



Director: Professor Katrin Kohl
OGN Coordinator: Claudia Piller
German Classic Coordinator:
Dr Karolina Watroba

Email: ogn@mod-langs.ox.ac.uk
germanclassic@mod-langs.ox.ac.uk
Website: www.ogn.ox.ac.uk
www.ogn.ox.ac.uk/content/german-classics-prize

A German Classic: Thomas Mann's *Der Tod in Venedig* Commentary Guidelines for Sixth-Formers

All eligible students who submit their written commentary by email to **germanclassic@mod-langs.ox.ac.uk** by **1 September 2020** will receive individual written feedback on their work by 1 October 2020. The feedback will not include any ranking or mark. It will be designed purely as informal academic comment on the piece of work submitted.

You can choose **one of the following three** short passages for your commentary:

1. 'Erstes Kapitel', from 'Es war Reiselust' to 'Europa zu verlassen'
2. 'Drittes Kapitel', from 'Er frühstückte ohne Eile' to 'gezogen hatte'
3. 'Fünftes Kapitel', from 'In der vierten Woche' to 'grübelnd unter ihnen'

The commentary should be written in **English**, but it should discuss the **German** version of the text. You can use the English translation to aid your comprehension, but any quotations you discuss should be in German. The length of your commentary should be around **1500 words**.

How to Write a Good Commentary?

In different contexts, a commentary may serve different functions. For example, in some exams it may aim to test your understanding of a foreign language and reading comprehension. But this guide is written specifically for university-level study of literary texts.

In this context, a commentary should offer a close reading of the selected passage informed by an understanding of the whole work, and paying special attention to the precise wording. We're interested in how the use of language and style in the passage produces its meaning. Here are some questions that can help you get started:



- What happens in this passage? (Explain in one or two sentences.)
- What is the most important thing about this passage? (Explain in one or two sentences.)
- What is the position of this passage in the text?
- Who is/are the main character(s) here and what do we find out about them?
- What is the time and place, and are they particularly important here? Why?
- How would you characterise the narrative perspective here? How is the story being told at this point? How much does the narrator know in comparison to the character(s)? Is the narrator emotionally involved in the story? From whose point of view is the story told?
- How would you describe the style: vocabulary, grammar, sentence structure, register? What effect does the style have? What literary devices have you noticed: metaphors, similes, alliteration, exaggeration, repetition, personification, symbols, ambiguity, allusion? What function do they serve? What images stuck with you and why?
- How would you describe the development of this passage? What has changed between the first and the last sentence?
- What other parts of the work does this passage relate to especially strongly and why? What broader themes, tensions or concerns in the work does this passage bring out particularly clearly?

Make sure that you analyse rather than summarising or paraphrasing the text. This means that you shouldn't just mention aspects of the passage without explaining their function within the passage. Remember to stay close to the passage: for example, avoid writing at length about a general theme of the work which you see represented in the passage, but rather write about the passage itself, explaining how the broader theme is generated or realised in it.

Be concise: you do not need a detailed introduction to the whole text and author, and you don't need long quotes from the passage – it's better to quote specific words or short phrases to support your argument, or describe word choices, register, sentence structure, and so on, in your own words. Including additional information, for example about the biography of the author or the historical period in which they are writing, only makes sense if it contributes to your interpretation.

You should be aiming to produce a commentary that integrates your individual comments and observations into a larger argument about the passage. One important skill that you develop here is deciding which details of the passage are important and interesting, and explaining why. Another important skill is to identify your main argument about the passage and structure your commentary so that it presents this argument as clearly as possible – setting it out in the introduction, presenting your evidence through close reading in the main body, and reaching a conclusion at the end.