Study Skills Handbook

Strategies for Reading French Texts

Contents

Aims and Objectives

Strategies for Reading French Texts (**Strategies** for short) will provide you with an indispensable introduction to a range of textual material in French (literature, film, music and theory). It will help you develop the skills to read these different genres and the different styles of French represented within them. It will also encourage you to hone skills of close reading by focusing on the *strategies* these texts employ to express their ideas, themes and motifs through the study of short chosen extracts.

In thinking about our chosen texts, we will pay particular attention to the following:

- exploring the relationship between the author and the reader;
- exploring the importance of gender and sexuality to the reader - writer relationship;
- analysing a text with a view to its historical and cultural contexts;
- analysing a text with a view to its political and ideological contexts.

We shall examine the texts chosen individually, but will also draw comparisons between texts. In particular we will consider how the different cultural, theoretical and ideological approaches to reading we have considered can be compared and contrasted across the variety of genres, time periods and places that our texts represent. In this way, **Strategies** will lay the foundation for a successful progression to greater in-depth study in the second and final year, both by allowing you to make more informed choices about the options available and by making you acquainted with the "tools of the trade" (essay-writing, commentary, critical analysis, meaningful synthesis etc.).

The Study of Literature, Film, Theory, and Pop Music, and Transferable Skills

You may ask yourself why it is so important to study French (francophone) literature, film and pop music… These art forms are, of course, an expression of a culture's values and beliefs, either in their reflection of mainstream ideas, or as laboratories for new concepts and theories, or indeed as vehicles for revolutionary or propagandist ideologies. In a historical perspective, the creative works of each period bear witness to their times; from the present standpoint, these works of the past, even the recent past, form part of the cultural heritage, and thus of the make-up, of present-day society. You may also ask yourself why the *Strategies* module invites you to think particularly about how these texts may be *read*. Bear in mind that the production and consumption of texts is an intimately entwined and constantly evolving process. You will explore that process by examining a number of the key textual forms that France and the francophone world have produced, with reference to a selection of important theoretical perspectives that can act as tools for understanding their content.

Apart from equipping you with some knowledge and insight into an important aspect of French culture, the study of literature, film, theory, and pop music will also enable you

- To undertake a critical analysis of a particular but rather wide-ranging problem situation and to report on it in a rational and coherent way (through essay-writing: see below)
- To undertake close scrutiny of a particular problem and to report on it a rational and coherent fashion (through studying passages for commentary – see below).
- To improve and expand your knowledge of the French language (through reading texts, viewing films and listening to music in the original language)
- To build up your confidence in discussions and to voice your views on a specific matter in a pointed and coherent fashion (through your participation in seminars – see below).

In short, you will hone those linguistic, problem-solving, presentational and interpersonal skills that are so valued by employers!

Lectures, Seminars, Screenings and Study Skills Sessions

The structure of the module is designed to meet the stated aims and objectives in its co-ordination of lectures, seminars, screenings.

Lectures by members of the department (and occasionally invited speakers) introduce the works, examine their formal characteristics on a general level and raise some of the main themes at issue.

Seminars give you the opportunity to work on the works within the context of regular small group meetings led by members of the department. Seminars are not mini-lectures, and your active participation is essential for the seminar to be successful.

Screenings give you the opportunity to see each of the films set for study on a large screen (with sub-titles) and are, of course, essential to the process of learning how to analyse film. Each film will be screened twice (see your lecture schedule for the timings of these screenings) and attendance at each screening is compulsory.

Study skills sessions introduce you to the tools you will need to write successful essays. You will examine essay question types and explore how to respond to them appropriately, how to choose and use secondary literature of various kinds to enhance your reading and writing, and how to reference your work correctly.

Independent Study

The contact hours (lectures, seminars, screenings and study skills sessions) on this module are very important, but probably the most decisive factor determining what you gain from the module is the amount of independent study you devote to it. The pace of study is much faster than at A-level and the module moves on relatively quickly from one work to another. This means that you will have to adapt quite swiftly to the accelerated rhythm and intensity of university study, where students are expected to cover more material with greater independence and more initiative on their part. Lecturers and seminar-leaders will help you and guide you, but you are ultimately responsible for the management of your own time.

Reading and Re-Reading Texts

The study of literature is essentially a matter of critical reading, i.e. re-reading. On a **first reading**, most readers concentrate on *what* a text is *about* rather than on *how* it is written. This first stage is particularly important when reading texts in a foreign language, which may present problems of vocabulary, and sometimes of grammar. However, it is only a first stage and it must be supplemented by **further study and analysis**. It is essential to remember that a text is something which has been *made* or constructed, and that it is this constructed nature of the text which is the primary object of literary study. This is why **re-reading** is important. Once you know *what a text is about*, you should move on to thinking about *how it is written*, *why it is written in this particular way* and *what may be shaping your response to it.*

Viewing and Analysing Film

The study of film can be viewed as akin to the study of literature in many respects. We may speak of films as audio-visual texts that can be read, or analysed. The films set for study are screened twice in order to allow you to progress from a discovery of *what* the film is *about* to questions of ***how*** *it has been made*, ***why*** *it has been constructed in this particular way*, and ***what*** *it may reveal about the society and culture in which it was made*. The initial screening of each film will take place before the initial lecture dealing with it, with the second screening following the lecture. In this way, your lecturer will be able to guide you in your analysis, or reading, of the film in question. In addition to this, you will be able to make use of the language departments' new *Transnational Resources Centre* to view films again, in order to carry out the detailed analysis necessary for seminar and essay preparation. Using the *TRC* you can book a group 'cinema' space in order to watch and prepare work with fellow students, or book out a film to watch on your own. You can also use the editing facilities available to capture and analyse key moments of the films set for study. See the *TRC* website for further details:

http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/trc

Listening to and studying pop music

Studying pop music is a little different to studying literature or film. Most of the time we only read a book or watch a film once or twice, whereas we tend to listen to our favourite music over and over again and might also hear it on the radio, on television, etc. For this reason, it is a good idea to download the set musical texts to your computer or MP3 player far in advance of the relevant lectures and seminars (for instance at the beginning of the module) so that you can absorb and become familiar with the music over a period of several weeks. When it

comes to studying the music in preparation for seminars, you will obviously want to listen to it more closely. Many of the skills and techniques developed in studying literary texts will also be useful here: think carefully not just about what the song is saying, but about what kinds of words are used and how they interact with the music to convey meaning. Bear in mind also that the artist has designed an album *as an album*: although we may be used to listening to our favourite individual tracks, or shuffling album tracks up with hundreds of other songs in our collection, it is important, in preparing for a seminar, to listen to the whole album in sequence and to think about relations between the tracks and the overall meanings and impressions conveyed.

Reading theoretical texts

The study of theoretical material on the *Strategies* module is divided into two areas: you will examine key theoretical approaches to texts via 4 *theory* lectures and accompanying serminar workshops; you will also analyse a seminal theoretical work, Foucault's *Surveiller et punir*, as a set text in term 2. Reading theoretical texts can seem a rather different proposition from examining literary texts: at times they will employ a specialised vocabulary and a density of expression new to those more used to reading and analysing fictional works. Nevertheless, many of the skills and techniques you will develop in studying literary texts will also be useful here. Taking time to read and re-read theoretical material carefully is crucial. Try noting down key ideas as you go ; think as you read about how these ideas may challenge or enhance your own established ways of reading. Think also about whether you can be more explicit about your usual approaches to textual analysis as a result of reading this material. In preparing for a seminar, you should focus on your own close readings of the material set. Do not be tempted to consult general sources, particularly those on the web, that claim to sum up different theoretical schools of thought. Your tutor is primarily interested in *your* engagement with the detail of the text, and will advise you carefully about any further reading.

In All

The module is, then, designed to develop your ability to read critically and analytically, training you in the task of close reading or commentary (detailed attention to the relation between form and content) and essay (wider discussion of themes). The module will provide you with the concepts and vocabulary to approach these tasks, as well as giving you valuable practice in speaking and writing about literature, film and pop music. During the year, the seminar tutors will also give you feedback on your performance.

In order to make the most of the module, you must be prepared to devote a considerable amount of independent study-time to it: re-reading, note-taking, preparing for lectures and seminars, planning and writing commentaries and essays, revising for exams. The rest of this booklet is intended to help you find your bearings with all of these tasks.

Taking notes on a literary, theoretical, filmic or pop music text

Taking notes while reading helps concentration and provides an indispensable basis for further work and revision. You may find it useful to move through the following stages in your note-taking:

- ✓ General outline
- ✓ Detailed notes
- ✓ Consolidating notes
- ✓ Re-organizing notes

General outline literature and theory

On a first reading, it is probably better not to spend too much time taking notes and to concentrate instead on familiarizing yourself with the text and its vocabulary. All the same, it is a good idea to jot down a few points which seem particularly important, in order to orient your second reading.

Detailed notes – literature and theory

As you re-read, you may want to take more detailed notes on a separate sheet of paper. Alternatively, you could simply mark what seem to be particularly important passages or key-words in your text, so that you can make more detailed notes on them when you have finished your re-reading. When re-reading theory, it will be helpful to have Cuddon's *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* alongside you (see the bibliography at the end of this guide)

General outline - film

Taking notes on a film whilst in the process of viewing it can be a tricky business! It is important, of course, to keep your eyes firmly on the screen, so you need to try to perfect the technique of taking brief notes in the dark without looking at the paper you are writing on! In order not to miss out on what is happening on the screen, jot down only the most important points at this time.

Detailed notes - film

After each viewing you may wish to make more detailed notes on what you have seen. It would be useful at this stage to pinpoint what seem to you to be key moments in the film. You can do this by describing key incidents or scenes, and by using timings ('after about half-an-hour there's a scene where…').

General outline – pop music

It is a good idea to treat the music for this module as you would any other music. Download the music to your computer or MP3 player and listen to it several times, possibly while doing something else, for instance travelling on the bus or working out in the gym. Note if there are any tracks you particularly like and try to think about why. How do different tracks make you feel, either emotionally (happy, sad, etc) or physically (do you find yourself tapping your foot or dancing?). Are there any particular lyrics or ideas that stand out, or unusual musical features, such as particular instruments used?

Detailed notes – pop music

When studying pop music in detail, it is helpful to listen with headphones as this often makes it easier to distinguish different instruments etc. You will also probably want the song lyrics in front of you. These are usually easy to find with a quick web search. As lyrics are often sung, or rapped, far too quickly for non-native speakers to keep up, it is a good idea to read through the lyrics without the music first and look up any unfamiliar vocabulary. Then follow the lyrics while listening to the music. Do this several times and pause the track at regular intervals to note your impressions. The most important aspect of analysing pop music is thinking about how words and music interact. How is the meaning of the words inflected by the way they are performed by the vocalist? What does the musical accompaniment add to this overall impression? Does the performance or the music change significantly at any point in the song, and if so, why? Do you notice recurring motifs, either in the lyrics or in the music?

Consolidating notes

You may wish to 'fill out' or complement your notes e.g. by insuring your notes have the correct page or chapter numbers, or by cross-referencing passages / scenes on a similar theme etc. You could then also add information you have obtained from elsewhere (lecture and seminar notes, reference works, secondary literature).

Re-Organizing Notes

These notes can then be organized or re-organized in order to form the basis of plot summaries, outlines of main themes etc. Following the same sort of pattern of organizing your notes for every work on the module may help you memorize important facts and features about the work at the revision stage (see below). Some students find a system of colour-coding (with marker pens or colouring pencils) helpful, but do not spend too much time on this: the most important thing is that you should *understand the work and the issues at stake*, and that you should have *a clear, correct, and complete set of notes that reflect this understanding*. (Similarly, it may well be an inefficient use of your study-time to type out your handwritten notes.)

***

If you follow these stages, you should find that you attain greater critical distance from the work, allowing you to grasp not just *what* it is about, but also *how* it is constructed, and then to consider *why* it might be constructed in this way.

For the kind of things to look out for when taking notes, see **Working independently on literary, filmic and pop music texts.**

Working independently on literary and filmic texts

The following list outlines some of the aspects of the works set for study which you should consider independently in order to prepare for lectures and seminars. This activity will also prove useful for preparing essays and commentaries, and will provide a valuable aid for revision at the end of the module.

In general, think about:

- ✓ **Plot summary**
  What happens and in what order; main plot and sub-plot(s)
- ✓ **List of characters**

Who the characters are, their attributes and how they relate to one another

- ✓ **Themes**
  Main issues dealt with; how these are presented, and what this implies
- ✓ **Imagery**
  Fields of imagery employed, what they convey

For literary texts, think also about:

- ✓ **Structure**
  Formal structure (division into Books, Parts, and/or Chapters; respective lengths of these…)
  Narrative techniques and devices
  Patterns of oppositions (characters, themes)
  Patterns of repetitions
- ✓ **Style**
  Levels of language employed (tone, register); what these convey
- ✓ **Strategies for reading**
  The relationship between the author and the reader; how this is conveyed, and what this implies.
  Angles of approach (your *theory* lectures will help you discern these):
  - from what different theoretical perspectives can the text be analysed?
  - How important is it for the reader to know about the historical or cultural context in which a text was written?
  - How important is it for the reader to know something about the life of the text's author?

For filmic texts, think also about:

- ✓ **Mise en scène**

  Sets, lighting, use of actors, costume
- ✓ **Camera work**

  Type and length of shots
- ✓ **Editing**
- ✓ **Use of sound**
- ✓ **Colour or black-and-white film?**

Working independently on pop music texts

Although it is not necessarily the case, it is not uncommon for pop songs to tell a story. To this extent, it can be helpful to consider many of the same points that would be relevant in a literary text or a film i.e. *plot*, *character* and *theme*.

But for musical texts, you should also think about:

- ✓ **instrumentation**
  What type of instruments are used and how do they affect the tone of the track?

- ✓ **rhythm**
  Is the track fast or slow? Does it have a regular or irregular beat? Does the rhythm change during the course of the song?

- ✓ **motifs**
  These can be both lyrical (repeated words, phrases or ideas) and musical (repeated musical phrases or 'hooks')

In All …

The main point to bear in mind is that the ability to give an accurate *description* of the work is important, but that it should always be supplemented by *analysis* or *interpretation*. Try to think in terms not simply of *how* a work is constructed but also *why* it might be constructed in a particular way. It also works the other way around: any statement you make about the work, its characters, style etc. should be backed up by a specific reference to the work, be it whole chapter or scene, or just a line or a few words; your notes should help you to locate this sort of 'textual evidence'.

Preparation, note-taking and writing

Taking notes at a lecture

Different people lecture in different ways, but most seek to convey as much information as possible in the time available. All the same, not everything they say will be equally important, so try to discriminate between the main points and the subsidiary points of the lecture.

- ✓ **Outline Themes of the Lecture**
  The lecturer may give you these in advance, so you know what to look out for. Base your note-taking around these.

- ✓ **Be Discriminating**
  Do not write down everything the lecturer says. Concentrate on getting the main points. If points are repeated, do not note them more than once.

- ✓ **Pause**
  There are likely to be short pauses in the lecture, where the lecturer may recapitulate ideas expressed, or invite questions. Take advantage of these pauses to interrupt your note-taking for a while, to gather your thoughts (maybe you have some questions, which it may be appropriate to ask?) and to keep your attention fresh.

- ✓ **Quotations/Illustrations**
  Do not copy these out in full if you have access to the text: simply note the page number for later reference.

- ✓ **Re-Read the Notes after the Lecture**
  It is important to *go over your notes as soon as possible after the lecture*, when you have the material still fresh in your mind. Fill in any gaps, check references, and make sure you have understood the main points. If you have questions, ask the lecturer or your seminar tutor.

Preparing for and Attending Seminars

To ensure that you get the most from seminars, it is essential to prepare adequately.

- ✓ **Reading / Viewing**
  Read each text set for study *at least once* before attending lectures and seminars on it. Each film set for study will have been screened once before the initial seminar and lecture on it. It is therefore crucial that you attend this screening. You can also view the films again in your own time in the *Transnational Resourses Centre*.
- ✓ **Note-Taking in Advance**
  Prepare carefully all work set in advance of your seminar discussion and intended for discussion within it. Take your preparation notes into the seminar with you. Make sure you have things to say or to ask.
- ✓ **Participation**
  Seminars are not intended to replicate lectures. They should be seen as opportunities for discussion and question-asking. Part of the responsibility for their success lies with you! So try to participate actively in seminar discussions. Do not be afraid to make contributions, and listen to what other people have to say. Your tutor may ask you to work collaboratively with some other students in your seminar group, and to present your findings to the group as a whole.
- ✓ **Note-Taking during Seminars**
  Take further notes in seminars, jotting these down briefly in gaps in seminar discussion – do not spend the entire hour simply taking notes.
- ✓ **Consolidation**
  As after lectures, re-read your notes after the seminar and relate them back to the work. If this raises any questions, ask your tutor the following week.

REMINDER: As the departmental handbook explains, seminars form an essential part of your university education. So it is well worth taking the seminars, and the tasks set for them, seriously. Tutors will mark attendance lists for every seminar, and all unavoidable absences (e.g. through illness) should be explained, in advance if you can. You will also be required to complete a given amount of written work that will be discussed in seminars (see p. 22 for more details). Plan your various tasks well in advance, so that you can meet the deadlines! It is **your responsibility** to ask your seminar tutor if you are at all unclear about the tasks you have been set or the deadlines for them.

Writing about literary, theoretical, filmic and pop music texts

In order to develop your skills of textual description and analysis, you will be asked to submit two distinct types of written work: the essay and the commentary. The essay and the commentary are two very different exercises designed to develop different –although related– skills: those of general analysis on the one hand, and those of close reading on the other.

The Essay

The essay presents an extended argument, which takes as its starting-point a question about the filmic, pop music, theoretical or literary text under study. It typically addresses issues of structure, theme and interpretation relating to the text, and will seek to analyse such issues in relation to the question posed. Analysis is generally supported by relevant illustration from the text (also referred to as 'textual evidence'); this should be concise and *to the point*.

The Commentary

The commentary is distinguished from the essay by its close attention to the relationship between the formal and thematic aspects of a particular passage of text. It is much more focussed than the essay, and discusses form in greater detail. General statements about the text as a whole are kept to a minimum.

It is important to bear in mind the difference between the essay and the commentary, since this may affect the grading of assignments.

More specific advice on writing essays and commentaries follows.

Essays on Literature, Theory, Film and Pop Music

It offers little consolation, if you are in a quandary about essay-writing, but there are no hard and fast rules for composing a good essay. Different departments and different tutors may even have slightly different expectations, or place different emphases. Individual students will also have their own approach or style, which may lead to very different, but equally good essays. What follows, are some essential guidelines, suggestions and rules of thumb, to help you master one of the most important skills you will acquire during your higher education.

Look upon an essay as an opportunity to formulate a personal response (even if it is based on knowledge acquired in the seminar room or lecture theatre) to a question presenting a literary, theoretical, filmic or musical problem. It therefore requires a clear and well-argued line of thought, as well as a good grasp of the work(s) and the issue(s) at stake. So, a good essay will, amongst other things

- ✓ Answer the question
- ✓ Present a sustained argument
- ✓ Have a coherent structure
- ✓ Demonstrate a sound knowledge of the work
- ✓ Discuss the work critically and analytically

Answer the question

To make sure you answer the question, it is often a good tactic to discuss the question in your introduction and return to it in your conclusion. Ensure that you establish the *relevance* of the material you choose to discuss.

Present a sustained argument

Try to form an opinion on the issue raised by the question and argue a case on that basis. It is useful to anticipate and incorporate counter-arguments, even if only to dismiss them ultimately. *Keep focussed*, however, on the main problem and the direction your answer should be taking.

Have a coherent structure

Your essay should have a distinct *introduction* and *conclusion*. You should outline the main direction of your argument in the introduction, and sum up your main points again in conclusion.

Between your introduction and conclusion, try to divide the *body* of your essay into *sub-sections* dealing with particular aspects of the issues raised by the question. Help your reader to follow your argument by providing clear signposts and markers on the way (e.g. 'however'; 'in contrast'; 'first…, secondly…, thirdly…'; 'as a further argument in favour of this position…').

Demonstrate a sound knowledge of the work

A sound knowledge of the work should be the basis from which you set out to write an essay. The best way of demonstrating your grasp of the work is by supporting your argument with relevant illustration and quotation. Do not simply include otherwise gratuitous illustrations in order simply to prove you have read the text, viewed the film or listened to the album!

Discuss the work critically and analytically

You are expected not simply to know what happens in a given work but to be able to offer an analysis of its content and form, to discuss the main themes and the way in which they are presented and also to consider why they are presented in a particular way. This is in many ways the most important aspect of an essay on literature, music or film.

Preparing and Planning an Essay

Preparing an essay should include the following stages:

- ✓ Thinking about the question
- ✓ Re-reading and note-taking
- ✓ Formulating an essay plan

Thinking about the question

Spend some time thinking about the question and its implications. You might want to ask yourself the following questions about the problem that is set:

- What are the main issues raised in the question?
- Does the question itself offer an interpretation of the work?
- Do I agree or disagree with this interpretation?

Re-reading and note-taking

Re-read the text and/or your notes with the question in mind. Take notes on what seem to be areas relevant to the question. Include quotations or examples to illustrate particular points (do not forget to note the page or line number for easy reference in literary works).

Formulating an essay plan

Begin to draw up an essay plan on the basis of your thoughts about the question and the notes you have made. Work out what you think about the issues raised by the question and then construct an argument to support your view. Jot down the main points you intend to raise and indicate what textual material you intend to use as evidence or illustration.

Think about the logic of the essay as a whole: will it move from the general to the particular, or vice versa? Will you first present the 'negative' side and then the 'positive', or will you consider each point separately in the light of both arguments for and against?

As far as possible try to have your main ideas in place before sitting down to write up the essay. If you write according to a clear plan, you should be able to present a more persuasive case more economically.

Still unsure about writing?

If you're still uncertain about organising your ideas or about how to write a well-constructed paragraph, introduction or conclusion, take a look at some of the study guide texts listed on p. 26.

Writing up your essay

When writing up your essay, the use of correct and coherent English (or French, for that matter) is essential to present your argument lucidly. Avoid spelling mistakes, and make sure that any quotations you include are accurate and make sense (do not forget the accents in French quotes!). Make sure also that you supply appropriate page numbers when quoting from your set texts, and that you footnote references made to secondary material (see p. 23 for advice on how to do this).

As you work from the first to the final draft, make sure that any changes you make do not adversely affect the rest of your essay, or make the appropriate adjustments. Do not lose track of the overall direction of your argument when tinkering with individual paragraphs or sentences. With this potential problem in mind, **always** read through your essay carefully before handing it in.

Always make back-up copies of your essay on your university drive, and save your work regularly whilst writing.

For more advice and guidance…

Alongside your *Strategies* lectures you are required to attend six *Study Skills* sessions in which the skills of reading, writing and referencing are addressed in more depth. For more information, see
http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/french/current/ug/modules/firstyear/skills/

For more on the skills of essay- and commentary-writing in the *Strategies* module, try visiting:

http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/french/current/ug/modules/firstyear/frim/commesswriting/

Commentaries

As for essays, there is no magic formula for composing a good commentary. Here follow some general principles, however, which should help you a good deal in your first explorations of French literature, music and film.[1]

A commentary gives you the opportunity to perform a close reading or detailed analysis of a particular text (in the case of a short-ish song) or extract from a longer text. As with the essay, your methodical analysis should result in a coherent personal, interpretative synthesis. In other words, a commentary is as much an exercise in *writing* as it is in *reading*.

Generally speaking, a good commentary will

- ✓ Situate the passage with respect to the work as a whole
- ✓ Identify issues of content and the formal characteristics of the passage
- ✓ Analyse in detail the relationship between form and content
- ✓ Relate the passage briefly to the structure and themes of the work as a whole

How should I write my commentary?

Further advice about literary commentary can be found at:

http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/french/current/ug/assessment/commentarywriting

It is useful to refer to this alongside the advice that follows below:

1. Introduction: Situate the passage with respect to the text as a whole

By way of introduction, locate the passage with reference both to the structure of the work as a whole (with reference to parts and chapters in a novel, place of song within its album, scenes and episodes in a film) and the development of the plot. Do so as concisely as possible.

2. Overview: Identify issues of content and the formal characteristics of the passage

Briefly note what the passage is about (what happens and what changes in the course of its development), as well as its most important formal aspects (i.e. main narrative or filmic

[1] In other areas of study (e.g. *French Culture and Society before the Revolution*, or English Literature) a commentary exercise may involve a slightly different focus, or place different emphases. The same is likely to be true, as you progress through your degree course and study texts of various types. The lecturers and seminar tutors will make clear what the criteria and expectations are for a commentary in their specific subject area. When in doubt, ask!

technique, poetic form, dramatic structure) – this could still be part of the introductory paragraph and/or form a transition to the main body of your commentary.

3. Detailed Analysis: Analyse in detail the relationship between form and content

This is the essential part of the commentary, and it may be approached in two ways: either by moving through the text line by line (or, in the case of a film, shot by shot or scene by scene), or by identifying and concentrating on particularly important moments or features. In both cases special attention should be paid to how formal aspects of the passage (i.e.: structure, vocabulary, syntax, mood, imagery, mise-en-scène, camera work, etc.) reinforce its meaning. You must be able to describe the form in order to analyse and interpret its effects, so a certain amount of technical vocabulary will be required. Above all, it is important to avoid gratuitous description of either form or content. Make sure that your description is always directed towards making a specific point.

4. Conclusion: Relate the passage briefly to the structure and themes of the work as a whole

Summarize your findings and note how the different aspects of form and content you have identified in the passage under discussion relate to the work as a whole. State how themes or character or plot are developed through the deployment of formal techniques. At this stage (and this stage only!) you may make generalizations about the writer under consideration. Try to end on a 'high note'.

5. For more advice and guidance…

try visiting

http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/french/current/ug/modules/firstyear/frim/commesswriting/

where you can find a step-by-step commentary workshop activity.

Preparing a literary commentary

The lecturers and seminar tutors will give you further advice and help in tackling commentaries relating to different genres (essay, short story, novel). The general 'tactics' of approach, however, are largely the same.

When tackling a passage for commentary, start by re-familiarizing yourself with the given extract: since it is taken from one of the set texts, you should already be aware of its content and purpose in general terms. Make sure you can identify its exact place in the text as a whole (if you cannot, look it up!). Do you know the meaning of all the words? Do you really *understand* what is being said?

Now you can begin your close reading, moving from the general to the particular.

Jot down the overall characteristics of the extract: what is its specific genre or form? Is the extract descriptive or full of action? What is its main issue? What is the general tone or register? How is it structured? Who is speaking and for how long? Whose thoughts are conveyed? If there is more than one speaker: are they in agreement or is there a conflict?

Then concentrate on the way the author has used and manipulated the language to get his or her ideas across. Look out for the following:

- **Vocabulary**: lexical fields, connotations…
- **Syntax**: how complex is the sentence structure? Are there many questions or exclamations? Verb tenses: what do they convey?
- **Imagery**: macabre / sinister / light; metaphors and similes…
- **Rhythm / musicality**: staccato / flowing; assonance and alliterations; poetic language in a prose text…

As you go through the text, you should pay special attention to the play of *parallels and contrasts*, of repetition and variation. Always ask yourself *why* the author uses a particular turn of phrase, rhetorical figure or image. Also, can we take what is being said at face-value (symbolism, irony)?

Preparing a commentary on a film extract

As with the literary commentary, your seminar tutors and lecturers will give you further advice and help in tackling this particular form of commentary exercise when you come to focus on film.

In a commentary on a film extract, you will be asked to focus on a specific moment in the film, such as the last or first five minutes.

As with the literary commentary, your analysis should move from the general to the particular.

First of all, jot down the overall characteristics of the extract: What is happening? What is the general mood of the extract? How is it structured? Which characters are involved? What is their relationship to one another? How is this expressed?

Then, try to think in more detail about how the extract has been put together by the film maker, and how it achieves its effects. Your seminar tutor will help you in this task of close analysis by guiding you to look at particular techniques, such as:

- **Mise-en-scène**: set, lighting, use of actors, costumes, etc.
- **Camera work**: length and type of shot, camera angle, editing.
- **Sound**

Preparing a commentary on a musical text

As with literary and filmic texts, it is helpful to situate the track you are studying within the context of the overall album. A track that opens an album might serve a different purpose to one that closes an album. The meaning of the track might be underlined or inflected by the tracks immediately preceding or following it.

Typically, you will then want to make general observations about the track. What is it about? What is its overall message and tone? Does it tell a story, or is its format more like a lecture or an intimate personal reflection? Is there one or more vocalist? Does he or she adopt characters within the song?

You can analyse the lyrics of the song in much the same way as you would discuss the language of a literary text, commenting on vocabulary, syntax, imagery and rhythm. However, bear in mind that the words of a song are always transformed by the manner of their performance and by their musical accompaniment. Always try to show how the music helps to convey the message of the song.

For all commentaries…

When you have identified the main points of interest in the extract, try to group them together in sections and decide on the order you are going to discuss them in. Thus, when you write up your commentary, its argument will be coherent and progress logically from the introduction towards the conclusion.

📎 Draw up a checklist of techniques and themes specific to each author / song writer / film maker. This will help you to know what to look for in the work of a particular artist, and is especially useful for revision and exam purposes.

Using Resources

Using Bibliographies

Most modules supply bibliographical information at the outset, or as the module progresses (or both). Many are now available online and can be found on the home page of the module concerned. Bibliographical information constitutes an essential resource for independent learning.

Bibliographies vary enormously, from a raw alphabetical list to closely targeted selections of recommended reading, from several hundred titles to just a few. In order to get the most from a bibliography, you have to learn to use it. As a first-year student, you are not expected to read hundreds of books in preparation for an essay or a presentation on a single topic. So try to find ways of **narrowing down** the list you start with.

- Targeted bibliographies are the easiest to use: they often indicate levels of difficulty (introductory / essential – intermediate – advanced) and relevance to particular topics. Some tutors will even give you the library shelf-mark! Raw alphabetical lists are the most difficult to use, and in a sense what you have to do is to turn a raw bibliography into a targeted one.
- Even if a raw bibliography is supplied, lecturers and seminar tutors often give oral indications of the level of difficulty and relevance of particular titles: pay attention to such comments and make a brief note of them.
- Otherwise, follow up a few of the most promising titles on the list to identify an introductory book or seminal study on the topic in question; once you have found such a work, you can progress to more advanced or specialized material (as you would in the case of a targeted reading list). If you do not know where to begin with a particular bibliography, ask your tutor for advice.

Conversely, you may wish to expand on the bibliography you have been given to research a particular topic more fully. You can do this (i.) by using the references to further books and articles given in the bibliography or footnotes to one of the introductory books you have read; (ii.) through a subject search on the library's on-line catalogue (OPAC); or (iii.) by consulting specialist bibliographies such as those available online (this requires some specialist knowledge: ask your tutor or one of the librarians for directions).

Using the Library

Searching for the material listed on your bibliography will take you to different parts of the library: the main shelves, the *short loan collection* (SL) and sometimes the periodicals section. A significant amount of material is now also available for consultation / downloading online. Please be particularly aware of the following online resources, available through the *Electronic Resources* section of the library website, at:

http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/services/library/main/electronicresources/

- **JSTOR**: A collection of full text articles from older journals across a range of subjects. It has a search facility, so you can home in on particular texts and authors:

  http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/services/library/main/electronicresources/databases/j/

- **Course Extracts for French Studies**: extracts from certain key books and articles pertaining to some French Department modules, which have been scanned electronically. Click on the relevant module code to access any texts that may be available for the module(s) you are following :

  http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/services/library/main/electronicresources/extracts/fr

Don't be afraid to ask a librarian for help in locating material listed on your bibliography, and for further advice about how to find your way around the library, please see the following page of the department's online handbook:

http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/french/current/ug/learning/handbook/resources/

Sharing resources

If entire cohorts of students need the same book or article at the same time, this inevitably creates pressure on the library's holdings. So a certain amount of responsibility and sense of solidarity among students is necessary to give everybody the opportunity to consult the works they want: *do not hold on to books for longer than you have to*, and in any case *return books by their due date*. It need not be said that the defacing or damaging of library books is totally unacceptable.

Using Secondary Literature

The study of texts operates a distinction between *primary* and *secondary* works. *Primary* works are the texts set for study; *secondary* works are critical or background works relating to them. In your first-year dealings with French literature, theory, pop music and film, the first emphasis is on the reading and comprehension of the primary works, all the more so since they are in a foreign language. But lecturers and seminar tutors will also direct you towards secondary literature that they feel is accessible to you.

Secondary literature is useful for two main reasons. Firstly, it provides you with information about, and interpretations of, the work under study. These may then serve as material for the formation of your own ideas about a work. Secondly, secondary literature provides you with a model of how to write critically about those works – the kinds of approaches and concepts to use.

What secondary literature can never do is replace the value of your own critical thinking about a particular work. You should *never* simply lift ideas from secondary literature. You may refer to it and agree or disagree with it, but you must do so from your own point of view. In literary, film and music studies, the most important is to learn to think and argue for yourself.

Because of the fast pace of the module, it is unlikely that you will have the time to read critical works from cover to cover, unless they are very short (like the introductory study guides that exist for many well-known French literary texts). **To read secondary literature efficiently**,

- Concentrate on understanding the main argument put forward – this can often be gleaned from the introduction and conclusion.
- Then use the table of contents and the index to find material relevant to your concerns: many books have only one relevant chapter or even only a few pages that will be of direct interest to your queries.

- When using journal articles (those available in the periodicals section of the library, and those available for downloading online), please be aware that these are generally focussed, in-depth reflections about a particular aspect of the text you are studying. Not all journal articles on a given text will be relevant to the approach that you are taking in your lectures and seminars, so be discriminating in your reading and ask your seminar tutor for advice. Avoid basing your analysis of a text on a single journal article.
- In taking notes, jot down the main points with a few examples; avoid slavishly copying out sentence after sentence, unless a certain point is particularly well put.
- Don't be tempted into bulk photocopying: not only is photocopying restricted by copyright regulations, you also need to be able to *digest* and assimilate. This is done more effectively by note-taking than by using a highlighter pen!
- Once you think you understand an argument, see if you agree or disagree with it. This will give you a clearer idea of what you think about the primary work. It is often only in confronting other people's opinions that you find out what your own are.

Using Internet Sources

The internet can be used to facilitate secondary reading in a number of ways. Internet databases such as those outlined above allow you to access academic articles that have been subject to peer review (in other words, articles that have been examined and edited by the academic community), and Internet search engines such as the MLA bibliography allow you to search for such material. The reliability of such material is easy to ascertain, but much other material available to you on the web is much less easy for students to evaluate. In *Plagiarism and the Internet* (New York and London: Routledge, 2008), Wendy Sutherland-Smith notes that 'many students, when asked how they verify the quality of Internet information, appear surprised and admit they have never thought about it. Others say they only check Internet information against other websites or use Wikipedia. […] many first-year undergraduates had no ideas that people who wrote for Wikipedia were not necessarily scholars or academics' (pp. 109 – 110) You MUST guard against these misconceptions and bad habits, which regularly lead first-year students to commit plagiarism and to reproduce material that is factually incorrect. If you use the web in your research for *Strategies*, think about the following:

- Have you begun your research by using the bibliographies compiled by the lecturers on each set text? Here, not on the web, is the place to begin.
- Avoid 'study aid' sources such as Spark Notes. They are too general to be useful and you are not in a position to evaluate their accuracy.
- Check online journal articles. Have they been peer reviewed? Do they come from a verifiable academic source?
- When working with contemporary texts, where there is relatively little critical material available, be particularly careful to check the reputation of the site. Is it, for instance, produced by a reliable journalistic institution such as the BBC or Le Monde? Is it a specialised online source concerned with a particular genre, such as SkyRock.fm? Does the site have a bias (is it promoting a particular artist or product; is it written from a partisan standpoint)?
- If in doubt, check your source with your seminar tutor.

Acknowledging Secondary Sources

Whatever approach you take, *do not forget to note the source of the ideas and material you gather*. The department follows standard academic conventions for referencing material taken from books, journal articles, and the web. These are set out in the *MHRA style guide* on your reading list. It is good to get in the habit of following these conventions from the outset, and they are **essential** in the submission of assessed coursework. For a detailed explanation of these reference conventions, please see the following page of the department's online student handbook:

http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/french/current/ug/assessment/essaywritingconventions

It is also important to remember that if you use any **ideas** or **wordings** that are not your own in an essay, commentary, or exam, you **must** acknowledge your source. Failure to do so amounts to plagiarism, a very serious offence that will be penalised heavily. For more information about what plagiarism is and how to avoid it, please see the following pages:

http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/french/current/ug/assessment/importantnotices/plagiarism

http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/services/skills/usp/mentoring/plagiarism

These referencing skills will be dealt with in depth in your *Study Skills* sessions. see:

http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/french/current/ug/modules/firstyear/skills/

Submitting Written Work

In the course of the year you have to submit **four** pieces of written work (3 essays and 1 commentary), which will be marked and returned to you. You will choose the **best three** of these pieces, which will constitute your **portfolio of summatively-assessed work**. These pieces will count for **60%** of your final mark.

You will also sit a 2-hour examination at the end of the year in which you will be required to apply theoretical concepts examined during the year to AT LEAST two of the texts studied in terms 1 and 2.

Your written work will be submitted electronically. For more information about the assessments and about the submission process, see:

http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/french/current/ug/modules/firstyear/strategies/summative

It is your responsibility to ensure that you submit your essay / commentary on time. Advice about what to do if you have a legitimate problem preventing you from submitting on time can be found on the web page listed above.

Study Skills Guides

In general:

Robert Barrass, *Study! A Guide to Effective Study, Revision and Exam Techniques* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1984).

R. Freeman, *Mastering Study Skills* (London: Macmillan, 1982; 2nd ed.1991).

Bryan Greetham, *How to Write Better Essays* (Basingstoke : Palgrave, 2001).

Peter Levin, *Write great essays! : A Guide to Reading and Essay Writing for Undergraduates and Taught Postgraduates* (Maidenhead : Open University Press, 2004).

Richard Marggraf Turley, *Writing Essays : A Guide for Students in English and The Humanities* (London ; New York : Routledge/Falmer, 2000).Phil Race, *How to Study :Practical Tips for University Students* (Oxford; Malden, MA : Blackwell Pub., 2003).

Eileen Tracy,*The Student's Guide to Exam Success* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2002).

These and other materials can be found in the library:

Central Campus Library Fifth Floor: classmark 3171.3028

On commentary writing:

M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 9th edition (Boston : Wadsworth, c. 2009)

H. Bénac, *Vocabulaire de la dissertation* (Paris, 1949). This provides lists of technical terms used in close analysis of a literary text in French, and gives explanations and examples of usage.J. D. Biard,, *Lexique pour l'explication de texte* (Exeter : University of Exeter, 1980)

Formatted: English (U.K.)

P. Nurse (ed), *The Art of Criticism: Essays in French Literary Analysis* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1969). This will provide you with further sample literary commentaries.

These materials can be found in the library: (Central Campus Library Third Floor)

On literature and criticism

Peter Barry, *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2009).

Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle, *An Introduction to Literature, Theory and Criticism*, 3rd edition (Harlow, England; New York: Pearson / Longman, c 2004)

J. A. Cuddon (ed), *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* (London: Penguin, 1998)Neil McCaw, *How to Read Texts: A Student Guide to Critical Approaches and Skills* (London: Continuum, 2008)

Good Luck!

Revised: C Hampton (August 2012)

University of Warwick
Coventry CV4 7AL