

# HOW TO REVISE LANGUAGE A - LITERATURE



From the IB graduates at

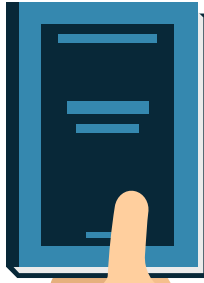


**Lanterna**  
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## Paper 1

### What do you need to know?

Well nothing really. Rather than learning swathes of information, preparation for Paper 1 is about honing your critical reading and writing skills and developing a system that will allow you to approach any passage of prose or poetry with confidence.

### How to revise it

The paper might seem daunting at first as it can be difficult to know what's expected of you, or what makes a good commentary. There are two crucial components to revising it:

1. Find a technique that works for you
2. Practice, practice, practice!

## Technique

There are no hard and fast rules for writing a good commentary, or magic tricks to make your score highly. Developing a strong way of structuring your commentaries is hugely important, because a) Section D of the mark scheme demands purposeful and effective structure to the commentaries and b) a poor structure will affect the clarity and persuasiveness of your ideas throughout, thus losing you marks elsewhere.

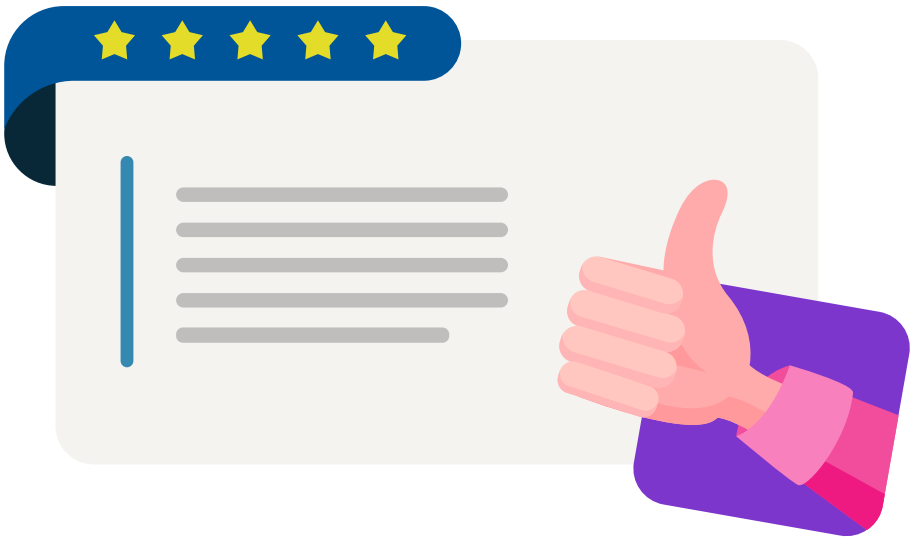
Students tend to organise their commentaries in one of three ways:

1. **Structural:** This is an answer that follows the structure of the passage to be commented on discussing a poem line by line, or a prose passage one paragraph at a time. The mark scheme insists that this sort of answer is acceptable, and will be judged on the basis of its appropriateness; however, I would, in general, try to avoid commenting in this way. For one thing, it's very easy to slip into narration (which will get you a 1 out of 5 in the Interpretation of the texts criterion), but also, a structural response might strike an examiner as quite unskilled.



2. **Checklists:** A technique students quite often use, and which can indeed work very well, is to have a checklist of things to discuss (such as, for example, tone, character and imagery) and to write a paragraph or two on each. Though it's certainly reassuring to know what you're looking for in a passage, like structural responses, Checklists commentaries risk seeming slightly pedestrian.
3. **Argumentative:** Some students prefer to structure their commentaries like essays, deciding what the points of the passage to be analysed are, or the main impression it gives and then using their stylistic observations to illustrate why. As far as possible, then, the paragraphs should form a sort of argument.

It can be hard to judge how well your way of organising a commentary works: get a teacher to read a practice piece and give you feedback!





## Practice

You can never do too many practice commentaries. As a minimum, try to do at least five but the more, the better. Ask your teacher to mark them and take their comments on board: you'll be surprised how much you improve each time.

If you haven't got time to write out a whole essay, grab a past paper (or simply pick a poem or passage from a book) and give yourself 45 minutes, or as long as you usually spend in an exam, to analyse it and write out a plan for a commentary. Organise your observations on the passage into outlines for paragraphs that will form a coherent essay.

## Things to perfect when practicing:

### Language and Style

Start working on these early on, because there are FIVE WHOLE MARKS to be gained on each paper for language and style. On Paper 1, this reflects the fact that the skill being tested is your ability to describe how different figures of language work to achieve an overall effect. You will, of course have your own, individual writing style that may be as purple and flowery, or clipped and concise as you like (within reason) but however you write, to get top marks, it is extremely important that you learn to be precise.

Work out exactly what you want to say: what are each of the figures you're commenting on doing?

Stylewise, there are two poles of wrongness: haziness, and over-complication. Learning some useful critical language will sharpen your analysis, but remember that little words are your friends too! Make sure you know exactly what each word you're using means, and think carefully about whether you're applying it in the right context. As literature teachers, your examiners will know what elision, assonance and even zeugma mean, and realise immediately if you don't know what you're talking about.



## Introductions and conclusion

In Paper One, what (and how much) you write in an introduction is very much up to you. The introduction should summarise what you're going to say and can be as short as you like. I sometimes write just one sentence before launching into the analysis. Do practice making a smooth transition between the introduction and the main body of your commentary.

## Structure

I'm bringing this up again because it's so apocalyptically important: the examiner will be looking for your commentary to have a strong organising principle, and flow logically. A poor structure will lose you marks in multiple criteria.

## Timing

Worry about this after you've got your technique right. How long you spend on reading, planning or writing is up to you. I'd recommend half an hour at least on reading and planning but remember, you don't get marks for your plan. Experiment with more or less detailed plans and see what yields the best results!

## Paper 1 Top Tips

- Ask everyone and anyone for criticism.
- Read friends' commentaries and think about what they're doing differently to you. Don't copy them - but ask yourself what you could improve? What are you doing well?
- Read for pleasure outside of class as widely as possible, and with a critical eye. Consider different forms, genres, and authors, and constantly ask yourself how the language and stylistic techniques work in relation to the points of the text.





## Paper 2

Lots of students find Paper 2 either slightly or extremely terrifying, and it's common for stronger students to lose marks here. Crucially, the exam asks you to consider how texts work not just internally, but also in relation to one another. Therefore, the focus of your revision should be on the relationships between the poems, plays or novels you study

## How to revise it

### Do your research

Know a bit of context. What would have shaped your authors' thought? Wilfred Owen is famous for his bitter, bleak war poetry - does this take on new significance when we consider his early work, heavily influenced by Romantic reverence for nature? The horrors of the French Revolution, meanwhile, are a ghostly presence throughout the poetry of Wordsworth and Coleridge, intimately linked with nature's dark power, and the pervasive themes of terror, guilt and punishment. In his tragedies and history plays, Shakespeare consistently presents us with nightmarish visions of improvement royal succession, usurped power: are contemporary politics somehow translated into the plays?

### Close Reading

Read your texts carefully, think about questions of audience and genre and how their writers say what they're trying to say. To a large extent, Paper 2 questions encourage you to think about the mechanics of your texts, which means that they employ many of the same critical skills as Paper 1.

### Comparison

Think about ways that your writers can be compared and contrasted. These don't have to be thematic (and because of the spread of authors covered on the course, it might in fact, be hard to make thematic comparisons) but can be stylistic. Use the questions from past papers to direct your thought here lots of students find their best ideas come to them when they're writing practice essays.



## Carefully choose quotations that illustrate your ideas.

**IDEA:** The narrators of Keats' Odes experience moments of ecstatic insight, entering into communication with the objects they contemplate and endowing them with significance.

- 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' - the reality of the urn is the 'silent form' and 'cold pastoral' referred to in the 5th stanza.
- But the narrator is roused by the 'leaf-fringed legend' carved into the Urn, gives purpose to its frozen figures: 'Bold lover, never, never shalt thou kiss', revels in it: 'More happy love! More happy, happy love!' and even draws an aesthetic principle from it: 'Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard / Are sweeter (...).'
- Similarly, in 'Ode to a Nightingale' the narrator is transported on the 'viewless wings of poesy' to an imagined world of sensuous stimulation.
- POSSIBLE EXTENSION: These moments of insight are crossed with tragedy in their transience and vulnerability.
- The plentiful season addressed in the first stanza of 'To Autumn' is the same as the autumn distinguished by a hook, who 'watches the last oozyngs hours by hours' in the second.
- The narrator of 'Ode to a Nightingale', jolted back to his 'sole self', laments the fact that the 'fancy cannot cheat so well / as she is famed to, deceiving elf'.

These ideas will become the substance of your exam essays.







## Learning

Remembering your arguments (and, very importantly, the quotations that illustrate them) is a hugely important part of your Paper 2 revision:

- Some students find it most helpful to do past paper after past paper, repackaging their ideas each time to meet the demands of a specific question, and learning by repetition in the repetition.
- Some like to condense existing essays and notes down into bullet points, or keywords that trigger whole arguments.
- Others use visual triggers to help them remember: highlighting notes; putting paragraphs in spider diagrams, or writing quotations out on pieces of paper and sticking them in visible places. Try a couple of things and see what works best!



Image:

One student (who liked to wear black socks) compared her Paper 2 texts like this:



## Practice!

It would be difficult to overemphasise the importance of practicing past papers for Paper 2 success. Not only will addressing the demands of each question help you to think of new and interesting things about your authors, that you can learn and recycle in your final exam, but (as with Paper 1) your technique will improve a huge amount with each essay you write. Finally, comparing the questions from year to year will highlight the huge amount of similarity between them, and should lessen your terror and dread about the exam. Work on perfecting your technique before you start timing your essays.

By the time it comes to crunch time, you'll have a whole host of things other than the literature on your plate, and two hours might seem like a big chunk of time to take out of your day. Therefore, I'd recommend two things:

1. Start early. It's never too early to have a go at writing a past paper. You could even set aside two hours a week (say, first thing on a Saturday morning) from the beginning of January onwards that are dedicated to practicing for your Language A exam. One paper a week isn't a huge amount to add to your workload, but will improve your final mark infinitely.
2. As exams approach, let your own strengths and weaknesses dictate the way you practice. If you write well, but lose marks because of poor structure, try just taking an hour to think about a question, and write out an argument in bullet point format. If you're having problems with style, on the other hand, try writing a few untimed essays as elegantly as possible.

## Paper 2 top tip!

Always ANSWER THE QUESTION you've been asked. Treat the examiner like a child: imagine yourself leading them through your essay by the hand, everywhere pointing out where and how you've knocked the question on the head. Make it as easy as possible for them to give you the marks you deserve.

I hope you have found this useful. If you'd like any more help with IB Language A Literature, be sure to check out our Online Private Tutoring with our world-class tutors.

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