

Language & Literature Comparative Commentary

What are you supposed to demonstrate?

In asking you to write a comparative commentary, the examiners are seeing how well you can:

- READ different kinds of texts in English
 - Understanding the content, and
 - Appreciating the technical means with which the writer conveys this.
- COMMUNICATE in English what you find in the texts.

Always keep the examiners four marking criteria in mind. They are equally important:

Criterion A	Understanding of the text How well do you understand, analyse and compare the texts?	5 marks
Criterion B	Understanding of the use and effects of stylistic features How and why does an author write the way he or she does?	5 marks
Criterion C	Organization and development How clearly, coherently, and convincingly do you present your commentary?	5 marks
Criterion D	Language How fluent, accurate, and appropriate is the language you use in your commentary?	5 marks
	TOTAL	20 marks

Discuss the similarities and differences between the texts and their theme(s). Include comments on the ways the authors use elements such as structure, tone, images and other stylistic devices to communicate their purposes.

“There will be good reasons why these texts have been chosen for you to analyse. With close reading you will be able to discover them. Texts about which there is nothing to say are not usually chosen for examination papers!

You are most likely to be presented with one poem or extract or two shorter texts which are linked in some way, usually by theme.”

Even if you find one (or both) of the Texts difficult to understand, it is not a disaster.

If you explain your difficulties and organised what you have to say well and use precise, appropriate language, you can still do respectably.

Writing your first ideas down will force you to be more exact than just thinking about them.

The key to success is being methodical. Develop the methods that suit you.

The Basic Approach

1. Read both texts fairly quickly
2. Then write down these sentences:

Both a) and b) are about _____
However, the writer in a) wants to _____
But the writer in b) wants to _____
3. Read each text steadily, annotating on the exam paper and/or a separate sheet the following:
 - Where each new stage in the content seems to start (this could be simply at the paragraph breaks in a prose piece, but there may be none).
 - All the stylistic features that capture your attention (it would be a good idea to develop a code system for this – different ways of marking imagery, sound effects, interesting sentence structure, etc)
4. Work your notes into an OUTLINE for your commentary, referring back to both texts as you go to check references and evidence, until you have material for all the paragraphs you need to cover all the necessary aspects of the commentary.
5. Spend additional time planning exactly what you are going to say in your Introduction – this is very important for shaping the whole commentary.
6. Write the commentary.
7. Proofread the commentary, making corrections neatly. (While you don't earn marks for neatness, it helps if the examiner can read the paper without effort. You will gain marks for mechanical accuracy, sharp phrasing, clearly marked paragraphing, etc, even if you put some of these elements in as an afterthought.)

Structuring your Commentary

WARNING: There's no one correct way to organise and write comparative commentaries. These guidelines give you key elements. But use your judgement in deciding what approaches suit the particular texts you have to discuss!

Here are two basic ways to structure a commentary. The second method is strongly recommended – it will help you build a more sophisticated argument.

A Then B, Then Compare

- Introduction
- Main content in Text A
- First stylistic aspect of Text A
- Second stylistic aspect of Text A
- Third stylistic aspect of Text A
- First stylistic aspect of Text B
- Second stylistic aspect of Text B
- Third stylistic aspect of Text B
- Comparison of the two texts
- Conclusion

A + B By Aspects

- Introduction
- Main content in Text A
- Main content in Text B
- Comparison between contents of A and B.
Similarities Differences
- Main content in Text B
- Comparisons between uses of first stylistic aspect in A and B
- Comparisons between uses of second stylistic aspect in A and B
- Comparisons between uses of third stylistic aspect in A and B
- Comments on further stylistic aspects in A, not used in B.
- Comments on further stylistic aspects in B, not used in A
- Conclusion



Introductions

The most important elements to establish in an introduction (apart from referring to the writers by name and the titles of their works) are:

The content or main ideas or information or experiences which the writers' are conveying;

- a) Their purposes;
to entertain, inform, convey factual information, persuade, convey personal opinion, analyse a problem or situation, instruct, etc.
- b) The genres or formats used:
magazine article, academic text, fiction (novel or story), (auto)biography, poem, drama or film script, speech, advertisement or brochure, manual or instructions
- c) The readers
 - General English speaking readers/"popular" audience
 - Well-educated general English speaking readers
 - Subject specialists
 - Somebody in a superior position to the writer
 - Somebody in an inferior position to the writer
 - An audience belonging to a particular country or culture
- d) When and where the texts were written – the period can be a crucial element for both the content and the style aspects of the text, as can the culture and place within which it was produced
- e) General comment on the common subject which the authors discuss.
- f) A thesis which the rest of the commentary will then argue. This will summarise in one sentence the central common element between the two texts, and the key differences

The two texts discuss the benefits of technology in medicine; however Text A relates these from a personal point of view in an informal style, whereas Text B tries to be more objective and uses a more academic register.

You could also pose a leading question which the rest of your essay will answer in the form of a step by step argument building up an answer.

Where exactly to the two authors agree in their views on medical technology, and in what ways do their approaches to conveying their ideas to their readers differ?

Discussing Stylistic/Technical Features

There is limited value in merely identifying what techniques a writer is using. Always comment on how effective (or ineffective) the technique is in helping or the intended readers grasp what the author wants to say.

The structure of the passage:

- Do you think the text is a complete text or an excerpt?
- If you are discussing a poem, is it a traditional form (such as sonnet or ballad) or free verse?
- How has the writer organised his or her material? Are the stanzas/paragraphs more or less the same length or irregular? One continuous unit?
- What patterns are there in the text – parallels, contrasts, repeated elements?
- What is the overall “shape” or “movement” of the text – i.e. a steady flow or argument or sudden jumps, a slow build-up to a sudden climax or a dramatic opening followed by a gradual steadying to a calm conclusion, a return to the opening state after an exploration of other areas or what?
- How does the writer use cohesion in the text – through repetition, transitional devices between stanzas/paragraphs? Or is there a (deliberate) lack of surface cohesion?
- In poetry, how does the poet exploit line division – is each line a complete sense unit (end-stopped) or does the sense “run-on” (enjambment) into the next line? What about the first and last word of each line?
- In prose (possibly also in poetry) what are the proportions of the different types of writing - eg. in fiction: action, description, dialogue, direct accounts of characters’ states of mind and feeling, narrator’s comments etc.; in non-fiction of argument, example, incidence, quotation, etc.

Why does the writer make these choices and how do they relate to the theme(s) of the text?

Discussing Content/Analysis of Theme(s)

Show to the examiners that you have understood what the two writers are saying, and comment on how valuable, relevant, persuasive, moving, and so on, their ideas or experiences might be for readers.

You will need a substantial paragraph or more for the content of each text – don’t skim on this section.

Some detailed questions to apply to the content:

- What theme(s) does the writer make you reflect on/imagine more vividly.?
- Are the themes and “meanings” implicit or explicit in the text?

- Is the writing teaching a point or points, raising a problem, trying to make writers more imaginatively and emotionally aware of an issue, or what?
- What does the writer assume about the level of the reader's previous knowledge or awareness? Does she or he confirm or extend or challenge the readers' assumed beliefs or attitudes to the subject matter? Does the writer reinforce or subvert stereotypes of ideas, characters or groups?
- Does the text work entirely on one level or several – i.e., starting with the local and particular but moving you to think of more general ideas, or from the personal to the social to the universal?
- What degree of ambiguity is there?
- Is the piece claiming to be objective and factual or more subjective and imaginative?
- Does the writer seem to work from simplicity to complexity, or from complexity to simplicity?

With some texts, it is useful to combine discussing content with discussing the structure – you can give a step-by-step explanation of how the writer develops the idea or story or description by taking each of the “building blocks” of the text in turn.

Point of View

- Remember that the speaker or narrator is not necessarily the author him or herself! The speaker or narrator may be a character in prose fiction or an adopted persona.
- Who is the speaker? What is his or her relation to the subject matter? What is his or her relationship to the reader (superior, equal, inferior, intimate, distant..)?
- First or third person point-of-view? Omniscient, or external observation only?
- Does the speaker or narrator have much presence or identity in the text?
- Do we trust the speaker, or are we led to be sceptical of her or his view of what is being said?

How do these choices affect our reading of the text?

Narrative voice, tone and mood/atmosphere

- What are the speaker's or narrator's attitudes and feelings towards the material, and how do these shift during the course of the text?
Are they mocking, serious, ironic, bitter, meditative, detached, matter of fact, combative, seductive, self-pitying etc?
- Do we get the feeling that the author's or poet's attitudes and feelings are not those of the speaker or narrator? The writer may deliberately use for the narrator a “persona” with a distorted view of the subject matter – naivety about the complex subject matter, for example or arrogance towards sympathetic characters.
- What is the mood or atmosphere(s) at each stage of the text? Are the mood(s) or atmosphere(s) of the piece the same as the writer's tone(s)? This is sometimes a difficult distinction – the mood or atmosphere will be the general surface emotions set by the subject matter, such as the characters or setting. The writer's tone might be different, however. For example, he or she might be mocking about the central character's happiness because it is foolish or ignorant, or determined despite the hopelessness of the situation of the situation being described.

Why does the author choose this particular voice and tone? How do they support the theme of the piece?

Diction

- What kind(s) of vocabulary and phrasing are used? Colloquial, everyday, formal, semi-formal, academic, specialist/technical (which specialist/technical field), archaic, Latinate, Anglo-Saxon?
- What parts of speech do more work than others – verbs, nouns, or adjectives and adverbs? What kind of verbs (active, passive, moving, static, mental, physical...)? What kind of nouns (abstract, concrete)?
- What connotations do key words carry?

How do these choices support the argument/tonelfeeling and ultimately to the theme?

Imagery and Setting

A literal image gives a straight account of something actually there, while a figurative image describes via an imaginative comparison, i.e. metaphor or simile.

- Does the writer use literal images frequently?
- Do the images appeal to one sense more than another?
- Are the images central to our understanding of the passage, or just extra descriptive detail?
- Does the author use images which function literally in the text, but also operate as figuratively?
- How precisely does each figurative image in the text give you a sharper insight into what is pictured? What are the various points of comparison between the metaphor and the item described?

Why does the writer make these choices and how do they enhance and support the text and its theme(s)?

Sound

- What does the rhyme contribute to the text?
 - What kind of words does rhyme support?
- What do metre and rhythm contribute?
 - Regular or irregular?
- Where and why exactly has the writer used alliteration, assonance and/or onomatopoeia?
- How do certain consonants or vowels help to reinforce the meaning or mood of the text?

Syntax

Syntax is often referred to as “grammar” – the forms by which words are correctly linked together, i.e. word order or past tense.

- What kinds of syntax does the writer use?
 - Simple sentences (noun phrase + verb phrase)
 - Complex or compound (with subordinate clauses as well as main clause)
 - Fragments
 - Questions
 - Commands
 - Unexpected word order or non-grammatical phrasing?
- Short, sharp, snappy abrupt sentence structures or convoluted, involved, long drawn out, meditative sentences?

What is the effect of the syntax and how does it add to the theme

Some Useful Vocabulary

To indicate similarity:

- Similarly
- In the same way, we could say that
- Common or related or parallel themes techniques are
- Writer x shows this concern/interest/technique/approach

To indicate difference:

- Writer x, however,
- By contrast/In contrast
- Contrastingly
 - is more concerned with
 - lays more emphasis on
 - pays more attention to
 - devotes more time to
 - seems to feel more indignant/passionate/angry about
- Writer y's approach/concern/interest/technique is different

Comparative sentence forms:

- While writer x..., writer y...
- Whereas writer x..., writer y
- On the other hand; on the other hand...
- Both writers are interested in..., but their approaches vary...
- Although writer x..., writer y...
- Both writers..., but for different reasons.
- If writer x..., writer y, on the other hand...
- The writers share a concern with ..., but express it differently.
- Writer x's criticism of...more overt/direct/central/peripheral, subtle, implied than writer y's.