

Individual Oral Commentary (IOC) Guidelines

15% of your IB Diploma English 1A Language Score
15 minutes in length

Requirements and Time

You will be given 20 minutes of uninterrupted preparation time with the passage. Your *total* Individual Oral Commentary should be 15 minutes in length. You will need to conclude your commentary at 12-13 minutes to provide time for my follow-up questions to make sure your response is as complete as possible.

Where to Start

What is your introductory paragraph of your IOC going to include? What is your hook? Your one to two sentence thesis? Your topic sentences? Works Cited? The simple answer to these inquiries is, “Who cares”? These are not the essential questions that we should be asking ourselves as we create an individual oral commentary; instead, they should be reserved for when we sit down at the computer to write and revise a thoughtful, well-developed essay. With an IOC, we do not have that kind of luxury (if we can associate essay writing with luxuriousness) due to the demanding time constraints: twenty minutes to prepare a commentary on one important passage from our IOC texts. So writing paragraphs is out the question, unless you are looking for a quick and easy way to waste twenty minutes.

But you may ask, “Does it need focus”? Well, of course it does, since one of the categories on our rubric is “Presentation,” however the most important aspect of this category is not a well-written thesis statement, but instead clear focus and persuasiveness. Is your argument unconvincing, or is it persuasive? Is it vague or focused? Fortunately, this IB assessment also creates natural focus since you only get about forty lines from the text. Therefore, what we need to do is get out our proverbial magnifying glasses and identify what makes this passage work, what the author, narrator, speaker or speakers are trying to do in this passage, and what proof we can use to support these ideas.

STOP BAD FIT

As you pick through the passage trying to figure out why it is important, and why your teacher thought it was a passage that you could spend 12-13 minutes rambling on and on about, maybe this stupid acronym will help (I welcome everyone to try to rearrange the letters to make a better one): Stop Bad Fit. What does that mean? Nothing, or maybe it could be some sort of mantra in the fashion design world. I don't know. But maybe if you spend 20 seconds writing it down, we can remember to look for these important elements in our passage, whether our passage is poetry, prose or dialogue from a play.

Here is how it works:

Symbol
Theme
Organization
Progression

Big Three
Atmosphere
Diction

Figurative Language
Imagery
Tone

For some, this process might be very helpful, and for others it will feel restricting and should be avoided. The guiding questions included with the passage might address some of these, but not all. Maybe you just want to stick with the guiding questions as a starting point, and then develop your argument as you see fit, which is fine. But I want to give you strategies that you can experiment with to see if they are helpful. Let's look closer:

Symbol: Colors, directions, animals, stars, weather, planets, etc. I do not think it is a waste of time to make a list of the important symbols in every work, and come to some general conclusions as to how the authors use these things to create meaning. To paraphrase the entire book *How to Read Literature like a Professor*, serpents are never just snakes, yellow is never just an ugly paint color for your car, west is never just the opposite of east, and rain is never just something that makes things cold and wet. The author chose these details for a reason so figure out why and include this in your response.

Theme: We should know these about the four works and, if not, review them so that you can identify which ones are present in your passage and how your interpretation relates to them.

Organization: Ask yourself how the passage is divided and structured: into stanzas, paragraphs, lines, sentences, punctuation (dash, hyphens, commas, colons, ellipses, semi-colons, periods, question and exclamation marks, or important omissions of these), and ask yourself where the important divisions occur. You should also consider how the title relates to the passage, and if it is important to include this in your commentary.

Progression: Since you only have a small passage, it is important to investigate the progression of the passage itself. This could include how the tone shifts or develops, how characters develop, how the actions develop, etc. These passages are chosen because they are important; most important passages reflect some sort of change, transformation, epiphany, important event, important interaction, so the progression is almost always important. In addition to this, the passages should be

connected and compared in some way to the work as a whole, in order to show why this particular passage is important or meaningful.

Big Three

- **Speaker:** Who is it? Is he or she reliable? Are there examples of a contrast between connotation and denotation? What is the subtext of dialogue?
- **Audience:** Who is it? What is the intended effect of the passage on the audience?
- **Situation:** Your good 'ole narrative elements—what happened, why, where, when, how, etc.

Atmosphere: The mood of the passage, and why this is important. Consider how diction, imagery, and tone contribute to the overall mood of the passage. Does this change at any point?

Diction: If we understand that diction means the choice of words that the author, narrator or speaker uses, then we should avoid awkward uses of our own diction when attempting to comment on others. Example: "A lot of diction is used in the passage." Although the literary term is precise, the sentence, besides being passive, is also vague, unclear and confusing. Instead: "The narrator's diction in the first paragraph contributes to the tone of the passage." That sounds better, as long as you then show examples of specific words or phrases that prove this assertion. You could even focus on one or two parts of speech, such as adjectives or verbs (which are my favorite part of speech, besides adverbs). In a letter to his daughter, Fitzgerald shares my fondness of verbs: "All fine prose is based on the verbs carrying the sentences. ... A line like 'The hare limped trembling through the frozen grass,' is so alive that you race through it, scarcely noticing it, yet it has colored the whole poem with its movement — the limping, trembling and freezing is going on before your eyes." Also consider if there is a repetition of important words. Are parts of the passage colloquial for formal? Are parts lyrical?

We should also ask ourselves if there is important dialogue that needs to be analyzed based on who said it. Not only what people say, but why what they say is important and how other characters react to what they say. It is also useful to analyze how the dialogue is introduced. Does *Gatsby* "ask" Mr. Klipsringer to play the piano, or does he "command"? If *Gatsby* commands, which he does, why is it important at this point in the novel?

Figurative Language: In a forty-line passage, even non-poetry needs to be analyzed using our "poetic" terms. This connects to progression when there is a sudden shift from figurative to matter-of-fact language, which can lead to very effective insights about a passage.

Imagery: The simplest way to think about imagery is to consider your five senses. What does the author describe, and how does he describe it? Aural imagery is how the sounds of the words affect the listener. Again, we need to go back to our Literary Terms chart and look at assonance, consonance, alliteration, onomatopoeia, etc. All those terms used to identify how sounds help create meaning. Poets seem to like these, which makes sense, since we rarely read *Gatsby* aloud, but Plath's "Daddy" must be. Remember Ginsberg's preface to his collection of essays: "If it isn't composed

on the tongue, it's an essay." So I guess that conversely means that everything composed on the tongue, at least according to the Beats, is a poem. I think Borges characteristically said it best in a lecture he gave on Dante's *Divine Comedy*: "Truly fine poetry must be read aloud. A good poem does not allow itself to be read in a low voice or silently. If we can read it silently, it is not a valid poem: a poem demands pronunciation. Poetry always remembers that it was an oral art before it was a written art. It remembers that it was first a song."

Tone: Tone usually reflects the attitude of the speaker, author, or narrator, which is revealed through diction. Some tone words: pessimistic, light-hearted, flippant, fearful. Some non-tone words (words that are vague and confusing): symbolic, important, meaningful, bright. I could go on and on. Think of poems. Repetition can convey a tone. So can being vague or describing things matter-of-factly. Tone is fun (mildly-sarcastic). Also consider if and how the tone progresses through the passage, or if there are sudden or important shifts in tone.

On Language

The difference between a 3 and a 4 on the "Language" section of the IB Oral Rubric is whether or not you can be precise with your language. In order to do this, you must, among other things, use our wonderful literary terms appropriately. Instead of "Eliot is making a comparison," we should be identifying precisely what Eliot is doing: "Eliot's use of metaphor/simile/synecdoche/metonymy . . ." You have a whole packet of these, and could easily go through and highlight ones that have been important in our discussions, or the ones which you see reoccurring over and over again. It is important to get these correct and be precise with the words we choose to express ourselves orally.

To score a 5 instead of a 4, you need to not only be *precise*, but also *concise* with your language. To begin, let's take out all those unnecessary extra words like "I believe," "I think," "I noticed," "I felt that" or "When I was preparing in the other room I noticed . . ." These phrases do not belong in your commentary, just like they do not belong in your writing. Instead of hearing about your thought process, try to devote your time to what your thought process produced, in other words, your argument without unnecessary words. Please also avoid the wordy, lawyer-sounding, subject-avoiding passive tense. "It can be seen" should be taken out; we already know it "can be seen." In fact, you just had 20 minutes to determine what "can be seen," therefore leave it out of your oral response.

After a student says, "My name is Joe. I will be commenting on . . ." do you want to know what the most common introductory sentence to an IOC commentary is? "Ummmmmmmmmmmmmm." How can we prevent this sound from escaping from our mouths? Write the first word or phrase that you want to start with so you are guaranteed a good start. Students often "gain steam" as they get comfortable commenting, so an effective beginning is helpful and should not be overlooked. Other awful ways to begin: "I got the passage. . .," "Okay [awkward pause] Okay [awkward pause] . . . Let's see. . ."

So if you cannot write an introductory paragraph, how should you begin? Well, I think that is up to you, although I have noticed that a nice place to begin is to situate the passage within the context of the larger work, and then to focus on the importance of the passage itself.

On Style

Ever heard the old writing adage “Style is learned in the wrist”? It is helpful when considering what style is and how we can comment on writers or narrators’ styles and how it effects our interpretation. Punctuation falls under style. So does sentence syntax. As does stanza organization. Just think of a writer sitting down trying to “learn” their style by writing and writing and writing. Eventually, he or she will figure out what works and what does not. Once a writer learns what works, it is our job to identify and analyze the important stylistic elements in a work in order to develop a complete response to a passage.

On Poetry

Do not be afraid to relate a poem to other poems by the same poet, or to the other section of a poem if it is an excerpt. The danger is to talk too much about other poems, when your focus needs to be the passage in your hand. However, situating the passage within the context of the work or works is part of the “Knowledge” section, and needs to be addressed. This is especially important if your interpretation can be strengthened by comparing the passage to another poem or poems that reflect the same idea or style. Plath writes about her father a lot. Is it beneficial to comment on the progression of her attitude and feelings about her relationship with him? I think so.

On Plays

Plays are fun because all we have is dialogue (and some imbedded stage directions). We therefore need to look at the language, much like we analyze a poem, and in addition to this we need to understand how the dialogue conveys the state-of-mind, thoughts, anxieties, fears, excitements, etc. of the character. In addition to this, we also need to look at how the characters interact with each other. What are they holding back, how do they react to each other’s words, and how do they influence each other? We can also use the language of the passage to argue how Shakespeare intended the play to be acted on the stage and how that contributes to the understanding of the passage and the characters who inhabit it.

On Prose

Although not a poem, all the prose passages that I have selected from novels for IOC’s include descriptive and figurative language that must be analyzed in order to develop a complete response. We have completed exercises that focus our attention on the small details such as looking at the diction. Some passages might have other ideas included, such as song lyrics, lists, quotes from other novels. Although it is important to differentiate these from the prose created by the author, these are part of the passage, and should be addressed and integrated into your argument. You may argue why the author, or characters, decided that these lines are important as a starting point for your analysis.

Practice IOC Roadmap

Materials:

- Voice Recording Device—any format works (tape/mini-tape recorder, digital recorder, computer) as long as you can play it back through speakers the next day for you and your partner to listen to. The only playback devices Mira Loma has are very large tape recorders; you may reserve these and use them in my room at lunch or after school if you do not have another way to record your voice.
- IOC Passage—Do not open it until you have 33 minutes of uninterrupted time (20 minutes of preparation, and 12-13 minutes of commentary).
- Clock—To keep you on schedule (a stopwatch timer that counts up works well, and is what we will use during the IOC)

Individual (at home)

Reserve thirty-three minutes of uninterrupted time in order to simulate the real IOC environment and time constraints.

Preparation Time (20 minutes):

1. Read, analyze, and mark up the passage
 - Use a highlighter and make notes in the margins (This is a time to practice techniques for doing a lot of language analysis in a very short amount of time).
 - Make sure you prepare to discuss the narrative and stylistic elements as they reinforce or reveal the theme(s), character developments, etc.
 - Stay within the context of the passage: “You must not be tempted to discuss everything you know about the whole text. *Your commentary must focus on the specific extract that you are given for discussion.* You should relate it to the work only where relevant—for example, to establish context, or discuss its importance to the work as a whole” (*English for the IB Diploma Handbook*).
2. Develop your analysis. Use the guiding questions if you find them helpful to focus your response, but by no means must you respond to them. In general, guiding questions encourage you to look at aspects such as:
 - Presentation & role of characters
 - Presentation of relationships
 - Theme(s)
 - Use of language
 - Significance of the extract to the development of the plot or text as a whole
 - The effects created by the structure, style, and techniques employed by the writer
3. Create a written outline/notes for your argument on a separate sheet of paper.

Individual Oral Commentary (12-13 minutes): Record your Individual Oral Commentary into a recording device, using your notes, outline, and marked passage. You will turn in both the outline and marked passage the next day in class.

Listening Pairs (next day in class)

Listen to each of the recorded practice Individual Oral Commentaries and give constructive feedback.

1. Both the assessor and the commentator should listen to the recorded Oral Commentary and take notes in Source Books.
 - Indicate the amount of time the analysis takes.
 - Notes should include what you perceived the argument and main points to be.
 - Create and write down hypothetical follow-up questions after you are finished listening to the commentary that would help the commentator with his or her argument.
2. The assessor should give the commentator specific feedback—Instead of numbers from the rubric, begin with the terminology and criteria on the rubric. This should also be recorded in the Source Book.
 - Refer to each of the four criteria from the rubric.
 - What went well, and what needs improvement?

Self-Reflection Journal (Homework)

On the night after you presented your practice IOC, write a self-reflection in your Source Book (about one page), reflecting specifically about what went well and what you could do differently to improve. Be sure to cite specific ideas you talked about, including new ideas that you came up with in your commentary, as well as whether or not the passage was one that you would have chosen. Also brainstorm what strategies you need to focus on and implement during your next Practice IOC. Use the rubric for guidance in reflecting on what went well (and what areas you can still improve on), and use the feedback that you received from your partner.

Point Breakdown

- Marked Passage and Outline—*10 points*
- IOC Source Book Entry
 - Commentator's Outline/Feedback/Follow-up Q's—*5 points*
 - Self-Reflection Journal—*5 points*
- Class Participation—*5 points*

Anonymous IOC Advice (from last years IB Juniors)

“Take the practice IOC’s seriously . . .I didn’t take them like it was the real thing, and this hurt me once the real IOC came around.”

“My *Gatsby* Power Read notes were especially helpful for the IOC.”

“Source Books are a must . . . They’re a great resource for studying for the IOC.”

“The after school review sessions that I attended were pretty helpful . . . so I highly recommend those.”

“You can get way with not reading parts of your IOP book that aren’t your IOP but you need to read all the IOC books just in case. You can never be too prepared.”

“Whatever book you don’t want, you’ll get on your IOC.”

“Just being well prepared factually did not help for the IOC. It is pivotal to actually take the practice IOC’s seriously because knowing the concepts and being able to put them together in 20 minutes are two entirely different things.”

“The ‘IOC Guidelines’ great for review and so were the review sessions.”