, quoting them and commenting on the purpose and effect of these, within the context of the piece.

Your individual oral commentary (IOC) is an internally assessed and externally moderated task that is worth 15% of your final grade in literature. The task requires you to verbally comment on and analyse an extract from one of the texts that you have studied in part 2 (detailed study) of your course.

**Table 1** What you will be doing

Standard level	Higher level
Preparation time: 20 minutes	Preparation time: 20 minutes
Total delivery time: 10 minutes	Total delivery time: 20 minutes
Oral commentary: 8 minutes	Oral commentary on poetry: 8 minutes
Teacher questions: 2 minutes	Teacher questions on poetry: 2 minutes
	Discussion on second text: 10 minutes

At both standard level (SL) and higher level (HL) you'll need to speak for 8 minutes, with a subsequent 2 minutes of questions from your teacher. For SL you'll explore one of two possible texts, and for HL you'll focus on poetry. At HL you will also undertake a 10-minute discussion with your teacher on a second text you've studied (Table 1).

The IOC gives you a chance to be yourself and it has several advantages to it, including:

- it's only you and your teacher — you don't have to 'perform' in front of your classmates
- the recording is only an audio recording — it's not filmed
- you have a chance to respond verbally to a text studied in class, which is great if writing isn't your best way of expressing yourself

## Planning your IOC

Students often worry about exactly how to give their commentary, and while there is no 'right' way to go about it, you can follow the basic structure below to ensure that you are meeting all of the criteria to the best of your ability.

## Preparation time

You have 20 minutes to plan your commentary, and you'll be given a clean copy of the extract as well as additional blank pages for you to use. Read the extract. Then read the extract at least two more times so that you don't miss anything. It's really important to read slowly and carefully, highlighting and annotating as you go along. Initially, number all of the lines, so you can make careful and accurate references to them in your commentary. Then, identify the different literary features that you find, thinking about the impact they have on the meaning of the text.

The extract will be a passage of text from one of the works studied in part 2 from the IB prescribed list of texts. You won't know which text

you'll be speaking on until your preparation time (usually chosen at random from a collection of options). Text for the commentary should be 20–30 lines. There will be a range of different extracts chosen for your class, but it is possible that you will be given the same extract as one of your classmates.

The extract must give the title of the text, so you won't need to guess which poem you've been given or which novel you're speaking on. The extract must have two 'guiding questions' to help prompt your discussion (but it is not mandatory that you respond to these). The lines in the extract should be numbered.

### Your introduction

The IB encourages schools to keep coursework submissions anonymous. This means that you only need to introduce yourself with your 'personal code' (which your school will have). Avoid mentioning your name or your school.

In your introduction, state:

- the title and the author
- what the passage is about
- your thesis statement
- a clear list of what your commentary will be about

### Thesis statement

A thesis statement is a declarative sentence that states the purpose of your essay. Because you are not responding to a particular question, you need to develop your own arguments and provide a sentence or two that precisely summarises your interpretation of the extract.

When creating your thesis statement, consider the following:

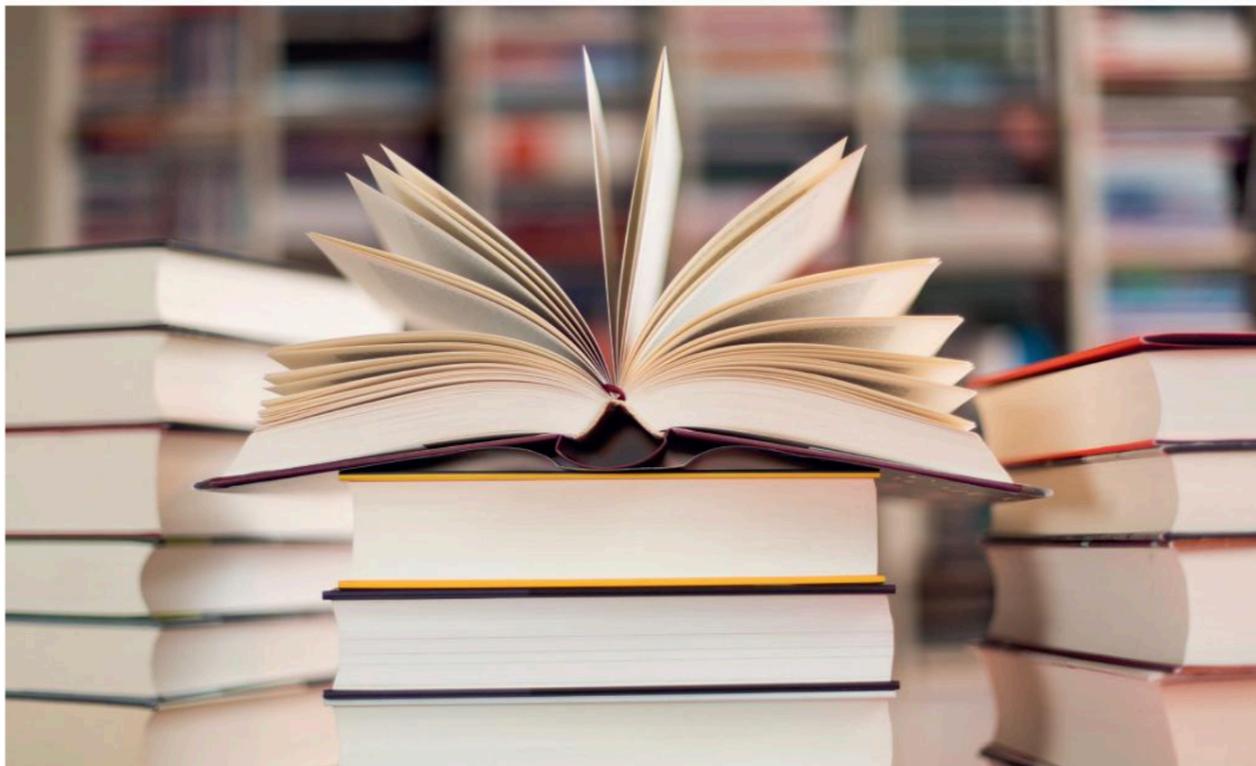
- Think of one or two sentences that convey your overall ideas in a sharply focused but succinct way.

- Make sure these sentences are not simply a description of what goes on in the passage.
- Focus on the ideas that arise in the extract, rather than listing literary devices.
- Try to include two or three ideas, so that your thesis statement is broad and overarching.

Table 2 shows some examples of thesis statements. The purpose of developing such a precise thesis statement is so that you can draw back all of your ideas to this central concern. It's all well and good finding a simile in the extract, and better to find one and suggest *how* it reveals something about a particular character, but your commentary will be far better organised if you can relate that simile to that character's emotional state that you mentioned in your opening.

**Table 2** Example thesis statements

Weak thesis statement	Improved thesis statement
In 'Backdrop Addresses Cowboy' the poet talks about a cowboy who kills people and leaves a trail of destruction behind him	In the poem 'Backdrop Addresses Cowboy' Margaret Atwood effectively satirises the mythical figure of the American cowboy, depicting him as a character who is both comically entertaining yet also dangerous
'A Dill Pickle' is about two ex-lovers who meet in a coffee shop and then talk about their old relationship	The short story 'A Dill Pickle' is about the unlikely reunion of two past lovers who both reminisce and regret aspects of their relationship
In the passage Beatrice shows herself to be a funny character and one who does not approve of marriage	This extract from <i>Much Ado About Nothing</i> illuminates Beatrice's wit and cynicism, as she expresses her acrimonious view of matrimony



## Questions and activities



- 1 Whether you're studying novels, short stories or poetry, develop content and theme statements for the opening paragraphs of each text. For novels, use the first two paragraphs of each chapter; for short stories use the opening of each; for poetry, try to develop them about the poem as a whole. Work on crafting your statements so they are fluid, cohesive phrases.
- 2 Practise 2-minute commentaries. Select any poem or extract and choose one particular device, such as figurative language or imagery. Then time yourself commenting on this feature, and only this feature, for 2 minutes.
- 3 Listen to yourself. One of the best ways to learn about how you sound is to listen to a recording of yourself. Take 10 minutes to undertake a practice and then play back your recording. What did you notice? Do you speak quickly? Repeat yourself? Seem disorganised? Lack focus? Hesitate? Do you resort to certain verbal ticks, such as saying 'like' frequently? Do you 'go up' at the end of a sentence, even when not asking a question, which suggests that you are unsure of what you're talking about? Think of ways to avoid doing this, so that your IOC has real fluency.

### Your body section

Make sure your commentary is an analysis of the author's style and language. You might look at tone, imagery, diction, personification, symbolism, what is left 'unsaid', and so on. The list of literary devices is practically endless and these change depending on your text type, but do not neglect sound and rhythmic devices for poetry, narrative techniques for prose, or rhetorical devices for non-fiction texts.

### The conclusion

Signal to your listeners that you are ending by **signposting**. This means to signal your next idea or to clearly state the point you are going to make, e.g. 'In conclusion...' or 'Overall...', and restate your thesis statement.

Give a short summary of the key literary techniques you commented on and their intended effect. End with an overall statement that ties up your main ideas.

### Higher-level discussion

The purpose of the discussion is for you to demonstrate your knowledge of a second text by responding to questions from your teacher. Questions could be about any aspect of the text, including character, structure, language, technique, style and key moments, ideas or themes. Students at HL have two additional criteria to meet.

### The assessment criteria:

The assessment criteria for the IOC are:

#### Standard level

- Criterion A: knowledge and understanding of the extract (10 marks).
- Criterion B: appreciation of the writer's choices (10 marks).
- Criterion C: organisation and presentation (5 marks).
- Criterion D: language (5 marks).

#### Higher level

- Criterion A: knowledge and understanding of the poem (5 marks).
- Criterion B: appreciation of the writer's choices (5 marks).
- Criterion C: organisation and presentation of the commentary (5 marks).



Develop content and theme statements for the opening paragraph of each text

- Criterion D: knowledge and understanding of the work used in the discussion (5 marks).
  - Criterion E: response to the discussion questions (5 marks).
  - Criterion F: language (5 marks).
- Here are some tips for meeting each of the assessment criteria:

#### Criterion A (SL and HL)

- Consistently quote from the passage.
- Explore the interrelationships of different sections in terms of the overall meaning of the extract.
- Comment on the significance of the extract within the work as a whole.
- Provide brief mentions of biographical details and contextual information, if relevant.

#### Criterion B (SL and HL)

- Comment on literary features that help give a sense of the significance of the extract.
- Understand that the literary devices often don't work in isolation, so figurative language might work together with narrative voice to create a particular mood, or that schemes of language can contribute to how characters and settings are shaped.
- Avoid giving definitions of literary devices.

#### Criterion C (SL and HL)

- Develop a thesis statement based on the overall significance of the extract and draw all of your ideas back to this.



Listening to a recording of yourself is a good way of improving your performances



- Use deliberate signposting to indicate to your audience what is coming next.
- Don't deliver your commentary as a series of unconnected points or a list of devices you noticed.

#### Criterion D (HL)

- Have key sections you know well rather than trying to know everything.
- Memorise key quotations from these sections and be able to use them.
- Work out something to say about more difficult areas, such as considering the climax and being able to comment on the author's use of language.

#### Criterion E (HL)

- Genuinely answer what you've been asked.
- Clarify if you don't understand the question — it's fine to ask for more explanation if you're not sure.
- Try your best to give your own personal response.

#### Language criteria (SL and HL)

- Speak in formal English, in your natural speaking voice.
- Speak in present tense (even if the author is dead).
- Use a rich, wide range of vocabulary. In your planning time, think carefully about words to describe the tone, mood and feelings created so that you don't revert back to the same adjectives.
- Avoid informal language and repeating yourself.

### Theory of knowledge



- 1 Consider how shared and personal knowledge function within the area of literary criticism. How much of what you discuss in your IOC will be personal knowledge? What shared knowledge do you need to equip yourself with to approach an oral commentary on an author's work?
- 2 The TOK knowledge framework is a tool used for analysis that explores aspects such as the key concepts, language and methodology in a given discipline. Consider the methodology, or structure and organisation, of your oral commentary. How does it use a framework that is particular to literary analysis or critical analysis in the arts?

### Key points



- Your IOC is a chance to provide your personal interpretation on one of the texts studied in part 2.
- Developing a thesis statement is integral to the cohesion of your commentary.
- Explore the language, structure and style in the extract to 'show' the writer is doing something, rather than telling us what is happening.
- Signpost your ideas so that your commentary is clearly organised.
- Know and understand the criteria.

Hermione Paddle teaches IB literature, language and literature and TOK.