Guide to Extended Comment Questions

1/. **Extended Comment Questions**: frequently at G.C.S.E. the examiners will ask what we call "extended comment questions". These normally require you to refer to the text (in the original language!) and draw conclusions from it. You may assume as a loose guide that there is one point to be made per mark available. Thus a five mark comment question requires five separate points. Note that particularly good points may deserve more than one mark; conversely, trite or trivial points may merit only half a mark.

2/. **Basic Technique**: simply put, quote a piece of Latin; then explain how that addresses the question you have been asked. Thus if you were asked "*iamque omnis campis exercitus ibat apertis*: how does Virgil's use of Latin emphasise the size of the army?", it is not enough simply to write "he uses *omnis* which shows the size of the army". Your answer should be something on these lines: "He uses the word *omnis* (= whole, entire) to describe the army. Thus the whole army is on the march, as opposed to just a few troops. This helps to draw attention to the size of the army." You must explain how your point relates to the question.

3/. **What To Look For**: this is far from easy to explain. Remember that the examiners know that you are G.C.S.E. candidates - they're not expecting earth-shattering revelations. Also remember that there is no right or wrong answer; simply give your opinion backed up by facts (= quotations) gleaned from the text. Never lose sight of the fact that all Latin literature (including prose work) was intended to be read aloud. This should have a significant impact upon how you view an extract. The sorts of things you may wish to consider are as follows:

a) **Word Order**: in poetry there are two emphatic places in the line - namely the beginning and the end. In prose emphasis can be made by the placement of a word at the beginning or end of its clause. Note that you must look in context to see if the word order is relevant. Thus in the line *Messapus primas acies, postrema coercent || Tyrrheidae iuvenes* ... (= Messapus controls the vanguard, the young sons of Tyrrhus the rear...) the position of Messapus is relevant and worthy of comment since he commands the front of the army and is first word in the sentence; the sons of Tyrrhus bring up the rear of the army and are at the end of this clause. You may also see other effects of word order: *<classem> aggeribus saeptam circum et fluvialibus undis* has the word *saeptam* (= hedged in) is surrounded by the words *aggeribus* (= mounds) and *circum* (= around); so the literal meaning of *saeptam* is mirrored in the word order of the Latin.

b) **Juxtaposition**: the placement of words relative to each other is also sometimes worthy of note, especially if you get two words of contrasting or identical meaning adjacent to each other. Thus in this line *Turnus, ut ante volans tardum praecesserat agmen* the words *volans* (= flying, at full tilt) and *tardum* (= slow) are adjacent; by the positioning of these opposites the contrast between Turnus's speed and that of the rest of the army (*agmen*) is highlighted.

c) **Choice of Vocabulary**: look closely at the words used, paying close attention to adjectives, adverbs and verbs. Consider what is added to the Latin by the adjective or adverb. Does its graphic detail enable us to picture the scene more effectively? Adverbs are actually surprisingly rare, with the exception of temporal (e.g. *mox* or *tum*) and simple (e.g. *non, sic* or *semper*) ones. Verbs are often overlooked - the choice of verb may be critical. Compound verbs can supply subtleties of meaning not readily apparent in a simple English translation. Thus *conicio* (= I hurl) is more emphatic than *iacio* (= I throw). Some verbs imply different methods of action. Take the English verb "to kill". Latin may simply use *neco* or *interficio* - straight forward verbs with no particular nuance. It may use, however, verbs like *trucido* (implies butchery) *obtrunco* (implies dismemberment), *caedo* (implies slaughter - root meaning is "to cut") and so on. In prose especially choice of vocabulary can be important. *homo*, for example, is a derogatory word to use of an important citizen. Vocabulary is important in prose because it is more difficult to use some of the other literary devices mentioned here.

d) **Metaphor and Simile**: these are very common and should be commented upon. Similes are simply direct comparisons (e.g. "Just as when a wolf ... in just the same way Turnus ...."); think about how apt or appropriate the simile is. Is the comparison between Turnus (trying to break into the Trojan camp, fired up and desperate to kill) and the wolf (trying to break into a sheep fold and satisfy his hunger on the lambs inside) good? Does it help to make the scene more vivid? What does it tell us about Turnus? What does it tell us about the Trojans? What, indeed, does it tell us about Roman farming? A simile will only work for an audience if the audience understands the simile in the first place. The author's use of stylish tricks or vocabulary in the simile will also need comment - after all, one reason for bringing in a simile in the first place is to show off. A metaphor is less direct than a simile. You may say to intimidate someone, "You're dog meat!" The person to whom you make the threat is nothing of the kind, but the threat is made more graphic by the suggestion that he/she will become food for the dogs. Again, consider what the metaphor does in context.

e) **Chiasmus**: this is a technically difficult to achieve and hence stylish arrangement of words. It is almost impossible to reproduce this effectively in English. The order is A B B A, where As are the same and Bs are the same. The phrase *acutus natura usu exercitatus* (= sharp by nature, trained by experience - a description of C. Fannius) is a chiasmus. *acutus* and *exercitatus* (the As of A B B A) are both adjectives in the nominative; *natura* and *usu* (the Bs of A B B A) are both nouns in the ablative. The chiasmus helps to emphasise his qualities and handily brings into juxtaposition the opposing nouns *natura* and *usu*. The chiasmus helps, therefore, to stress that he has both natural and trained characteristics. *et*

vocibus excitatus et recreatus loci frigore (= both roused by the voices and revived by the coolness of the place) is another, more complex chiasmus.

f) **Asyndeton**: simply a posh way of talking about the omission of conjunctions where they would have been used normally. This is usually done to convey a sense of excitement or urgency. Thus *mox imaginatus est venisse Neronem, in toro resedisse, prompsisse primum librum...*(= soon he imagined that Nero had come, had sat down on his couch and had taken the first book) is asyndeton. Not very exciting, I'm sure, until you realise that Nero is dead and that this is a ghost story! Another one is *ferte citi ferrum, data tela, ascendite muros, | | hostis adest, heia!* (= Bring weapons quickly, hand out the missiles, climb the walls, the enemy's here, move it!). The panic of seeing the unexpected arrival of the foe spills over into the guard's speech. Conversely, the over-use of conjunctions (polysyndeton) can help to convey a sense of remorseless accumulation. Thus *iam tres libros absolverat subtiles et diligentes et Latinos atque inter sermonem historiamque medios* (= he had already completed three books, well-written, (and) painstaking, (and) in good Latin, (and) mid-way between literary conversation and historical narrative) has an excessive quantity of conjunctions which we would not allow in English. But the cumulative effect is to reinforce the sheer excellence of these books.

g) **Anaphora**: a more stylish way of saying repetition of words or possibly even of phrases. *solacia duo nequaquam paria tanto dolori, solacia tamen* (= there are two consolations in no way equal to such great grief, but consolations they are nevertheless) contains repetition of the word *solacia*, helping to reinforce the (admittedly slight) comforts that Pliny (the author) experiences.

h) **Metrical Effects**: unlikely in prose (but does happen, especially at the end of a long sentence) but very common in verse, these rely upon the metre to augment the images or ideas being described. Thus in a hexameter verse describing a race, or a galloping horse, the poet would try to make the metre fast (making as many feet as possible dactyls [= long, short, short]); conversely, a mournful scene would have a heavy spondaic metre (i.e. consisting of spondees [= two longs per foot]). Thus the line *hoc fletu concussi animi, maestusque per omnes* ... (their spirits were stricken by this weeping, and a sad [groan passes] along everyone) scans as – – | – – | – ˘ ˘ | – – | – ˘ ˘ | – –. This heavy, spondaic line serves to reinforce the sense of grief. Some metrical effects work in other ways. If there were a hiatus between the *concussi* and the *animi* (NB there isn't!), where no elision would occur, you could argue that this causes a gulping chance for emphasis reminiscent of sobbing.

i) **Alliteration and Assonance**: remember that all Roman literary works, even prose (and, strangely enough, letters too) were intended to be read aloud. This should make a significant difference to the way in which you

view an extract. Consider the following, a long simile describing the vain attempts of Turnus to break into the Trojan camp:

ac veluti pleno lupus insidiatus ovili
cum fremit ad caulas, ventos perpessus et imbris,
nocte super media; tuti sub matribus agni
balatum exercent, ille asper et improbus ira
saevit in absentis, collecta fatigat edendi
ex longo rabies et siccae sanguine fauces:

(= And just as when a wolf lying in ambush at a full sheepfold howls at the pen, enduring winds and rain, in the middle of the night; the lambs, safe beneath their mothers, keep on bleating, while he, harsh and wicked in his anger, rages against those he cannot reach, goaded by the long-gathered fury of hunger and his jaws blood-parched jaws). There is much harsh alliteration of the letters "c" and "g", especially in the last line, which may serve to provide an auditory reminder of the brutality and harshness of the wolf (and hence of Turnus). The alliteration of the "s" throughout may recall the slavering of the wolf as it prowls around. Assonance, on the other hand, is the repetition of vowel sounds and syllables. A concocted example might be *murmur gurgitis* (= the murmur of the stream); the repeated "*ur*" sounds may suggest to some the actual sound of the gurgling stream.

j) **Litotes**: is the expression of an idea by the negative of its opposite or a significant understatement. This normally serves to emphasise or reinforce the idea which the author is attempting to convey. Thus *haud aliter Rutulo muros et castra tuenti || ignescunt irae, duris dolor ossibus ardet* (= not otherwise do the rages blaze for the Rutulian as he gazes upon the walls and the camp, fury burns in his iron frame). Note the *haud aliter* (= not otherwise) is litotes - Virgil actually means "in exactly the same way"; this litotes is more powerful. Litotes tends to be overused these days, especially by politicians; it has lost, therefore, so much of its original force that it has almost become a cliché.

k) **Anything else**: there is not space to discuss all relevant literary terminology and tricks of the trade. Comment upon anything that takes your fancy, provided that you link it to the original question. There may even be a phrase or sentence which, of itself, contains nothing unusual or distinctive, but is nonetheless effective and noteworthy. Thus *maculis quem Thracius albis || portat equus cristaque tegit galea aurea rubra* (= whom a Thracian horse with white spots carries and a golden helmet with red crest protects) per se is not particularly interesting. It does add in context, however, a significant element: Turnus (the person so described) can instantly be pictured; he features prominently in the next 100 lines or so of the poem as he attempts to storm the Trojan camp. For the reader/audience to have a simple, yet striking, mental image is of

considerable help to the overall enjoyment and appreciation of the poem in general and this scene in particular.

4/. **Summary**: reduce everything that the author has written to its bare essentials. With the wolf simile quoted above, Virgil simply could have written "Turnus became angry and tried to storm the camp". He doesn't do this, therefore anything and everything beyond this is potentially worthy of comment. Keep it simple, refer to the text by direct quotation of the original material, and tie each point you make to the question. If you link the point you make to the question as it was asked, you will always receive some credit. Bald statements about the text are neither impressive nor appealing to the examiners.