

Poetry Explication

Before beginning any assignment, a writer needs to understand its purpose. Contrary to popular belief, the assignments in a literature course really will help later in life. The key to a poetry assignment is *analysis*, which means examining the pieces to understand how things work as a whole. It is exactly like taking apart a piece of machinery to see how it works. By analyzing poetry, the writer learns valuable critical thinking skills that can be applied to science, accounting, medicine, or numerous other careers.

Remember, the writer is not just summarizing the poem in his paper; this does not qualify as analysis or explanation. Instead, he or she needs to make an argument about what he or she sees in the poem. For instance, does the writer think the author uses symbolism to create the theme? Does the word choice affect the tone or meaning of the poem?

Trying to develop an interpretation of a poem's meaning can be difficult—poems often appear to be simple or straightforward but are actually quite complicated, and they tend to use language that is unfamiliar or that may be ambiguous in meaning. It is a good idea for the writer to break down his or her examination of a poem into separate steps in order to take each element of the poem into consideration and to better understand how these elements fit together.

Basic Comprehension

Before the writer can begin a deeper analysis of the poem, he or she needs to make sure that he or she understands the basic situation and ideas being presented in the poem by completing the following steps:

1. Read the poem silently then out loud.

Doing this will familiarize the writer with the poem's basic content, as well as with the meter and rhyme scheme of the poem, if any. Is the poem written in an open form or a closed form? When reading the poem aloud, the writer should consider whether or not the line breaks in the poem serve as the natural breaks between sentences or clauses. If not, it may help to ignore the line breaks and pause only at the end of a sentence or when a comma exists—this will make it easier to read for meaning.

2. Paraphrase the poem.

The writer can write a paragraph that sums up, in his or her own words, what he or she sees to be the poem's main idea. The writer may also want to paraphrase the poem line by line. Doing this will help uncover the basic meaning of the poem and draw attention to the ways in which the poem's original form conveys that meaning. While this happens, he or she should look up in the dictionary any unfamiliar words.

3. Identify the speaker and the intended audience.

What can the writer tell about the speaker based on the content of the poem? Is the speaker male or female, young or old? Is the speaker addressing anyone in particular? The writer can make notes about how he or she inferred this from the poem.

4. Identify the specific setting of time and place.

Does the poem offer any information about the setting in which the poem's action or situation is occurring? This can be concrete information such as "in the JFK airport in 1986," or it can be abstract information like "at the bedside of the speaker's father as he is dying."

5. Consider the poem's title.

Does the title emphasize a particular idea, situation, or theme that may help give the writer insight into the meaning of the poem? What does the title refer to?

Language Analysis

The language used in a poem is the most important element; each word has been carefully chosen by the writer and needs to be examined just as carefully by the reader. When analyzing a poem, the writer should spend the majority of time on the language—the words that are chosen, the way that they are arranged, the metaphors they convey, and the images or feelings they evoke. For a writer to analyze the language of a poem, he or she should complete the following steps:

6. Consider the poem's diction.

Think about the poem's word choice. Does the writer notice any plays on the meaning of a word or any puns in the poem? Are any words used in such a way that their meaning is uncertain—do any words mean two things at the same time? Are there any other examples of verbal wit?

7. Identify any figures of speech.

The writer might think about how words or phrases in the poem may have both literal and figurative meanings. Is imagery in the poem? Does the poem make use of metaphor or simile? How do these metaphors or similes give further insight into the poem's message? Are any important symbols noticeable in the poem?

8. Identify any instances of irony.

Is any of the poem's language ironic—does the implied meaning oppose the surface-level meaning in some way? How does this affect the overall meaning or message of the poem?

9. Consider the tone of the poem.

Finally, the writer might think about how the poem's language and the context in which it is written create a tone—is the tone angry, sad, thoughtful, or jubilant? How might this contribute to the poem's meaning?

Poetry Questions

Writers can use any of these questions to help them understand a poem.

1. Who is the speaker? Is it possible to determine the speaker's age, sex, sensibilities, level of awareness and values?
2. Is the speaker addressing anyone in particular?
3. How does the reader respond to the speaker? Favorably? Negatively? What is the situation? Are there any special circumstances that inform what the speaker says?
4. Is there a specific setting of time and place?
5. Does reading the poem aloud help the reader understand it?
6. Does a paraphrase reveal the basic purpose of the poem?
7. What does the title emphasize?
8. Is the theme presented directly or indirectly?

9. Do any allusions enrich the poem's meaning?
10. How does the diction reveal meaning? Are any words repeated? Do any words carry evocative connotative meanings? Are there any puns or other forms of verbal wit?
11. Are figures of speech used? How does the figurative language contribute to the poem's vividness and meaning?
12. Do any objects, persons, places, events, or actions have allegorical or symbolic meanings? What other details in the poem support the reader's interpretation?
13. Is irony used? Any examples of situational irony, verbal irony, dramatic irony, or understatement (litotes) or paradox?
14. What is the tone of the poem? Is the tone consistent?
15. Does the poem use onomatopoeia, assonance, consonance, or alliteration? How do these sounds affect you?
16. What sounds are repeated? If there are rhymes, what is their effect? Do they seem forced or natural? Is there a rhyme scheme? Do the rhymes contribute to the poem's meaning?
17. Do the lines have a regular meter? What is the predominant meter? Are there significant variations? Does the rhythm seem appropriate for the tone of the poem?
18. Does the poem's form-its overall structure-follow an established pattern? Do you think the form is a suitable vehicle for the poem's meaning?
19. Is the language of the poem intense and concentrated? Does the reader think it warrants more than one or two close readings?
20. Did the reader enjoy the poem? What specifically pleased the reader about what was expressed and how it was expressed?
21. Does a particular critical approach seem appropriate for this poem?
22. How might biographical information about the author help to determine the central concerns of the poem?
23. How might historical information about the poem provide a useful context for interpretation?
24. To what extent do the reader's own experiences, values, beliefs, and assumptions inform his interpretation?
25. What kinds of evidence from the poem is the reader focusing on to support his interpretation? Does the reader's interpretation leave out any important elements that might undercut or limit the interpretation?
26. Given that there are a variety of ways to interpret the poem, which one seems most useful to the reader?