

# Commenting on a newspaper article: a few useful tips

A commentary is not a mere discussion of the issue raised by the text. You are expected to question and/or evaluate the author's arguments (i.e. identify the strengths and weaknesses of the text), to back or contradict them with evidence, to make comparisons, to consider potential repercussions, and so on and so forth.

**This is not an exhaustive list of questions**, nor do you have to ask them at all cost. It stands to reason that asking all these questions one after the other, with no unifying thread, would be a disaster!

Still, if you lack inspiration, this might help.

- **Is the journalist objective? / Does he/she have a biased judgment?**
  - If the journalist takes a clear stance on an issue, then you'll have to discuss whether this position is convincing or if there are flaws in his/her line of argumentation.
  - As a rule I strongly recommend that you explore all avenues. **Leave no stone unturned**, even if you disagree with some of the ideas you will raise. You can always dismiss them later on in the presentation.
  - If the journalist takes sides for, say, gun control, agreeing with him/her will eventually lead you to repeat the text and you'll soon run out of arguments. It's better to first consider the flaws in his/her line of argumentation, the problems that he/she may not have mentioned, **before** you actually show why you think there are more strengths than weaknesses in his/her article.
  - In short, **avoid stating the obvious**. It's good to try and see things from unexpected angles sometimes.
- **Does the journalist use terms that are not clearly defined or that are too technical?**
  - If too technical, the article may not be convincing.
  - If some terms are not clearly defined, you may start from this : "If 'communication' means A, then.... However, if you see 'communication' as B , then ..."

- **A VERY IMPORTANT POINT : Your reaction when you read the text.**
  - If you smiled or laughed : good for you, but you should use this reaction in your commentary. Why did you smile/laugh? Does it make the arguments more (or less) forceful? And maybe there's something more serious behind the humor / irony. You can use humor too in your commentary, provided you can manage it.
  - If the text is a piece of opinion writing: **did you find the arguments convincing?** Why/Why not?
    - Do you have examples / counter examples?
    - Does your personal experience enable you to back or contradict one of the arguments put forward?
  - **If there is something strange that you don't really understand or that doesn't seem to make sense:**
    - **SAY IT !** Too many candidates who don't understand an argument or find something contradictory or strange just avoid talking about it and sweep it under the rug. This is a **huge mistake**.
  - **Did you find the text boring or uninteresting?**
    - Finding the text boring is no excuse not to make a good commentary.
    - If the text does bore you to tears, turn it to good account. You may, for instance, stress that there isn't anything new in the text, or ask why a newspaper like *the New York Times* has decided to run a full-page article about that issue.
    - **Watch out !** Maybe there's more to the issue than meets the eye. In that case, you may want to start with sth like "At first sight this article has little interest..." before moving on to sth such as "But on closer examination / on second thought, it raises the broader issue of..."
  - **If you already had several texts on the same issue to comment on** and your reaction is "Oh no, climate change again!" use this reaction wisely:
    - *"I have read quite a few texts about this issue, and this one doesn't come up with anything new."*
    - OR : *"I have read quite a few texts about this issue, and I must admit that this one presents an innovative approach to the problem."*

- **If the text tackles a problem and the solutions to address it :**

- First you should discuss the problem described: Is it such a big problem? Is it new? What is it due to? and so on and so forth.
- Then, if you think there is an actual problem:
  - Assess whether the solutions mentioned in the text are relevant (consequences, other problems they could lead to, etc.)
  - Then ask whether there are any other / better / alternative solutions.
- Or you could by discussing the solutions and then point out that addressing the causes of the problem may be more relevant than looking for solutions.

- **ALWAYS PAY ATTENTION TO:**

- **The date :** a few questions are worth asking:
  - Has anything happened since the text was published which could be related to the issue at stake?
  - Has anything happened since the text was published which would prove/disprove the journalist's point?
  - Is this a new problem? Hasn't it always existed?
- **The title, the introduction and the conclusion**
  - That's often where you'll find the main ideas.
  - Sometimes the title sums up the whole text.
  - If there is a question in the title and/or the introduction: does the journalist answer it clearly? Does he/she answer it at all?
  - The conclusion of the text helps you understand what it is exactly that the author of the text is trying to show, and it can provide you with a starting point for your commentary or a good transition (*"and I personally find this last remark quite surprising because..."*)

- **The picture (if any)**
    - It may also help you understand what the main point of the text is
    - It may illustrate one point developed in the text
    - It may be misleading (exaggeration / caricature) or totally unrelated to the topic.
  - Does the issue raised by the text / the problem explained in the **text illustrate a broader phenomenon or raise broader questions ?**
    - *For instance, if the text deals with binge drinking in the UK, your commentary HAS to start from this before broadening the scope of the analysis (to alcohol-related problems or to binge drinking in other countries for example)*
  - **Are there several issues intertwined in the article?** *For instance a text entitled “A woman kills herself under Oregon’s ‘death with dignity’ law” may both raise the issue of assisted suicide and stress the complexity and / or paradoxes of the federal system in the USA.*
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## TLDR

- What are we talking about (clearly defined terms?)
- What was your reaction when you read the text?
- Overall, do you find the text convincing?
- Date
- Title/Introduction/Conclusion
- Picture
- How relevant are the solutions put forward?
- Consider all the different angles.
- Does the text raise several different issues (concentric circles)?