

Faculty of Classics: Guidance on Commentaries and Gobbets

Literary commentaries and gobbets for Classical Special Subjects

Commenting on a text should not be the same thing as writing a short essay. A commentary or gobbet is largely concerned with the explication of a single passage of text; an essay is directed towards a different goal, making a more general argument or arguments on a set topic, using a wide range of primary and secondary evidence. Here are some guidelines on commentary- and gobbet-writing which may be of use.

(i) *Context.* Identify the context (briefly but precisely), paying some attention to what follows as well as what precedes. If the passage is part of direct speech, identify the speaker. If an event is at issue, you should also locate the episode in its historical context, with attention to chronology, geography and the like.

(ii) *Content.* Say what you feel should be said about the passage as a whole. This will vary from author to author and passage to passage, but you should especially consider how the passage fits into the overall themes of the work from which it comes, and its place in the plot and narrative development (Is this a crucial or a pivotal point? Does it look forward or back to other points?). Do cross-refer to other relevant passages, but do this fairly briefly. You may also need to explain details necessary to the understanding of the passage, e.g. identify (briefly) named individuals, anyone or anything referred to by pronouns, any interesting places; explain constitutional details referred to and the like.

(iii) *Significance.* This is where you explain why and how this particular passage is interesting/important. The passage might reveal something about the method of the writer (for example details of verbal style (e.g. unusual or colourful vocabulary); metaphor and related figures (e.g. simile, personification); it might offer interesting comparison with one or more other ancient accounts, inscriptions, monuments, or artefacts; it might contain material central to the understanding of interpretation of the actions, policy, etc. of some or all of the characters involved; it might contain a chronological crux, it might well do more than one of the above or other analogous things besides. In any case, what *difference* does this passage and its interpretation make to our understanding of something?

Say what you feel should be said about the *details of the passage*, going through it in order and indicating points of interest. You may find it useful to quote a few words of the original and then comment on them, or use line numbers to refer to the text.

It is not expected that you will have extensive recall of all that is to be found in Commentaries. This is not what is being tested. What is being tested is, rather, familiarity with prescribed texts and ability to deal, in an informed and perceptive way, with significant passages from those texts.

DO read the whole passage carefully. DO focus your response on the passage in question. DO NOT spend time simply paraphrasing the passage.

Gobbets for Philosophy Special Subjects

The gobbet question is designed to test a different skill from the essay questions – it is designed to test your ability to extract the relevant philosophical content from a short stretch of text. The basic format of a gobbet should be: (i) context, (ii) content, (iii) assessment.

(i) Context. You need to identify the argumentative context of the passage. For example, 'This passage occurs in Socrates' response to Thrasymachus' claim that the ruler properly so-called is expert in promoting his own advantage; in reply Socrates urges that all expertise aims to promote the advantage of that on which the expertise is exercised, hence the expert ruler must aim to promote, not his own advantage, but that of the subject.'

(ii) Content. You need to say what the specific contribution of the passage is to that argumentative context. Is it a sub-argument (in which case the steps of the argument should be set out)? Or does it introduce a distinction (in which case you should clearly state what is being distinguished from what)? Or does it introduce some key concept (in which case, you should elucidate the concept, and explain its importance for the argument)? If there are differing interpretations of the passage, you should canvas them all – don't just state your preferred one.

(iii) Assessment. Once you have elucidated what the content of the passage is, you need to assess that content. If the passage contains an argument, then you should say whether the argument is a good one, and identify its flaw if it is fallacious or unsound. If the passage introduces some key distinction or concept, you should say why the distinction or concept is important for the surrounding argument. If the significance of the passage goes beyond the immediate argumentative context (e.g. in introducing a concept which is important for a wider range of contexts) that wider significance should be indicated. Wider significance may be internal to the work as a whole, or may extend beyond it, for instance by relating to some theme central to the thought of the author (such as Plato's Theory of Forms or Aristotle's Categories) or to some important topic in modern philosophy.

Your primary focus in philosophy gobbets should be on argumentative and conceptual content. Details of sentence construction, vocabulary etc should be discussed only in so far as they affect that content. The same goes for the identification of persons etc named in the passage; note that where the passage is taken from a Platonic dialogue it will usually be relevant to identify the speaker(s).

It is vitally important to observe the time constraints imposed by the number of passages to be translated and commented on. Brevity, relevance and lucidity are crucial. It is especially important not to be carried away in expounding the wider significance of the passage (see above); a gobbet should not expand into an essay on the Theory of Forms, or the problem of universals, or whatever.

Gobbets for Ancient History Special Subjects

A gobbet is a passage of text on the content, the context and the significance of which you are asked to comment.

1. *Context.* This can have two parts. The first (always relevant) is where you locate the passage in the historical work in which it appears. (This shows an agreeable familiarity with the work in question.) The second (relevant if an event is at issue) is where you locate the episode in its historical context, with attention to chronology, geography, and the like. (This shows agreeable familiarity with the historical setting.)

2. *Content.* This is where you explain details necessary to the understanding of the passage, e.g.: identify (briefly) named individuals, anyone or anything referred to by pronouns, any interesting places; explain constitutional details referred to and the like.

3. *Significance.* This is where you explain why and how this particular passage is interesting/important. The passage might reveal something about the method of the historian; it might offer interesting comparison with one or more other ancient accounts, inscriptions, monuments, or artefacts; it might contain material central to the understanding or interpretation of the actions or policy of some or all of the characters involved; it might contain a chronological problem; it might well do more than one of the above or other similar things besides. In any case, what *difference* does this passage and its interpretation make to our understanding of something?

It is not expected that people will have extensive recall of all that is to be found in Commentaries. This is not what is being looked for. What is being looked for is, rather, familiarity with prescribed texts and ability to deal, in an informed and perceptive way, with significant passages from those texts.

DO read the passage carefully. *DO* focus your response on the passage in question. *DO NOT* spend time simply paraphrasing the passage.

Specimen gobbet

Atque interea statim admonitu Allobrogum C. Sulpicium praetorem, fortem virum, misi qui ex aedibus Cethegi si quid telorum esset efferret; ex quibus ille maximum sicarum numerum et gladiatorum extulit.

[In the meantime, following the advice of the Allobroges, I immediately sent that gallant man, the praetor C. Sulpicius, to get from the house of Cethegus any weapons that were there, and he brought out a very large number of daggers and swords.]

(CICERO, *In Cat.* 3.8)

Attempt 1

This extract comes from Cicero's speech to the people in the forum late in the afternoon of the 3rd December 63 BC. In this speech he reported the events of the previous night, when Volturcius was captured at the Mulvian Bridge while trying to leave Rome with the Allobroges, and of the meeting in the senate the following day, when the urban conspiracy was revealed thanks to the evidence of the Allobroges and Volturcius.

This passage describes how, on the morning of the 3rd December, while the senate was assembling (*interea*, l.1), Cicero instructed the praetor Gaius Sulpicius to search the house of C. Cornelius Cethegus. When challenged before the senate to explain the presence of so many weapons in his house, Cethegus supposedly claimed that he had always enjoyed collecting good metalwork. Apart from the letters from the conspirators to the Allobroges and

Lentulus' letter to Catiline, this cache of arms was virtually the only hard evidence Cicero had for the urban conspiracy.

Cicero elsewhere describes Cethegus as violent and impetuous; he is said to have been appointed to oversee the massacre of the senate. Cicero also says that although the other conspirators wanted to wait until the Saturnalia before launching the massacre, Cethegus wanted to bring the date forward. He was one of the five conspirators executed on the night of the 5th December.

The Allobroges were a tribe from Transalpine Gaul. They were heavily in debt to Roman businessmen at this period, and the envoys appear to have been sent to Rome to petition the senate for debt-relief. If they hoped for more favourable treatment through their betrayal of the conspirators, they were disappointed; the following year the Allobroges were driven to open revolt by the pressure of debt.

It is interesting to find a praetor engaged in searching the house. Cicero made much use of the urban praetors in the course of his suppression of the conspiracy. Their main responsibility at this period was to preside over the law-courts, but they could also serve as the consul's immediate 'enforcers' at a time of crisis. Cicero sent two praetors with an armed force to arrest Volturcius on the 2nd December, and at the start of November, as Sallust tells us, two more praetors had been sent out at the head of armies to quell unrest in other parts of Italy.

Attempt 2

This passage is taken from Cicero's third speech against Catiline. His four surviving speeches against Catiline are our main contemporary source for the Catilinarian conspiracy. The speeches as we have them may not represent exactly what was said by Cicero at the time, since we have evidence for Cicero revising his speeches later for publication (as in the case of the pro Milone, as reported by Asconius).

Here Cicero describes how, on the information of the Allobroges, he sent the praetor C. Sulpicius to bring whatever weapons he could find from the house of Cethegus, one of the conspirators. He is said to have found a very large number of daggers and swords, proving that Cethegus was involved in the conspiracy and that a massacre was being planned at Rome. However, it is not certain whether Catiline was actually involved in this plot or whether this was an independent conspiracy, as Seager has argued.

Sulpicius is described as a 'gallant man' (*fortem virum*). Cicero must have been grateful to him for taking on this task, which might have been very dangerous. No-one knew how far the conspiracy went, and Cethegus could have tried to resist when Sulpicius searched his house.

The mention of the Allobroges is interesting. They were Gallic tribesmen whom Cethegus and others had tried to bring into the conspiracy. Their decision to betray the conspiracy to Cicero was crucial to the uncovering of the plot, and they were later rewarded for this.

Cethegus was convicted of involvement in the Catilinarian conspiracy, and was executed after the debate in the senate on the 5th December. The execution of Cethegus and the others brought Cicero great unpopularity in later years, since despite the passing of the SCU (*senatus consultum ultimum*) he was perceived to have acted unconstitutionally. This passage suggests that Cicero had some justification for his actions, since the cache of arms at Cethegus' house proved that a major plot against the state was underway.

Comments:

Specimen gobbet 1 would normally expect to receive a good first-class mark; Specimen gobbet 2 a low-ish 2:2 mark. Why?

Paragraph 1. Both candidates provide general context. But Student 1 provides in the very first sentence four pieces of information which could not be gained simply by reading the passage: (1) to the people (2) in the forum (3) late afternoon [after the meeting of the senate] (4) 3rd Dec. 63 BC. In the rest of the paragraph, Student 1 accurately summarises enough of the content of the speech to make sense of the passage at hand (uncovering of conspiracy thanks to Allobroges), and shows that she remembers the name of the crucial figure (Volturcius). Student 2, however, in her first sentence says nothing which couldn't be learned by reading the reference (CICERO, In Cat. 3.8) at the bottom of the passage. The second and third sentences look at first sight somewhat more impressive, but in fact could be used for any gobbet from any part of the Catilinarians – hence they get no credit.

Paragraph 2. Student 1 situates the passage precisely in time (reference of interea). Writing Gaius Cornelius rather than C. Cornelius takes half a second longer and shows that she knows what C. stands for. She remembers Cethegus' defence against the accusation of hoarding arms (shows pleasing knowledge of the rest of the speech). Student 2 summarises the whole passage, which Student 1 rightly doesn't bother to do. The final sentence of Student 2's paragraph 2, on Catiline and Seager, again looks superficially impressive, but is in fact completely irrelevant to the passage at issue (could be inserted into almost any gobbet on any of the Catilinarians!).

Paragraph 3. Student 1 tells us what else she knows about Cethegus. Not much detail, but that's ok: does at least show that she has read the sources carefully enough to remember who's who. Student 2 knows nothing else at all about Cethegus, so guesses (incorrectly) that the examiner might be interested in her views on the phrase *fortem virum*, which are all too obviously based on no knowledge whatsoever. This kind of 'arguing from first principles' is very characteristic of desperate exam candidates whose knowledge has run out two sentences into the gobbet...

Paragraph 4 in both cases is a bit pointless: with a richer gobbet to work with, you could omit this altogether. Once again, Student 1 provides relevant argument (why the Allobroges got involved in the conspiracy, and why they betrayed it); Student 2 provides summary of events (what the Allobroges did).

Paragraph 5. It doesn't matter that Student 1 can't remember any names here (an examiner would probably need to look them up too) – the point is that she shows she has been paying attention while reading the set texts. Student 2 has patently run out of information, and piles in some random information (the SCU, described in two different ways to fill space), before guessing at the 'significance' of the passage.

In general: Student 1 can do names, dates, places, content of the speech, what happens immediately before and immediately afterwards. Student 2 has absolutely nothing to work with but the passage itself and a broad and general knowledge of the conspiracy as a whole. Student 1 knows what a praetor is and does, and worries about whether praetors usually got involved in house-searches; this leads her on to speculate (relevantly!) about what the praetors' role might have been in the suppression of the conspiracy. Student 2 evidently thinks: praetor, quaestor, censor, proctor, whatever.