

Some Reflections on Writing Commentaries

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Writing a commentary on a classical text is a process that involves both revealing and producing meaning – a complex and valuable form of textual engagement for philologists. The following presents in a schematic form the various aspects of a text that a commentary should or could address. They are organized hierarchically, from foundational to keystone. Note, however, that they are often necessarily interdependent. Most importantly, everything else (grammar, style, context, agenda) depends on establishing the text, but establishing the text can often depend on everything else. This is the most important and inescapable hermeneutic circle of philology as a discipline. Note also that no commentary can address all aspects of a text without unduly taxing the endurance of the reader. The content of a commentary will instead vary according to the type of text and, even more, the readership that you envision. In all cases, the goal is to elucidate the text in ways that make it more accessible and more meaningful for the reader, but what constitutes ‘accessible’ and ‘meaningful’ will necessarily differ from case to case and person to person. Note that these reflections presume access to an abundance of resources; it should be understood that in an exam setting it will not be possible to incorporate all these elements.

1. Text. A full textual commentary addresses all significant variants in the manuscript as well as the issues involved and the chief solutions. For most purposes, you need only consider particularly problematic passages. Knowing whether an author’s text does or does not have a lot of problems can be helpful.
2. Grammar and syntax. Define any obscure words or word-usages, explain less common grammatical usages and idioms, and analyze the structure of any particularly complex syntax. Are there ambiguities in the syntax that cannot be resolved? Tools for elucidation include translation, citation of parallels (from the same or other authors), and references to standard reference works, including general and specialized lexicons and grammars.
3. Style. Call attention to key aspects of the author’s style. The following elements may all be relevant. Is the author notable for preferring or avoiding colloquial words,

archaic words, technical words, poetic words? Does the author have a tendency towards fullness or spareness, balance or the avoidance of balance, an abundance of subordination or parataxis? Does the author employ or avoid figures of speech or rhetorical devices, and if so, which in particular? If this is poetry, what metrical devices or unusual features does the passage contain? Does the author at times (and in this passage) adopt the vocabulary or style of another genre?

4. Historical context. Identify names, provide dates and further details for historical events, elucidate institutions or customs. For both this and the following, always ask yourself: what will actually help a reader better understand the text, or am I using a reference in the text as an excuse to write a mini essay or encyclopedia article?
5. Literary context. Note any significant intra- or intertextual aspects: quotations, allusions, parallels, typical features of the genre.
6. Agenda; how does it work? What is the apparent goal of the text? In what ways, and to what ends, does it act on and manipulate its audience? What purpose do the elements discussed in nos. 2-5 above actually serve? How does the passage fit into the larger work and contribute to its goals?