

Katherine's Guide to Writing Practical Criticisms

In advance

1. *Know the general plot of the whole work.* Eg., make sure you know what happens in the whole Aeneid.
2. *Know the whole set text in detail.* This includes the plot, themes, characters - anything that might shed light on a passage you are given. Given that you will also have to answer grammar questions on any passage you are given, and translate passages in your language papers, going through every set text in detail at least once before the exams is strongly advised anyway.
3. *Know in some detail the books/sections either side of your set text.* These may come in handy as context.

Things to consider

This is not intended as a check-list, and you shouldn't write a prac crit in this structure, since there are obvious overlaps in the categories anyway. This is just intended to give you some ideas of what you might like to think about or include.

1. *Context.* How does this passage fit into the set text? What immediately precedes and follows it? Do either of these help to explain anything the author has done in this passage? How about the books/sections either side of the set text? (Don't dwell on these too much, but an apt quote may really help your argument.)
2. *Influences.* In many works, Homer and Virgil will be important influences, but there are always many others. Have a look at good commentaries, and check their references against texts that they say may have influenced the passage. Quoting directly from other texts, if relevant to your point, is very impressive. (If you include a couple of short quotes in your prac crits over the course of the year, then you can just learn those and hope to use one or two in the exam!)
3. *Structure.* What is the internal structure of the passage? Does it fit into any bigger structure in the work as a whole? If the passage is a poem in a collection, why might the author have chosen to put the poems in this order, if indeed he did?

4. *Language*. A tricky aspect to get right, but there is always a lot to say, and well-made linguistic points can be among the strongest in prac crits. If you need a way in, try looking for common oppositions, such as light/dark, male/female, soldier/lover, civilised/barbarian, young/old, to get you started. How does the use of words affect the meaning of the passage? Does it remind us of any other passage in the work? Don't make comments about language or the sound of the language (e.g. assonance, alliteration) unless you can convincingly tie it to some theme or particular meaning - just saying it's there doesn't count for much.

5. *Themes*. Are particular themes or motifs brought out in this passage which occur elsewhere in the work? Is this passage part of a set of ideas which change gradually through the course of the work? Is there particular imagery which brings anything significant to mind?

6. *Characters*. Is this passage important to the development of any characters? Do we view any characters differently after the passage?

Writing the prac crit

As you will read in the undergraduate handbook, there are many ways of going about this that will score highly. However, brief, unconnected points are unlikely to score highly, since you will be able to develop more sophisticated ideas if you structure your argument. This will also help your examiner follow you more easily and stop him/her missing the intelligent points you have made. You must also stay tightly focussed on the passage in hand, rather than talking too widely about your whole set text. There is a fine balance between talking about context and close examination of the passage, because both of these are necessary - but the majority of your work should definitely be on the latter.

You might like to start by setting the passage in context briefly and outlining the points you will discuss in a concise introduction (no point making this long, and you won't have time to in the exam anyway). The main body of your prac crit might have three or four areas discussed in some detail, with reference to the specific language and structure of the passage to make it clear that you are not straying from it too much. Round it off with a quick conclusion - again, no need to make it long, but it's nice to tie your points together if you can.