

THE EXCERPT COMMENTARY

Step 1. Read the passage carefully at least 2 times.

Step 2. Identify the whole and the part.

- a. Try to identify the nature of the whole: what kind of work?
-Fiction? Non-fiction? Type, purpose, audience?
- b. Try to assess the function of THIS part.
-What is this excerpt doing on its own? What about in the whole (if the whole is known)?

Step 3. Go through your CLOSE READING questions:

<u>WHO</u>	is speaking? Narrator or character – description of either
<u>TO WHOM?</u>	audience or character – description, treatment by the speaker
<u>WHAT? WHY?</u>	Situation, purpose
<u>WHERE? WHY?</u>	Setting, purpose
<u>HOW?</u>	Tone, style, diction
<u>PATTERNS?</u>	Structure, form, repetition
<u>TENSION?</u>	Contrasts, conflicts, ironies
<u>SO WHAT?</u>	Dominant effect of the above; the implications; the importance

Step 4. Organizing your close reading questions.

Ask this “so what” question for each answer you came up with above. If you find a particular repetition in your answers to this question, that is your dominant effect and should be the focus of your essay.

Step 5. The implications of your dominant effect.

Again ask the “so what” question, but this time about your dominant effect. In other words, “I have just decided that 3 particular techniques are being used in this excerpt creating a particular effect. How does that effect inform a reading of the text as a whole?”

Step 6. Composing the commentary.

Use steps 4 and 5 to create your thesis statement. Select relevant details of evidence to support your argument and to include in your commentary. Your commentary does not need to have such an extreme point of tension as an essay, however it should still be focused and precise. Be sure to include no detail without relating it to your thesis and that detail’s specific effect and place in the whole.

Organize your commentary in any way that suits your argument, but let the passage and your thesis statement guide you in shaping your commentary. There is no one formula.

Caveat: This is an exploration and not a “Watch me, Mom!” display of all you know, so make sure that you remain focused.

CONSIDER THESE THESIS FORMATS:

Note how in each example, the thesis statement addresses 3 things: the specific literary techniques used, the dominant/direct effects of the techniques, and the larger implications/importance.

*[Author] uses literary techniques X, Y, and Z in this excerpt from [the work] in order to [fill in the blank]. The implications of this are.....

Or

*This excerpt from [the work] [implies... and contributes.... to the whole] through its use of [fill in the blank], which is created by the author’s use of literary techniques X, Y, and Z.

Or

*[Author] uses literary techniques X and Y to [fill in the blank] and literary technique Z to [fill in the blank], both of which inform/imply/contribute to [particular theme of the whole work].

Example from Kafka: (Though this thesis does not pertain necessarily to a specific excerpt from *The Metamorphosis*, but rather the whole, it should give you a sense of the format of the thesis.)

In *The Metamorphosis*, Kafka creates a dream-like atmosphere for both his protagonist and the reader through constant references to individual characters’ dreams, a distorted sense of time, progressively hazy imagery, and a use of symbolism reminiscent of *Interpretation of Dreams*. By creating this dream-like atmosphere Kafka is not only able to address the constant dream-like haze through which Gregor has been living his life, both pre-and post-transformation, but also, in true expressionistic form, he enables the reader to feel and experience the “dream” as well.