

## 1. Writing a good English Commentary

*Following an example of a good commentary on 'Friend' by Hone Tuwhane.*

What the author has written is a superb commentary. She has interpreted this poem as a discussion on the effects on colonialism. Whilst this is by no means the only reading of the poem, it is a valid one. In their opening paragraph, they make their reading of the poem very clear. ("[The poem is] a sad lament for an easier and happier time.") More importantly, she sticks to this reading throughout, which is rewarded.

What one must do in such a scenario is carry the central reading on through the commentary. There is little credit in suggesting a theme and then ignoring it during the commentary. Our friend avoids this nicely. Her analysis of the literary features of the poem continue the anti-colonial reading she has outlined at the start: *"the use of the cliché, 'the air that was thick'... furthers an understanding of the lingual crisis as, by accepting and utilising this phrase, Tuwhane surrenders and succumbs to the colonisation itself, and all it represents."* Again, you may not necessarily agree with what she has said and her reading of the poem (I don't), but it is plausible, and is backed up by direct reference to the poem's devices. Hence, it is rewarded. To continue your central thesis throughout your commentary is a hard skill, and one that requires practise. If you can get it, your examiner will love you. Or at least give you lots of marks, which amounts to the same thing.

The structure of her commentary is interesting. The body of the commentary is divided into (long) paragraphs, which each deal with one stanza of the poem. This is a valid way to structure a commentary, and tends to be the one that most people start with. It keeps your structure chronological and helps to ensure that you don't miss out any key elements in the poem. However, you run a significant risk of turning a commentary into a narration. You must avoid saying: 'This happened... then this happened'. The author managed to avoid this trap, but be awake to it. It's an easy way to lose marks.

Your alternative is the thematic structure. I group the content of the poem into key themes, and deal with each theme one at a time, attempting to link the themes as I go. In this example, I would have spent a paragraph dealing with the imagery of the tree, before spending another passage on the passage of time, then another one on the friend and so on. The advantage of this structure is that you are able to get right in and deal with the central themes of the passage, without having to deal with sections that are peripheral to the central message. It also means you not tempted to narrate the passage. However, it is harder to plan and prepare for; ensuring a link *between* your paragraphs is especially important with this structure, and is

harder to do than you might expect. For your first essays, I would probably recommend the chronological approach. As you get more experienced, give the thematic method a shot.

A common misunderstanding is that, to get 5/5 in Section E (your use of language), your grammar and spelling have to be perfect. That is not the case. For example, “a eulogy” should have been “an elegy”, “too” should have been “two” and other such trivial mistakes. This doesn’t really matter; the marker will not instantly penalise you for a trifling error. However, your language must be concise and precise; i.e. no deviation or repetition. More importantly, your language must be consistently formal, and suitable for scholarly writing. (You are not discussing a poem on the beach with friends, but in the dry world of academia.) Naturally, if your writing is replete with spelling mistakes, then you will lose marks. However, to get 5 marks, one merely has to have no “substantial” mistakes in spelling or grammar, so it comes down to your marker’s definition of substantial. None of the mistakes the author made were substantial enough to matter.