How to Write a Commentary

What is a commentary? For this course, at least, it is not an essay. It does not require an introduction, argument, or conclusion, as an essay does. It is a collection of points about a specific passage, based on close reading of the text.

It is often a good idea to begin by putting the passage in context; locating the passage in the poem as a whole can help you to draw out important aspects of it. However, ‘establishing the context’ does not mean providing a long overview of who the poet was (or why we do not know who he/she was), or a summary of the plot, or a list of the texts surrounding it in the manuscript. It is vital to focus on the passage itself. Everything in your commentary should refer to the passage; even the context *must* be relevant. For example, if the passage does not mention treasure, there is no justification for discussing treasure in your commentary.

In addition to themes and plot, you should consider aspects of the language and poetic form of the passage. By this I do not mean listing the ways in which previous scholars have translated the text. Rather, you might choose to comment on the use of direct speech, narrative, irony, imagery, versification, diction, figures of speech, etc. Make sure that you understand any technical terms that you use!

Here are a few suggestions for general questions that you might ask yourself when writing a commentary:

* What is the passage trying to convey? *How* is it conveying it?
* Is it a first-person account? a reported account?
* Is it primarily descriptive or discursive?
* Is the language elaborate? simple? ambiguous? difficult? abstract? concrete?
* Does the imagery or argument remind you of, or contrast with, other texts?
* Does the passage mark a turning point in the text?
* Does the passage use any figures of speech?

You must then *use* your information. There is no point in simply stating, ‘There is a lot of alliteration in this passage’ or ‘There is imagery in this passage’ or ‘It is difficult to translate this passage’. You need to analyse the effect that you think the use of a particular word or style has. If you cannot think of an effect achieved by something that you have observed, do not include it! Note that you do *not* have to comment on every word or idea in the passage, only the ones about which you have something to say.

Remember to provide line references and a translation of any citations in Old English. Be sure to include the works that you consult in a bibliography. Please do make use of previous scholarship to inform, challenge, and correct your own views.

The close reading skills that you develop in writing your commentaries will be essential to improving your essays at the end of the course.