

PUT SHEETRY

Reverend comes to [the] [place], [place] to kill the evil [person]
[the] [place] to allow him to fight the [person]. [the] [place] [place], [place]
Reverend's [person] [place] [place] by [the] [place] [place] [place]
Reverend [place] [place] [place] [place] to [place] [place] [place] [place]
[place] [place] [place] [place] [place] [place] [place] [place] [place] [place]
[place] [place] [place] [place] [place] [place] [place] [place] [place] [place]

SHOWSTAY

The [person] [place] [place] [place] [place] [place] [place] [place] [place] [place]
Reverend [place] [place] [place] [place] [place] [place] [place] [place] [place] [place]
Reverend [place] [place] [place] [place] [place] [place] [place] [place] [place] [place]
[place] [place] [place] [place] [place] [place] [place] [place] [place] [place]
[place] [place] [place] [place] [place] [place] [place] [place] [place] [place]

THE 'THE'

1. Begin a new sentence after a question with "This does"
2. Finish the sentence by explaining what the question.
3. SHOWED the topic sentence that you are trying to prove
4. For subsequent sentences of commentary, continue to
5. After completing a draft, go back and EDIT EVERY SENTENCE

**CRAFTING COMMENTARY:
DO'S AND DONT'S**

DO: PROVIDE EXPLANATIONS OF EVIDENCE.

Ex. Jack says, "I want to see the manager. I... I don't think he understands. My son is not part of this. He..." It is clear that Jack wants to protect Danny, so he takes a risk by wanting to speak to the manager.

DO NOT: DROP IN OPINIONS WITHOUT EVIDENCE.

Ex. The Overlook has the ability to fester in Jack's mind and urges him to kill his family. He tries to fight this external force, and this leads to instability. It also brings back his temperance had when he used to drink. He pictures himself at a bar being served free drinks by Lloyd who that the manager is interested in Danny.

What's wrong with this commentary?

1. Every single time you express an OPINION about the literature, you MUST

CRAFTING

COMMENTARY

for Literary Analysis

Two Methods for Success
Sample Paragraphs
Peer Revision Forms

CRAFTING COMMENTARY: COMMENTARY VS. PLOT SUMMARY

At this point in the writing process, it is time to begin writing commentary for your textual evidence. Let's first understand the word "commentary." Commentary means the same thing as "analysis" or "explanation." This is the part of the essay in which you "analyze" or "comment" upon the evidence you have provided for your reader. This is the most ambiguous and vague part of the essay because there is no one "right" way to explain evidence. In fact, there are LOTS of DIFFERENT things a writer could possibly say to analyze evidence. As it turns out, the commentary component of the essay should make up MOST of the essay—and it's the most difficult part to write.

Given that, there are still strategies to help you craft commentary and take your commentary to a deeper level. But before we take a look at those strategies, you need to first understand the first cardinal rule of crafting commentary:

COMMENTARY IS NOT PLOT SUMMARY.

Many students fall into the trap of misunderstanding the purpose of commentary and simply end up retelling the story. However, this is not literary analysis; it is a book report. In order to understand why you do not need to retell the story to your reader, first consider who the audience is for a literary analysis essay.

Consider the Audience.

Who most likely reads literary analysis essays? Who is most likely interested in literary interpretation? A doctor? A lawyer? A police officer? Probably not. So, who is the audience for the literary analysis essay? The people who read these types of essays are experts in the literary field (writers, professors, teachers, scholars, etc.) and students like you who have been assigned to write them. That means that your reader is someone who is FAMILIAR with the story already and does not need to be retold the plot. This does not mean that you cannot address ANY plot, but your informed, academic reader only needs plot reminders, not a retelling of the entire story.

Think of it this way. Would you need to explain to David Beckham how to kick a soccer ball? Would you need to explain to Jimi Hendrix how to play a guitar? The answer is a clear no. Beckham wouldn't need for you to explain how to kick the ball because he is already an expert at that, but he might be interested in hearing how you compare and contrast his kicking techniques to Lionel Messi. And Jimi Hendrix would not have been interested in hearing you explain how to play the guitar because he's an expert at that, but he might be interested in how you see his influence in music today.

You should assume your reader is an expert, so be sure not to summarize the plot; instead, focus on the analysis of the evidence (COMMENTARY) and tell your informed reader something he/she has not heard and does not know.

CRAFTING COMMENTARY: THE PLOT SUMMARY DILEMMA

Students can oftentimes think they've written commentary when in reality they've written nothing but plot summary. A writer may assume that because he/she has used textual evidence that he/she has not written plot summary when, in fact, he/she has explained the textual evidence with a retelling of the story instead of analytical commentary. In this way, summarizing the plot may sneak up on the writer without the writer realizing it.

Here is a model of a paragraph that summarizes the plot using textual evidence:

First this happened as shown in this quotation, "quotation." Then this happened as shown in this quotation, "quotation." Then this happened as shown in this quotation, "quotation." Then this happened, too. Finally, this happened. All of this shows how ambition leads to corruption.

In observing the format of the plot summary paragraph, we begin to see the flaw in the LOGIC of how the paragraph comes to the conclusion that the plot summary shows the theme "ambition leads to corruption." The flaw in the logic occurs because the writer still has not explained the HOW? question: How does this plot summary show "ambition leads to corruption?" The writer has only addressed the WHAT? question but not explained anything. The whole entire point of literary analysis is to EXPLAIN the evidence and to answer the HOW? question. So, if you write an entire essay without explanation, you have essentially written a "book report" and not a literary analysis essay (key word is "analysis").

THE COMMENTARY PARAGRAPH

Commentary is:

- **EXPLAINING** *how* textual evidence demonstrates the argument (the thesis statement).
- **DISCUSSING** the *importance* of each quotation in proving the thesis.
- **SUPPORTING** your *opinion*, which is your thesis statement.
- **ELABORATING** on your thesis to make it more *specific*.

COMMENTARY VS. PLOT SUMMARY

SAMPLE PARAGRAPH #1

Let's take a look at some examples of **PLOT SUMMARY** vs. **COMMENTARY**.

Plot Summary Paragraph

Beowulf comes to Hrothgar's kingdom to kill the evil monster, Grendel. When he arrives, he meets with the king and convinces Hrothgar to allow him to fight the monster. He tells Hrothgar that "[his] hands/ Alone shall fight for [him]". Hrothgar agrees, and Beowulf fights the monster, tearing off its arm. After killing Grendel, Grendel's Mother seeks revenge by killing Hrothgar's wise friend. As a result, Hrothgar challenges Beowulf to kill Grendel's Mother. Beowulf agrees and swims down to her lair below the water and kills her with a giant's sword. Beowulf then cuts off Grendel's head and brings it back to Hrothgar. 50 years later, Beowulf is the king of the Geats. An evil dragon attacks the people after his goblet is stolen, so Beowulf defends his people by attacking the dragon. However, it is Beowulf's last battle, and the dragon kills him. This shows that good overcomes evil.

Commentary Paragraph

The story *Beowulf* shows that risky behavior can at first lead to great accomplishments but eventually leads to downfall. First of all, Beowulf finds victory against Grendel even though he tells Hrothgar that "[his] hands/ Alone shall fight for [him]." In this moment, Beowulf takes a risk by deciding to fight Grendel without a weapon—especially since he has never faced a foe like this monster and does not know Grendel's strengths and weaknesses. Instead of taking time to observe the monster in action in order to discern Grendel's powers, Beowulf dives right into action by setting up a secret attack at the mead hall. Beowulf knows that the greater the risk he takes, the greater the glory he will receive, and so he is willing to risk his life against an unknown foe without the advantage of a weapon. Fortunately for Beowulf, he defeats the evil monster, and his risk proves victorious.

Reflection

Here, the plot summary paragraph simply lists out the major plot points from the poem *Beowulf* and then ends with a concluding statement that has not been explained at all in the paragraph: "good overcomes evil." This paragraph begs the question: HOW do these events SHOW "good overcomes evil"? In the commentary paragraph, the student explains Beowulf's decision to fight Grendel with his bare hands. The difference here is that the writer has explained the impact of this decision on Beowulf as a character. One of the ways a writer can check that he/she has written plot summary instead of commentary is to check the original text. The reader can find the parts of the plot rather easily—it's there in black and white on the page. But, commentary is the writer's own thoughts, explanation, and analysis, which cannot be found in the original text—commentary is what's suggested between the lines but not plainly stated in the text. The point of reading a literary analysis essay is to discover new ideas—ideas that cannot be found in the text itself!

COMMENTARY VS. PLOT SUMMARY

SAMPLE PARAGRAPH #2

Plot Summary Paragraph

Paradise Lost first begins with Satan being cast into hell by God for attempting to overthrow God in heaven. The narrator relates, “Him the Almighty Power/ Hurl’d headlong [...] To bottomless perdition” (1.44-47). Then Satan decides that “to do aught good never will be [his] task,/ But ever to do ill [his] sole delight” (1.159-160). Then, Satan decides to spread this evil by becoming a serpent in the Garden of Eden and tempting Eve into defying God by eating fruit from the Tree of Knowledge. The serpent then convinces Eve to “reach then, and freely taste,” and Eve eats the forbidden fruit (9.732.). This event finally causes the fall of mankind in the story. This shows that mankind possesses a duality in nature that is both good and evil.

Commentary Paragraph

Paradise Lost reveals the good and evil duality of mankind through the character of Satan. The two primal forces of good and evil in the Biblical story are typically depicted as God (good) and Satan (evil). However, Milton’s version of the story suggests that both characters possess good and evil traits. As a result of being cast into hell by God, Satan showcases complex emotions that reveal his guilt and regret for having attempted to overthrow God. The narrator relates, “So spake [Satan], though in pain,/ Vaunting aloud, but racked with deep despair” (1.125-126). The words “pain” and “despair” reveal a Satan that is in a state of mourning for his actions, knowing that he has lost “the happy realms of light” in exchange for “a dungeon horrible” (1.85, 61). By depicting Satan’s remorse, Milton creates a more human-like, sympathetic character that contradicts a strictly primal role of evil. Contrastingly, Satan’s proclamation “to do ill,” shows a Satan that is still bent on committing evil acts (1.160). Here, Satan reveals his feelings of revenge against God’s creation (mankind) in order to avenge God’s decision to cast Satan into hell. Satan’s desire to corrupt the innocence of mankind shows that he is not strictly a “good” character, but the fact that the embodiment of evil could even remotely express human-like feelings of regret shows that he is not strictly “evil” either. Through the character of Satan, Milton reveals that human nature is complex and is not necessarily categorized by good or evil, but is categorized by a combination of both traits.

Reflection

One of the key signs that a writer has slipped into plot summary is using sequence transitional devices such as: first, then, next, and finally. These transitional devices clearly mark plot points—plot points that are not necessarily needed. Take a look at how many of these transitional devices the writer uses in the plot summary paragraphs and compare them to the commentary paragraphs. There are hardly any of these transitional devices in the commentary paragraphs because the writer is preoccupied with explaining the evidence instead of retelling the story. Another key point to make about plot summary vs. commentary is that it is possible to summarize the plot with quotations. Oftentimes, students think they have avoided plot summary *because* they have used quotations. However, if the writer has surrounded the quotations with plot summary and left out the explanations of those quotations, the paragraph is still plot summary.

COMMENTARY VS. PLOT SUMMARY PRACTICE #1

Directions: Let's experiment with writing only plot summary. Write or rewrite a body paragraph from your essay using **ONLY** plot summary. Be sure to use quotations in the paragraph as you summarize the story. This paragraph will serve as an example of what **NOT TO DO** in a literary analysis essay. Later on, you will revise this paragraph to delete the plot summary and add in commentary.

Plot Summary Paragraph

COMMENTARY VS. PLOT SUMMARY PRACTICE #2

Directions: Read the following paragraph from a literary analysis essay on the writers of the Beat Generation. As you read, complete the following ratiocination guide in order to observe commentary and plot summary in action:

- Underline the plot summary.
- Highlight the commentary.

One of the pivotal female writers of the Beat Generation Joyce Johnson expresses in her memoir *Minor Characters* how her life became the metaphorical “road” of her journey to recreate herself although her defiance did not include striking out on the literal road. Johnson creates vivid images of her childhood that clearly reveal her feelings of oppression, which stemmed from the expectations placed upon her by her parents and society at large. Johnson describes domestic space to illustrate how she felt restricted by growing up in a household of traditional gender roles. She depicts her family’s baby grand piano to symbolize the impossibility of her mother’s dream of becoming a singer due to her subject positions as mother and wife. The importance of the baby grand piano that “dominates everything” in their home expresses Johnson’s mother’s lost ambitions, and her dream for Johnson to become a composer and to live the life that she never had (J. Johnson 13). Juxtaposed with the piano is a portrait of her mother and father. Johnson relates, “my mother could very well be what she never became, a concert singer, but she’s engaged to my father, who stands beside her in a dark suit” (J. Johnson 14). Johnson’s emphasis on her father indicates the patriarchal structure within Johnson’s childhood home that prevented her mother from becoming an artist. Since her mother met the expectations of conforming to her husband’s world, she projected her dreams onto her daughter, and the living space in their home served as her mother’s lost dream, “as if all these objects—the piano, the rug, the portrait—are held in uneasy captivity, hostages to aspiration” (J. Johnson 14). These “hostages to aspiration” reveal the irony of her mother’s dream for her daughter. Becoming an artist/ composer should imply freedom of expression; however, Johnson’s mother held her daughter “hostage” by forcing her dream upon her daughter. Ironically, Johnson’s mother negated the element of independence that should attend artistic expression by determining the art form she wanted her to pursue, which made Johnson feel resentment towards her mother and music. She relates, “The thought of having to fill all those [music] pages with my hated compositions depressed me” (J. Johnson 52). As a result, the living space of Johnson’s childhood home represented oppression.

Reflection Question

What do you notice about commentary vs. plot summary in this paragraph?

CRAFTING COMMENTARY STRATEGY #1: “THIS SHOWS THAT” METHOD

The most straightforward strategy for writing commentary in the literary analysis essay is the “This Shows That” Method. This method enables the writer to explain the quotations that he/she has selected and avoid the plot summary trap.

This method is simple. Here are the steps to using the “This Shows That” Method for writing commentary.

STEP #1: After a quotation, simply begin a new sentence with the words, “This shows that…” and then finish the sentence with an explanation. Essentially, this method enables the writer to explain what the quotation shows, not what it says directly. Note that this part can contain multiple sentences, not just one.

Example

Macbeth concludes, “If chance will have me king, why chance may crown me without my stir” (1.3.257). **This shows that** Macbeth’s conscience is still intact, so he resolves to do nothing to become king and not to act on the witches’ prophecy.

Reflection

Notice how the writer explains that the quotation shows Macbeth still has a conscience. This is commentary, not plot summary. The reader cannot go to Act I, scene iii, line 257 to read: “Macbeth’s conscience is still intact.” That’s because these words are the writer’s thoughts, analysis, and commentary about the quotation.

STEP #2: Add an additional “This Shows That” sentence that explains HOW the quotation SHOWS the topic sentence in action (i.e. how the quotation provides evidence that the theme is true). Note that commentary should not be random. It should connect to the topic sentence and thesis statement, so be sure that you only show the reader what matters for your argument.

Example

Topic Sentence: Selfish desires in the guise of ambition can lead a person down the path of evil as Macbeth shows with the regression of his morality from a victorious thane to a lustful killer.

Evidence: “I have no spur to prick the sides of my intent, but only vaulting ambition, which o’erleaps itself and falls on the other” (1.7.492).

Commentary: This shows that Macbeth knows that the only reason he has to kill Duncan is because of his own ambition for power. It also shows that he recognizes that this ambition will cause him to “fall.” In this respect, Macbeth’s selfish desires outweigh his sense of right and wrong.

Reflection

Notice that the commentary here focuses on the topic of “selfish desires” that is introduced in the topic sentence. The commentary is focused on the topic sentence and is not random. Use the topic sentence and thesis statement as a lens to focus your explanations of evidence.

STEP #3: Just as it is not enough to show the reader only one piece of evidence, it is not enough to have only one sentence of commentary per quotation. The reader needs more explanation, connections, thoughts, and analysis in order to be convinced. A good rule of thumb for writing commentary is to write at least TWO SENTENCES FOR EVERY QUOTATION. Remember that an essay should mostly be the writer’s commentary, so writing two times as much commentary as quotations will guarantee that the essay is mostly your own, original thoughts. For subsequent sentences of commentary, continue to use similar wording: “This also shows that…”

Example

This shows that Macbeth knows that the only reason he has to kill Duncan is because of his own ambition and selfish desire for power. **This also shows that** Macbeth is willing to commit an evil act that is an illogical decision since he gives three reasons not to kill the king and only one reason to kill the king. **This shows that** Macbeth is not thinking clearly through his decision and is acting on his emotions.

Reflection

Here, the writer has provided three sentences of commentary to explain the quotation and has taken the explanation to a deeper level about Macbeth’s character. The more commentary you force yourself to write, the deeper you force yourself to go in your analysis.

STEP #4: After using the “This Shows That” Method, it is important to EDIT OUT the words “This shows that” throughout the essay. Continually repeating “This shows that” will make the essay sound repetitive and choppy, which detracts from the overall fluidity and persuasive power of the essay. The nice thing about using the “This Shows That” Method is that when the writer deletes the words “This shows that,” what is left is a complete, stand-alone sentence. Be sure to add in any transitional devices as needed to smooth out the new, edited paragraph. Take a look at the new, edited example below.

Example #1

Macbeth concludes, “If chance will have me king, why chance may crown me without my stir” (1.3.257). Macbeth’s conscience is still intact, so he resolves to do nothing to become king and not to act on the witches’ prophecy.

Example #2

Macbeth knows that the only reason he has to kill Duncan is because of his own ambition and selfish desire for power. He is willing to commit an evil act that is an illogical decision since he gives three reasons not to kill the king and only one reason to kill the king. Macbeth is not thinking clearly through his decision and is acting on his emotions.

Reflection

Notice that the words “This shows that” have been removed from this commentary. The sentences that remain are complete sentences without the “This shows that” clauses. However, notice in Example #2 that the remaining commentary is still a bit choppy. After deleting “This shows that,” you may need to revise the commentary for smoothness by adding in transitional words and phrases.

Homework: Try out the “This Shows That” Method with one of your body paragraphs. Delete the plot summary and replace it with commentary that begins with the words “This shows that.” Type up your new, revised paragraph and bring it to class for peer revision. Remember to write at least two sentences of commentary for each quotation in the paragraph.

CRAFTING COMMENTARY STRATEGY #1: “THIS SHOWS THAT” METHOD

Steps of the “This Shows That” Method

1. BEGIN A NEW SENTENCE AFTER A QUOTATION WITH “THIS SHOWS THAT...”

2. Add a second “This Shows That” sentence that explains how the quotation shows the theme/ topic sentence in action and **PROVES** it is true.

3. *For subsequent sentences of commentary, continue to use similar wording: “This also shows that...” Be sure that your commentary is at least two sentences— more is better as long as it is relevant to the argument.*

4. **After completing a draft, go back and EDIT OUT (DELETE) the words “This shows that” to avoid repetition and choppiness in the essay. The commentary that remains should be complete, stand-alone sentences. Add in transitional devices as needed to smooth out the commentary.**

“THIS SHOWS THAT” METHOD COMMENTARY PEER REVISION

Directions: Today, you will exchange your “This Shows That” Method paragraphs with three peers. Attach this sheet to your paragraph so that your peers can answer the questions below. Then, use their feedback to revise the commentary of your body paragraph.

Peer Revision #1

Student Name: _____

1. Has the writer written at least TWO SENTENCES of commentary per quotation? Yes or No? (circle one)
2. Does the commentary explain the quotations? Yes or No? (circle one)
3. Does the commentary connect to the topic sentence? Yes or No? (circle one)
4. If you circled “no” for any of the above questions, please explain below.

Peer Revision #2

Student Name: _____

1. Has the writer written at least TWO SENTENCES of commentary per quotation? Yes or No? (circle one)
2. Does the commentary explain the quotations? Yes or No? (circle one)
3. Does the commentary connect to the topic sentence? Yes or No? (circle one)
4. If you circled “no” for any of the above questions, please explain below.

Peer Revision #3

Student Name: _____

1. Has the writer written at least TWO SENTENCES of commentary per quotation? Yes or No? (circle one)
2. Does the commentary explain the quotations? Yes or No? (circle one)
3. Does the commentary connect to the topic sentence? Yes or No? (circle one)
4. If you circled “no” for any of the above questions, please explain below.

Homework: Revise your paragraph based on today’s peer revision and bring in a new, updated TYPED body paragraph to turn in for teacher approval.

“THIS SHOWS THAT” METHOD TEACHER APPROVAL FORM

Directions: Turn in your typed “This Shows That” body paragraph for teacher approval. Your teacher will also be checking for proper paragraph format and topic/ concluding sentences.

If you do not receive teacher approval of your paragraph, you must revise and resubmit. Once you have received teacher approval, you are ready to move forward in the writing process.

Teacher Approval

_____ **YES** _____ **NO**

TEACHER FEEDBACK:

Questions I still have about the “This Shows That Method” for writing commentary:
(if applicable)

CRAFTING COMMENTARY STRATEGY #2: “LET” METHOD

Commentary Reminders

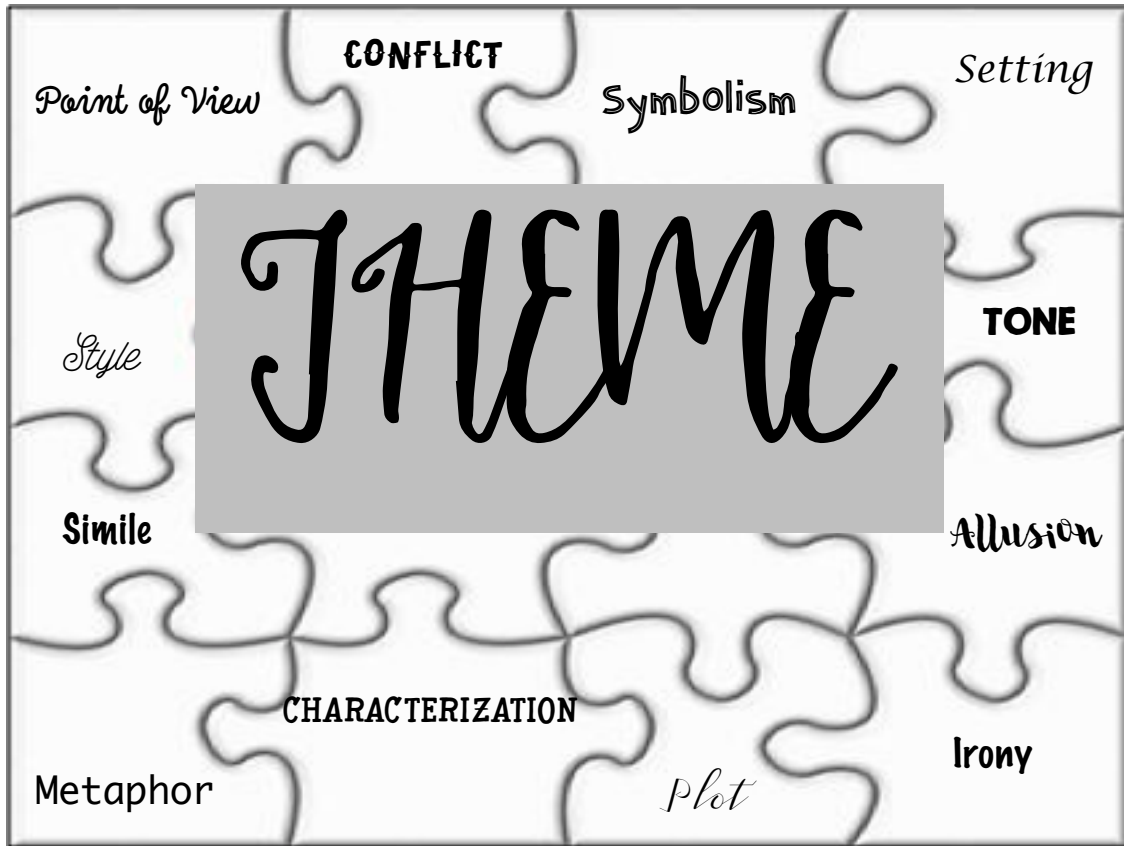
- Commentary requires the writer to **reflect on the evidence** and to **comment on aspects of the evidence that are not immediately apparent**.
- This level of analysis moves **beyond plot summary** and is one of the defining marks of a sophisticated writer.
- Commentary is also vital in **justifying the evidence as supportive of the thesis** and solidifies the argument. Without it, writers would merely “list” pieces of evidence.
- Good commentary is **insightful** and shows the depth of the writer’s **comprehension and critical thinking** about the thesis.

In Commentary Strategy #1, you practiced using the “This Shows That” Method for writing commentary. While this strategy can be helpful in avoiding plot summary, it relies on the writer knowing what to say about quotations to explain them.

However, sometimes students don’t always know what they can explain about a quotation. They don’t know the options. That’s where Commentary Strategy #2, the “LET” Method, comes into play. This strategy is guaranteed to help you take your commentary to a deeper level.

LET = LITERARY ELEMENTS AND TECHNIQUES

Quite simply, the “LET” Method stands for “Literary Elements and Techniques.” Believe it or not, but all of those elements and devices you have learned about in English class are used by an author to communicate a message, or theme. Essentially, the author uses literary elements and devices like puzzle pieces to depict an overall picture. Consider the following visual as an illustration of how elements and devices fit together to form an overall message:



While it's the author's job to **CONSTRUCT** a theme by using literary elements and techniques as building blocks, it is the literary analyst's job to **DECONSTRUCT** an author's theme by looking at the individual pieces and analyzing how the author has put them together.

Author = CONSTRUCTS THEME
Literary Analyst = DECONSTRUCTS THEME

This is the core of literary analysis. The very word “analysis” means to take something apart in order to observe the individual elements.

So, in the “LET” method, the literary analyst analyzes how the author uses literary elements and techniques to construct the theme in a piece of literature. This is all a matter of opinion, of course, but remember that there are lots of ways to be right in literary analysis... and ways to be wrong.

CRAFTING COMMENTARY STRATEGY #2: “LET” METHOD

Here are the steps to the “LET” Method for writing commentary.

STEP #1:

Know your devices! In order for you to discuss literary elements and techniques, you first need to know what they are, be able to recognize them in your quotations, and understand how they function in the story as a whole. The following is a list of “LET” options for you to discuss about your quotations. If there is a device on this list that you do NOT know, please look it up and learn about it. Remember that a literary element is like the Table of Elements in Chemistry. It is a device that is found in EVERY STORY and can be used in different combinations to create new stories just like elements in Chemistry can be used to create new compounds and formulas. However, a literary technique is a device that is not necessarily found in every piece of writing. Authors use literary techniques to affect HOW the elements are presented in the story. Note that the following chart does not contain a complete list of literary techniques but the more common ones found in literature.

LITERARY ELEMENTS	LITERARY TECHNIQUES
Characterization Conflict Point of View Setting Plot Theme	Imagery Dialogue (internal and external) Ethos, Pathos, Logos Parallel Structure Hyperbole Simile, Metaphor, Personification Alliteration (assonance and consonance) Irony (situational, verbal, dramatic) Flashback/ Flash-forward Foreshadowing Allusion Diction Tone Motif Symbolism Onomatopoeia Oxymoron, Paradox Pun Rhetorical Question Sarcasm

STEP #2:

For step #2 in the “LET” Method for writing commentary, you will begin to use literary elements and techniques to write commentary for your quotations by using the basic three devices: characterization, tone, and diction. No matter what you are analyzing, every piece of literature has a character (at least a narrator or speaker) and uses words (diction) that carry a tone (remember that the tone can be neutral or objective, but every piece of writing still has a tone!). So, this is where we begin the “LET” Method. Let’s take a look at some examples.

Example Commentary—Focus on Characterization

Although the other boys on the island dismiss Simon as odd and crazy, he alone sees the truth about “the beast,” as shown in his delirious encounter with the pig’s head. In the encounter, Simon seems to hear the pig’s head speaking to him, saying, “Fancy thinking the beast was something you could kill.” The hallucination reflects his dawning realization that the “beast” is not something outside the boys, but rather something inside them. He sees what all of the others on the island, even Ralph, fail to see: that their real enemy is their own dark side, their potential for evil, or their selfishness, laziness, and pride. In this way, Simon is a discerning and astute character while the others are in denial about their own potentiality for evil.

Reflection

In this commentary example, the writer focuses on the characterization of Simon. The writer explains traits of Simon that are evidenced by the quotation about the “beast.” According to the writer, the quotation shows that Simon has a “realization,” sees what others “fail to see,” and is “discerning and astute.” When writing commentary, you can always comment on the character traits that come through a quotation because those traits help to communicate the overall theme of the story.

Example Commentary—Focus on Diction and Tone

In *A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens, the narrator first introduces the novel by saying, “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times [...] that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only” (Dickens 5). Using the diction of “it was,” the narrator conveys the perspective of one who is looking back upon a past event. However, the narrator’s diction does not immediately reveal a specific time period, creating an ambiguous and mysterious tone to catch the reader’s attention. The narrator then refers to the “authorities” with the negative word “noisiest,” implying that commentators on the time period cared only about observing the extremes of society and not necessarily about solving the problems these extremes caused. The use of this diction makes the “authorities” seem callous to those who might have suffered. In this respect, the narrator unites the past and present societies to convey the corruption that has occurred as a result of the clashes in society.

Reflection

In this commentary example, the writer focuses on the word choice (diction) and tone of the quotation. Remember that a writer purposefully chooses words to convey specific images, ideas, and tones. The word choice is not just an “accident” or a “coincidence” and helps to illustrate the author’s overall message or theme. Since every single quotation involves words, you can *always* comment upon how the diction and tone of a quotation helps to convey the topic sentence and thesis statement.

STEP #3:

At this stage in the “LET” Method, you should comment upon any other RELEVANT devices that appear in your quotations. Observe the other literary devices that may be present in your quotations. Does the quotation contain situational irony and does that irony relate to your topic sentence? If it does, that’s something you can comment upon. How does the quotation use irony to show your theme/ thesis/ topic sentence? Does the quotation contain alliteration that relates to your topic sentence? If so, provide commentary on it. How does the quotation use alliteration to show your theme/ thesis/ topic sentence? Does the quotation use a flashback that connects to your topic sentence? If yes, explain it with commentary. How does the flashback show your theme/ thesis/ topic sentence? These devices are the literary analyst’s tools. They are necessary components to writing the literary analysis essay.

Remember that your commentary should never be RANDOM, so don’t just randomly comment upon the irony of a quotation simply because it contains irony. ONLY comment upon what most clearly connects to the topic sentence/ theme/ thesis statement. Take a look at the following example:

Example—Random Commentary

Topic Sentence:

Murder is never justified and only leads to more chaos as depicted in *Macbeth* when Duncan is found murdered.

Evidence:

For example, chaos erupts in the castle of Macbeth when Macduff discovers the body of the murdered king and spreads news of the murder throughout the castle, crying, “Ring the alarm bell. Murder and Treason!” (2.3.70).

Commentary:

This quotation shows that Macduff is able to react very quickly to any situation. He is the type of character that a king can depend upon.

Reflection

In this commentary example, the writer focuses on the characterization of Macduff, but the commentary does NOT connect to the topic sentence. The writer should have connected Macduff’s characterization to the overall message/ argument “murder is never justified and only leads to more chaos.” Instead, the writer has made a random observation that does NOT serve the purpose of convincing the reader that the topic sentence and thesis statement are valid.

Example—Relevant Commentary

Topic Sentence:

Murder is never justified and only leads to more chaos as depicted in *Macbeth* when Duncan is found murdered.

Evidence:

For example, chaos erupts in the castle of Macbeth when Macduff discovers the body of the murdered king and spreads news of the murder throughout the castle, crying, “Ring the alarm bell. Murder and Treason!” (2.3.70).

Commentary:

This quotation shows that Macduff is able to react very quickly to any situation—even one of total chaos. He immediately rings the alarm bell when he discovers that the king has been murdered in an attempt to root out the murderer. However, his announcement has an immediate chaotic effect: the tranquility of the castle is shattered as residents and guests alike awaken to the horror of what has happened. Not knowing what to do, men and women rush about in confusion and bewilderment, their usual routine thrown into disarray as lives once characterized by order are dominated by chaos instead.

Reflection

In this commentary example, the writer uses the characterization of Macduff for a purpose—to connect to the idea of “chaos” and “murder” in the topic sentence. By connecting the commentary to the topic sentence (and therefore, thesis statement), the writer makes relevant comments using characterization.

One way to avoid making random comments about evidence is to select the “key words” from the topic sentence (in this case “chaos” and “murder”) and bring them into the commentary. This will help you remain focused on the thesis statement and topic sentence.

Homework: Go back through your quotations and label any and all literary elements and /or techniques in each one. This will help you write commentary using the "LET" Method.

CRAFTING COMMENTARY STRATEGY #2: “LET” METHOD

Steps of the “LET” Method

1. KNOW YOUR DEVICES SO THAT YOU CAN USE THEM!
- 2. TRY COMMENTING ON CHARACTERIZATION, DIGTION, OR TONE. THESE DEVICES ARE FOUND IN EVERY QUOTATION!**
3. *Then, try commenting on other devices that might be in your quotations. Every quotation is different, so pay attention only to the devices shown in each, individual quotation you have selected.*

Make sure that your commentary isn't random. Use key words from the topic sentence in your commentary to connect back to the topic sentence and thesis statement. Be sure to explain how each quotation SHOWS the thesis statement/topic sentence in action.

"LET" METHOD OF WRITING COMMENTARY PRACTICE

Directions: Select a body paragraph for your essay and draft a paragraph in the spaces below using the "LET" Method of writing commentary. Remember to begin by commenting on characterization, diction, or tone and then move on to commenting on other devices that may be present in your quotation selections. Your commentary should be at LEAST TWO SENTENCES in length and should connect to the topic sentence by using key words/ ideas. Note that you can add in an optional third quotation as needed.

Topic Sentence

Blended Quotation #1

Commentary

Blended Quotation #2

Commentary

Blended Quotation #3 (optional— add on a separate sheet of paper)

Concluding Sentence

Homework: Type up your paragraph using the “LET” Method for writing commentary and bring it to class for peer revision.

“LET” METHOD COMMENTARY PEER REVISION

Directions: Today, you will exchange your “LET” Method paragraph with three peers. Attach this sheet to your paragraph so that your peers can answer the questions below. Then, use their feedback to revise the commentary of your paragraph.

Peer Revision #1

Student Name: _____

1. Has the writer used the “LET” Method? Yes or No? (circle one)
2. Has the writer written at least TWO SENTENCES of commentary per quotation? Yes or No? (circle one)
3. Does the commentary explain the quotations? Yes or No? (circle one)
4. Does the commentary connect to the topic sentence? Yes or No? (circle one)
5. If you circled “no” for any of the above questions, please explain below.

Peer Revision #2

Student Name: _____

1. Has the writer used the “LET” Method? Yes or No? (circle one)
2. Has the writer written at least TWO SENTENCES of commentary per quotation? Yes or No? (circle one)
3. Does the commentary explain the quotations? Yes or No? (circle one)
4. Does the commentary connect to the topic sentence? Yes or No? (circle one)
5. If you circled “no” for any of the above questions, please explain below.

Peer Revision #3

Student Name: _____

1. Has the writer used the “LET” Method? Yes or No? (circle one)
2. Has the writer written at least TWO SENTENCES of commentary per quotation? Yes or No? (circle one)
3. Does the commentary explain the quotations? Yes or No? (circle one)
4. Does the commentary connect to the topic sentence? Yes or No? (circle one)
5. If you circled “no” for any of the above questions, please explain below.

Homework: Revise your paragraph based on today’s peer revision and bring in a revised, TYPED paragraph to turn in for teacher approval.

“LET” METHOD TEACHER APPROVAL FORM

Directions: Turn in your typed “LET” Method body paragraph for teacher approval. Your teacher will also be checking for proper paragraph format and topic/ concluding sentences.

If you do not receive teacher approval of your paragraph, you must revise and resubmit. Once you have received teacher approval, you are ready to move forward in the writing process.

Teacher Approval

_____ **YES**

_____ **NO**

TEACHER FEEDBACK:

Questions I still have about the “LET” Method for writing commentary:
(if applicable)

COMMENTARY STRATEGIES ONE SHEET REVIEW

Commentary vs. Plot Summary

PLOT SUMMARY

Beowulf comes to Hrothgar's kingdom to kill the evil monster, Grendel. When he arrives, he meets with the king and convinces Hrothgar to allow him to fight the monster. Hrothgar agrees, and Beowulf fights the monster, tearing off its arm. After killing Grendel, Grendel's Mother seeks revenge by killing Hrothgar's wise friend. As a result, Hrothgar challenges Beowulf to kill Grendel's Mother also. Beowulf agrees and swims down to her lair below the water and kills her with a giant's sword. Beowulf then cuts off Grendel's head and brings it back to Hrothgar. 50 years later, Beowulf is the king of the Geats. An evil dragon attacks the people after his goblet is stolen, so Beowulf defends his people by attacking the dragon. However, it is Beowulf's last battle, and the dragon kills him. This shows that good overcomes evil.

COMMENTARY

The story *Beowulf* shows that risky behavior can at first lead to great accomplishments but eventually leads to downfall. First of all, Beowulf finds victory against Grendel even though he tells Hrothgar that "[his] hands/ Alone shall fight for [him]." In this moment, Beowulf takes a risk by deciding to fight Grendel without a weapon-especially since he has never faced a foe like this monster and does not know Grendel's strengths and weaknesses. Instead of taking time to observe the monster in action in order to discern Grendel's powers, Beowulf dives right into action by setting up a secret attack in the mead hall. Beowulf knows that the greater the risk he takes, the greater the glory he will receive, and so he is willing to risk his life against an unknown foe without the advantage of a weapon. Fortunately for Beowulf, he defeats the evil monster, and his risk proves victorious.

The "This Shows That" Method

1. Begin a new sentence after a quotation with "This shows that..."
2. Finish the sentence by explaining what the quotation *shows*. It is important that you remember to explain HOW the quotation SHOWS the topic sentence since you are trying to prove the topic sentence.
3. For subsequent sentences of commentary, continue to use similar wording: "This also shows that..."
4. After completing a draft, go back and EDIT OUT (DELETE) the words "This shows that" to avoid repetition and choppiness in the essay. The commentary that remains should be complete, stand-alone sentences. Add in transitional devices as needed to smooth out the commentary.

The "LET" Method

1. Know your devices so that you can use them!
2. Try commenting on characterization, diction, or tone. These devices are found in every quotation!
3. Then, try commenting other devices that might be in your quotation. Every quotation is different, so pay attention only to the devices shown in each, individual quotation you have selected. Make sure that your commentary isn't random. Use key words from the topic sentence in your commentary to connect back to the topic sentence and thesis statement.

LITERARY ELEMENTS	LITERARY TECHNIQUES	
Characterization Conflict Point of View Setting Plot Theme	Imagery Dialogue (internal and external) Ethos, Pathos, Logos Parallel Structure Hyperbole Simile, Metaphor, Personification Alliteration (assonance and consonance) Irony (situational, verbal, dramatic)	Flashback/ Flash-forward Foreshadowing Allusion Diction Tone Motif Symbolism Onomatopoeia Oxymoron, Paradox Pun Rhetorical Question Sarcasm

CRAFTING COMMENTARY: DO'S AND DON'TS

DO: PROVIDE EXPLANATIONS OF EVIDENCE.

Ex. Jack says, “I want to see the manager. I... I don’t think he understands. My son is not part of this. He...” It is clear that Jack wants to protect Danny, so he takes a risk by wanting to speak to the manager.

DO NOT: DROP IN OPINIONS WITHOUT EVIDENCE.

Ex. The Overlook has the ability to fester in Jack’s mind and urges him to kill his family. His real mind tries to fight this external force, and this leads to instability. It also brings back his temperament that he had when he used to drink. He pictures himself at a bar being served free drinks by Lloyd who mentions that the manager is interested in Danny.

What’s wrong with this commentary?

1. Every single time you express an OPINION about the literature, you MUST PROVE IT with a QUOTATION! This is the evidence to back your opinions and forms the commentary of the essay. It is impossible to be convincing without evidence.
2. Opinion = “The Overlook has the ability to fester in Jack’s mind” = needs proof/ quotation
3. Opinion = “His real mind tries to fight this external force” = needs proof/ quotation
4. Opinion = “It also brings back his temperament” = needs proof/ quotation

DO: WRITE AT LEAST TWO SENTENCES OF COMMENTARY FOR EACH QUOTATION.

Ex. Frankenstein describes how “breathless horror and disgust filled [his] heart” for he had not created a superhuman, but a monster. This shows that Frankenstein immediately rejects his creature. The word choice of “breathless” implies the shocking nature of the creature’s ugliness and emphasizes the extremity of this ugliness through Frankenstein’s visceral reaction.

DO NOT: SIMPLY WRITE ONE SENTENCE OF COMMENTARY OR NONE AT ALL.

Ex. Frankenstein describes how “breathless horror and disgust filled [his] heart” for he had not created a superhuman, but a monster. This shows that Frankenstein immediately rejects his creature.

What’s wrong with this commentary?

1. It’s just too brief. One sentence of explanation/ commentary isn’t enough to be convincing.
2. Besides that, this one sentence of explanation states something rather obvious about the quotation and does not connect to a theme.

DO: ANALYZE THE QUOTATION AND EXPLAIN IT BEYOND WHAT IS OBVIOUS.

Ex. In Poe’s “Oval Portrait,” he writes, “To all appearance it had been temporarily and very lately abandoned.” This shows through the use of the adverbs “temporarily” and “very lately” that the castle has recently been left behind, which implies that something unexpected had transpired and forced them to leave abruptly.

DO NOT: SIMPLY RESTATE WHAT THE QUOTATION SAYS ALREADY.

Ex. In Poe’s “Oval Portrait,” he writes, “To all appearance it had been temporarily and very lately abandoned.” This shows that the castle the traveler comes across is abandoned.

What’s wrong with this commentary?

1. The writer has restated what the quotation already says. While this might be a good strategy to **START** the commentary/ explanation of a quotation, it needs to go much farther and deeper.
2. The writer needs to add more commentary and can use the “This Shows That” Method or the “**LET**” Method to take the commentary to a more analytical level.

DO: STAY FOCUSED ON THE QUOTATIONS FROM THE PIECE OF LITERATURE.

Ex. The concept is introduced by Mr. Halloran when he tells Danny, “What you got, son, I call it shining on, the Bible calls it having visions, and there’s scientists call it precognition [...] They all mean the seeing the future.” This shows that Mr. Halloran has an understanding of Danny’s visions far beyond that of Danny’s parents. It also shows that Danny is not necessarily unusual because there are other people in the world like him who have been recognized by science and religion.

DO NOT: DIGRESS FROM THE TEXT.

Ex. The concept is introduced by Mr. Halloran when he tells Danny, “What you got, son, I call it shining on, the Bible calls it having visions, and there’s scientists call it precognition [...] They all mean seeing the future.” This shows that many people in the world would deny such a power even exists or refuse to try to understand it because it is not considered normal in society, and the less that it is understood, the less control people will have over it. By incorporating “the shining” into the story, readers are forced to acknowledge that supernatural ability and control is taken out of their hands with their lack of knowledge. With this mystery, it is impossible for them to predict what will come next, resulting in a play on their fear.

What’s wrong with this commentary?

1. None of the explanation is shown by the quotation selection at all.
2. None of the explanation can be proven. It’s full of pure, unfounded opinion and steps outside of the piece of literature. The writer’s job is not to generalize what people in the world do/ think/ believe. His/her job is to analyze what the characters do/ think/ believe. Stick to the story!

DO: STAY FOCUSED ON EXPLAINING THE QUOTATION YOU HAVE SELECTED AND ONLY THE QUOTATION YOU HAVE SELECTED.

Ex. In “The Yellow Wallpaper,” the narrator states, “I kept on creeping just the same, but I looked at him over my shoulder. ‘I’ve got out at last,’ said I, ‘in spite of you and Jane. And I’ve pulled off most of the wallpaper, so you can’t put me back.’” This shows that she “creeps” and crawls around the room, peeling off the wallpaper as quickly as she can—trying to free the women inside of it. The figures inside the wallpaper are a reflection of her; she feels trapped inside the room and wants to escape it.

DO NOT: EXPLAIN OR SUMMARIZE OTHER PARTS OF THE TEXT THAT ARE NOT SHOWN IN THE SELECTED QUOTATION.

Ex. In “The Yellow Wallpaper,” the narrator states, “I kept on creeping just the same, but I looked at him over my shoulder. ‘I’ve got out at last,’ said I, ‘in spite of you and Jane. And I’ve pulled off most of the wallpaper, so you can’t put me back.’” This shows that the protagonist is a woman who is very sick; however, her husband believes she suffers from a temporary nervous depression, so he keeps her locked up in a bedroom with a hideous shade of yellow wallpaper. No matter how many times she asks her husband for permission to walk around the garden, her request is denied because he believes that bed-rest is the best solution.

What’s wrong with this commentary?

1. The quotation is unrelated to the commentary.
2. The fact that the husband believes his wife suffers from “nervous depression” is NOT shown in the quotation selection and needs its own quotation to be proven.
3. The fact that she asks for permission and is denied is also not SHOWN by the quotation. The writer needs to select a different quotation or change the commentary!
4. Remember that every time you express an opinion in the form of explanation or analysis, you MUST prove it—show where you got that idea. And if your quotation does not show what you want it to show, find one that does!

DO: USE COMMENTARY THAT IS FOCUSED ON THE QUOTATION (SEE EXAMPLE ABOVE).

DO NOT: USE HYPOTHETICAL “IF”/ “THEN” STATEMENTS IN YOUR COMMENTARY.

Ex. Emily Grierson never experienced long lasting love. For example, when her father passed away, she was heartbroken and a “short time after, her sweetheart—the one we believed would marry her—had deserted her.” If Emily’s father had survived, she would have never lost her fiancé.

What’s wrong with this commentary?

1. If/then statements cannot be proven. We can never possibly know what this character would have done had the circumstances been different. All we can analyze is what is actually in the text—not a hypothetical situation. Delete if/then statements and replace them with commentary specifically about what the quotation shows.

ANSWER KEY & MODIFICATIONS

Commentary is the most difficult part of the essay, and it takes quite a bit of practice to become skilled at writing it. Some students will really struggle with this, so the main goal here is to help them avoid writing plot summary. The depth of the commentary will come as they practice more of these types of essays and are exposed to the ideas of their peers. At this point, make sure that students have practiced commentary and are not writing plot summary.

Commentary vs. Plot Summary Practice—ANSWER KEY

One of the pivotal female writers of the Beat Generation Joyce Johnson expresses in her memoir *Minor Characters* **how her life became the metaphorical “road” of her journey to recreate herself although her defiance did not include striking out on the literal road.** Johnson creates vivid images of her childhood that clearly reveal her feelings of oppression, which stemmed from the expectations placed upon her by her parents and society at large. Johnson describes domestic space to illustrate how she felt restricted by growing up in a household of traditional gender roles. She depicts her family’s baby grand piano to symbolize the impossibility of her mother’s dream of becoming a singer due to her subject positions as mother and wife. **The importance of the baby grand piano that “dominates everything” in their home expresses Johnson’s mother’s lost ambitions, and her dream for Johnson to become a composer and to live the life that she never had** (J. Johnson 13). Juxtaposed with the piano is a portrait of her mother and father. Johnson relates, “my mother could very well be what she never became, a concert singer, but she’s engaged to my father, who stands beside her in a dark suit” (J. Johnson 14). **Johnson’s emphasis on her father indicates the patriarchal structure within Johnson’s childhood home that prevented her mother from becoming an artist. Since her mother met the expectations of conforming to her husband’s world, she projected her dreams onto her daughter, and the living space in their home served as her mother’s lost dream,** “as if all these objects—the piano, the rug, the portrait—are held in uneasy captivity, hostages to aspiration” (J. Johnson 14). **These “hostages to aspiration” reveal the irony of her mother’s dream for her daughter. Becoming an artist/composer should imply freedom of expression; however, Johnson’s mother held her daughter “hostage” by forcing her dream upon her daughter. Ironically, Johnson’s mother negated the element of independence that should attend artistic expression by determining the art form she wanted her to pursue, which made Johnson feel resentment towards her mother and music.** She relates, “The thought of having to fill all those [music] pages with my hated compositions depressed me” (J. Johnson 52). **As a result, the living space of Johnson’s childhood home represented oppression.**

Reflection Question

Students should immediately notice that MOST of the paragraph is commentary, and there is hardly ANY plot summary. The literary analysis essay should be MOSTLY the students’ comments because the writer should assume that the reader is an academic in the field and familiar with the texts being discussed.

Modifications

1. The best way to modify commentary writing for struggling students is to limit the goal to avoiding plot summary (instead of aiming for depth), or change the required number of commentary sentences from two to one. It’s better if a student can write one quality commentary sentence rather than two plot summary sentences.
2. Like with the other mini-lessons, you might provide students with a fill-in template to use, or give them one commentary sentence and allow them to come up with the second one.
3. As mentioned above, consider pairing students with in-class tutors and/or providing more models of commentary from student writing.