Methodology: How to write a literary commentary

Reading stage

1. Read the excerpt once, without taking any notes—just to know what it is about, what themes it includes, what its tonality is, if it contains themes already addressed in excerpts studied in class, etc.
2. Read the excerpt a 2nd time—and preferably a 3rd time. Highlight the different ideas/themes or lexical fields, using different colours. Study how words interact with each other in this excerpt.
3. Look for key sentences, outstanding formulations and stylistic devices of all kinds (puns, humour, irony, repetitions, comparisons, metaphors, synecdoches, hyperboles, anaphoras, etc.). You will need to quote a few to make your points and "prove" that your demonstration is correct.
4. Study the whole excerpt. Do not leave aside any part of the excerpt. If you do not understand a sentence, spend time trying to elucidate its meaning.
5. You must know this excerpt by heart before starting to write your commentary.

Writing stage

A commentary must be conceived as a demonstration. Present your demonstration as follows:

Introduction

The introduction is a truly vital part of your commentary. It must not be too short! It is usually twice as long as a conclusion: 250 to 300 words (25 to 30 lines x 10 words per line) are typically required.

1. Start with the situation:
   - Setting: when & where is the excerpt situated?
   - If possible, what happened before, and what comes after that?
2. What’s the tonality of this excerpt? Is it humorous, comic, burlesque, dramatic, tragic, lyrical, poetic, descriptive, critical, etc.? One adjective is enough!
3. What happens in the excerpt? What are the main events or themes in it?
4. If possible, say if those events or themes appear elsewhere in the same work. If so, what is the originality of this particular excerpt?
5. What do you propose to prove? In other words, what is your thesis (Fr. “problématique”)? Your choice of thesis must flow naturally from the way you introduced the excerpt.
6. What plan will you follow to prove this? Set out the content of each part in 2 or 3 sentences. Make sure that your summary of each part is long enough, and understandable. The reader must understand where you are heading just by reading your plan. Make your plan clear, not mysterious!

Your demonstration (in 3 parts preferably)

1. 3-part plans are usually more intellectually stimulating than 2-part ones. They also allow you to address all the key issues in an excerpt while 2-part plans are necessarily limited in scope. A 2-part plan can be acceptable, but will usually lead to more "obvious,” less interesting commentaries.
2. Always go from basic to complex remarks, from the general to the detailed.
3. Transitions: Your parts must be logically linked. There must be a reason why you go from one part to the next. Do not simply superimpose your parts. Do not say: "Now that I've studied X, I will move on to the study of Y.” say instead why the study of X logically leads you to study Y.
4. When preparing your plan, it is always a good idea to give a title to each of your parts. These titles help you remember what you aim to prove in each part. Include these titles in a sentence at the top of each of your parts: they will help your reader understand what each part deals with, and will remind them of the plan you already set out in the introduction.

Conclusion

A conclusion is always composed of 2 things:

1. A rather short summary of your demonstration.
2. A final generalization, or an opening up of the ideas you developed in your commentary.

Conclusions can be shorter and to the point. 100 to 150 words (10 to 15 lines x 10 words per line) can suffice.