Analyzing Prose

You should begin a commentary by jotting down your own reactions to a passage. As a second stage, the following list of features may help you explore further and organize your ideas. These are particularly suited to prose but some ideas could also apply to poetry.

Focus
What is this passage about? Is it about a decision a character takes, a revelation that he / she comes to, or an event and what that reveals? Or does it reveal a person’s circumstances and character? Or something else?

Tone
Is the attitude of the narrator significant? What is the narrator’s attitude to his / her subject? What is the tone of the passage?

Point of View
From whose point of view is the passage told? Does this change in the course of the passage? Is there a shift in perspective? If so, what effects are gained from this change?

Central Character
Is there a central character? What do we learn about him / her? How do we learn this – through other’s comments, through description, through interior monologue? What? Is there anything significant about his / her relationship to us / the other characters in the passage? How do we feel about him / her?

Chronology
Is the passage narrated chronologically, or does it look forwards or backwards at any point? In either case, why is this done? What does it achieve? Is time significant?

Structure
How is the passage structured? Does it fall into several sections, or is it one unbroken piece of writing? What effect does its structure have? On what rationale is its structure based e.g. different stages of a journey, a progression of thought, something else?

Description / Language
What part does description play? Does it provide setting, add to atmosphere, tell us about the characters, or what? How are diction or images used, and what effect do they create? Comment on images and diction that enhance or create meaning.

Beginning / Ending
Is there anything striking about either or both of these?

Punctuation
Is there anything unusual about punctuation, sentence length, complexity? Pay particular attention to BIG punctuation marks like !, ?, or ....

How are we being invited to read this passage?
With empathy, experiencing the thoughts and feelings of the character or narrator? Critically, with judgment? With curiosity? Something else?
Analyzing Poetry

The following guide assumes that you are going to write your commentary aspect by aspect, theme by theme or idea by idea. However, you can write an equally good commentary chunk by chunk or stanza by stanza.

Remember, there is no such thing as a Magic Formula for commentary writing!
The following ideas should be a stimulus for your own critical thinking. Try to balance sharp-edged critical analysis with your own personal impression. Try to avoid simply stating the obvious but remember that the obvious needs to be stated as well as the complex. Finally, bear in mind that a sense of question, challenging, of puzzling through ambiguities and considering alternate interpretations is what most effectively distinguishes a good commentary from a mediocre one.

Before you Start
Is there any historical background on the poet or time (if you happen to know it) which is relevant. However, be aware of shaky historical generalizations. Not all people in 1946 were haunted by the aftermath of war.

Is the poem primarily a statement of an idea or principle; a description of a scene, place or person; an illustration of a point; an attempt to teach; an attempt to evoke an emotion; a moral argument or something else? Consider:
- What is the central impact of the poem?
- Does it seem organized around a viewpoint or series of viewpoints?
- Does it work through irony or ambiguity?
- Are there any differences between stated / explicit and implied meanings?
- Is the poem ‘delicately evocative’ or ‘unequivocally direct’?

Title
What you can say about a title will vary enormously, but consider how much the poem depends up on the title. Does the title compliment or undercut the message of the poem? Does it clarify the message, raise questions, establish a mood or raise expectations?

Tone
Can you hear a voice in the poem. Be careful about assuming that any voice you can hear is automatically the poets. It is better to refer to this voice as the speaker or persona.
- Does the voice shift?
- How intimate is the voice?
- Is the voice overheard or is it talking to us / a certain audience?

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

Structure
Consider the structure of the poem. You should look at two key things:
- Patterns – is there a repeated motif / element of the poem?
- Development – is this linear, circular, in stages, what?
Always look at first and last lines. Also think about enjambment, end-stopping and rhyme
Does the structure reinforce / contrast with the message of the poem

Diction
In addition to the obvious connotations of words you could also consider whether the diction consists of monosyllabic grunts, Latinate ostentation, colloquial laxness or slangy arrogance. Additionally, the strength or weakness of verbs is always a fruitful ground for analysis
Syntax
Is the poem written in sentences? Are they grammatical? Does this reinforce or contrast with the message of the poem? Are sentences simple or complex? Are the stuttering or fluid?

Sound
Remain aware that words are not chosen simply for their meaning but also their sound. Consider:
- Rhyme (end / internal / partial rhyme, is it punchy, elevated, elegant, raucous, silly?)
- Rhythm (regular or irregular, smooth, jostling, rushing, staccato?)
- Onomatopoeia, Sibilance, Harsh Consonants, Fricatives, etc

Imagery
- Images are not just visual – they can be olfactory, auditory, gustatory or tactile
- Are images complimented by more than one sense (synaesthesia)
- Look for patterns of growth, development or repetition in images.
- Make sure you relate images back to the idea they are being used to illustrate

Symbolism
Be careful not to over interpret. All poets are not really trying to say something else instead of what they actually do say. However, if elements of a poem do suggest further implications or bigger ideas then these are symbols. Consider what kind of symbols are being used – archetypal, concrete or abstract?

Assumptions
How much does the poem reinforce or challenge accepted assumptions about pretty ladies, lonely wanderers, macho men, Wall Street, etc

What’s Missing?
Remember to pay attention to what’s missing. Has the poet intentionally left anything out in order to create an effect. One obvious thing to look for is the absence of a rhyme scheme which is often something that poets purposefully leave out in order to achieve a given effect.