Paper 1 Commentary Writing Step by Step Guide

Step 1: (5 mins)
- Read through both extracts (usually one prose and one poetry)
- Decide which one you would prefer to do your commentary on. Often this will be decided by a gut reaction but you should consider not only which text you think you understand best but, importantly, which one you will be able to write about for one and a half to two hours. It’s no use writing about a text that you understand if you haven’t got much to say.

Step 2: (5 mins)
- Read through the chosen extract again 2 or 3 times.
- At Standard Level use the guiding questions to direct you to areas of the poem that might be interesting.
- Jot down your initial impressions of what is going on in the text: the persona, story and O.P.s
  - In poetry the purpose will often be to convey a certain theme, message or idea.
  - In prose however, because you don’t have a whole prose work, just an extract, a clear ‘message’ is not always obvious. As such the purpose might be to create a certain mood or atmosphere; evoke an emotion; create an impression of a character, relationship or setting or create tension. You may, of course, still be able to identify messages and themes in the text these can be the purpose too.
- Remember, things like characters and relationships may develop and change through the extract and that a good analysis will be sensitive to these subtleties.
- Be specific – exactly what mood is being created, exactly which message.

Step 3: (5 mins)
- Come up with at least one (perhaps two or three) Organizing Principle.
  - An O.P. is something that sums up one of the things that the author was trying to do in the text.
  - It’s the answer to the question – What’s this extract about?’
  - Texts are often subtle and complex and your OPs should reflect this – they may need to be quite long.
- This will help you structure your commentary and give you something to focus on.
- You might like to identify a key image, motif or quotation that sums up your Organizing Principle(s)
  - You might use this in the opening line of your essay to start with a bang.

Step 4: (15 mins)
- Track the passage – highlighting the language choices made by the author to achieve the purpose.
- As you work on the poem your O.P. may change – allow it to develop and become richer.
- Things you could attempt to track:
  - Structure: linear / circular, repetition, progress, internal contrasts, steps / stages, foregrounding.
  - Setting: is this significant? How does it relate to the mood / atmosphere.
  - Narrator: whose point of view do we have, what is their tone of voice, attitude, who do they favour?
  - Pace: fast or slow, rushed or calm, is there a definite rhythm.
  - Literary Features: imagery, pronouns, types of verb, sentence type and length, slang, jargon, word complexity (simple / complex / Latinate) passive voice, modality.
punctuation, rhyme, verb tense, concrete or abstract nouns, directions, motifs, enjambment, simile, metaphor, allusions, humor, symbols, sound effects, irony, syntax, hyperbole, personification, etc
- Paralinguistic Features – entrances, exits, relative position, stance, movement, etc
- Changes – in narrator, perspective, tense, pace – what effect do these have?
- The Title!

**Step 5: (5 mins)**
- Plan your essay – there are a number of different ways to structure it
  - You can plan paragraphs based on the different O.P.’s, themes or ideas in the poem
  - If you only have one O.P. you may base paragraphs on the different techniques used to create that O.P.
  - You can work through the poem a stanza at a time and discuss the impression created in each stanza
  - There should be a clear development or progression of ideas from paragraph to paragraph

Whichever method you choose make sure that your essay is not just a list of different literary features. Instead, you must always be talking about the effect those features have on the reader

**Step 6: (~ 1 / 1.5 hours)**
- Write!
- Remember – good essays tend to be made up of a small number of large, detailed paragraphs. Each paragraph should show how lots of features are working together to create an effect. Try to use a variety of kinds of literary feature (e.g. sounds, connotation and rhythm) in each paragraph. Perhaps start with a short and powerful introduction – perhaps use a quotation as a way in. Conclude with a short and powerful summary of your O.P, a quotation or an interesting question