

## Guidance for Critical Discussion at Parts IA and II

One of the exercises required for IA (papers 1-4) and certain Part II papers (usually A1 and A3) is to 'discuss' a passage or passages from Greek and Latin texts prescribed in the syllabuses. A question of this kind is intended to test a candidate's detailed knowledge of, and ability to comment constructively on, texts that have been read and worked on during the year before the exam. Their supervisors may have used different labels to refer to the exercise of discussing passages, most frequently perhaps 'practical criticism', 'commentary' or 'close reading'.

There is no single format for this exercise, and therefore no single 'right answer' for any individual passage, and no check-list of points against which a candidate's answer will be marked. Cambridge recognises that there are many things that can be done with texts, and that there is a plurality of scholarly and critical methodologies. The fact that the rubric is 'Discuss the following passage' rather than 'Comment on points/themes x, y and z in the following passage' reflects this openness. What is universally agreed by all literary classicists in Cambridge is that one of the most valuable ways of attending to ancient texts is through a close engagement with their detailed texture, and that this is an essential complement to the more synoptic command of texts that is developed in supervision essays and tested in essay questions in exams.

In general, examiners look for a combination of well-informed comment on details of a passage with an ability to link those details to wider questions. A 'discuss' question tests both the care and diligence with which candidates have read their texts, and also their ability to think about these texts within the frameworks of literary history, literary criticism and theory, and the wider culture of Greece and Rome. An extract from a larger work offers the opportunity to show how wider interpretative issues are focused in a brief context: thus discussion might cover either characteristic themes or techniques, and might include consideration of the ways in which a passage contributes to the rhetorical, allusive and imagistic structures of the larger work.

It is probably inadvisable to attempt to produce a commentary in the traditional sense of that word, i.e. a largely disconnected series of observations of points of interest or difficulty in the order that they arise in the text (although if a candidate showed herself or himself able to deploy the full range of scholarly weaponry, in traditional commentary form, on a passage she or he would certainly score highly). At the other extreme, candidates will certainly *not* score highly if they use the passage as a hook on which to hang a very general discussion of the text as a whole with little reference to the specific passage set; they should not use it as an opportunity to regurgitate a supervision essay. One possible model for tackling a 'discuss' question within the limited time available would be to identify a certain number of central topics or issues informing the passage, and then to write a set of connected paragraphs discussing these matters, with ongoing reference to the details of the passage itself.

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