

If you are just beginning to delve into the world of poetry, you may initially feel overwhelmed by the occasional ambiguity and inaccessibility of this literary style. However, learning the elements and poetic tools used to build a poem will help to understand and analyze poems. Writing about poetry can be difficult. A poem does not affect its reader in quite the same way that a work of prose does. To be able to understand and write about the way a poem works, you need to spend some time thinking analytically about the poem before you start your draft. Then, when you begin to write, you are better able to select appropriate evidence and construct a convincing argument.

The first thing to do is to find a poem that interests you.

Here are some websites that you can browse through to get you started.

Find a poem that is at least 25 lines long, copy it into MSWord, and print the page.

Poetry Archives <http://www.emule.com/poetry/>

Poem Hunter <http://www.poemhunter.com/classics/>

Poetry Treasure Chest <http://jollyroger.com/classicalpoetry/>

Every Poet <http://www.everypoet.com/archive/>

Romantic Poetry <http://www.theromantic.com/poetryclassic/main.htm>

Chinese Poetry [http://web.cn.edu/kwheeler/chinese\\_poetry.html](http://web.cn.edu/kwheeler/chinese_poetry.html)

Poet Seers [http://www.poetseers.org/the\\_great\\_poets](http://www.poetseers.org/the_great_poets)

Contemporary American Poetry <http://capa.conncoll.edu/>

Contemporary British and Irish poetry <http://www.thepoem.co.uk/>

Poets dot Org <http://www.poets.org/page.php/prmID/59>

Electronic Poetry Center <http://wings.buffalo.edu/epc/authors/>

British War Poems <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1914warpoets.html>

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### **Getting Started - take one step at a time and IN ORDER.**

#### **1) Give yourself a lot of time to read the poem several times.**

Read the poem aloud several times, noting its structure, meter, recurring images or themes, rhyme scheme-- anything and everything which creates an effect.

#### **2) Paraphrase the poem: make sure you understand the language of the poem.**

Poetry, particularly from other time periods, often contains confusing syntax or vocabulary. Put into your own words those lines or phrases which are especially difficult. Resist the temptation to brush over the lines or phrases which seem unintelligible; these can be the most crucial parts of the poem. The Oxford English Dictionary is a good resource for defining difficult vocabulary.

#### **4) Read the poem again and jot down notes on the sheet to note every observation, question, or feeling you get from the poem as you read.**

Pay special attention to how the poem begins and ends.

#### **5) Now, use your notes as entry points to begin your investigation and analysis of the poem.**

Ask yourself what elements in the poem lead you to the particular observation and how the poet achieves this effect.

Write down notes to yourself on each observation. Use an outline format, such as this:

**6) Always keep in mind that the poet uses poetic devices to achieve a particular effect.**

Breaking up the poem into formal poetic components enhances your understanding of the poem's overall theme, tone, and/or general purpose. In other words, use form to understand the content and create a thesis about the poem.

Below are some elements and corresponding poetic devices on which you can focus.

Note: Many of these divisions are arbitrary. Poetic elements frequently overlap.

For definitions of the underlined terms see the UWC Definitions of Poetic Devices handout.

<http://projects.uwc.utexas.edu/handouts/?q=node/40>

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**ISSUES TO ADDRESS IN YOUR OUTLINE:**

You will NOT use every single one, but should have a good and in-depth mix from all areas to fully analyze your poem. Choose the ones that BEST apply to YOUR poem.

**Content: How does the tone of the speaker and the context of the work change your understanding?**

**1) Speaker:**

Is the speaker the poet or a specific persona?

How is the speaker involved in the poem?

Is the speaker an omniscient narrator or casual observer?

Does the speaker refer to himself/ herself in the 1st person?

Is the speaker from an identifiable time period?

How does knowing the historical context of the poem change your understanding of the speaker's attitude?

**2) Tone**

How is the tone of the poem developed through the language used to create imagery?

How does diction influence the understanding of the tone?

Does the tone change as the poem progresses?

Is it consistent at the beginning and ending of the poem?

**3) Tension:**

What is the conflict or point of tension in the poem?

Is there an external or internal conflict?

Physical, spiritual, moral, philosophical, social, etc?

How is the tension in that conflict developed with poetic elements?

Is it resolved? If so, how?

**4) Context:**

When was the poem written?

What were the historical, political, philosophical, and social issues of that time?

Does that change your understanding of the poem's theme?

Did poets during that time period follow particular style?

Is the poem consistent with the literary conventions of that era?

How is it inconsistent?

**Language: How does the language and rhythm contribute to the meaning, purpose or emotional force?**

**1) Word Choice:**

- How would you characterize the poet's word choice?
- Is it formal, conversational?
- Does the poet use a specific dialect for the speaker?

**2) Meaning:**

- What are the connotations and denotations of particular words?
- Are certain words repeated?
- Are they abstract or concrete, literal or metaphorical?

**3) Rhythm:**

- Does the poem have an identifiable rhythm arranged in the meter (iamb, spondee, trochee, dactyl...)?
- How many syllables are in each line?
- Does it follow a pattern?
- What syllables are stressed and unstressed?
- How does alliteration, assonance, or consonance enhance the rhythm and musicality of the poem?

**Imagery: How does the imagery construct the poem's theme, tone, and purpose?**

**1) Visuals and Sensory:**

- Are the images literal or figurative, abstract or concrete? What sensory experiences are evoked?
- Are certain images repeated?

**2) Metaphor:**

- Does the poet use metaphors to make comparisons and express images or abstract ideas?
- Is there an extended metaphor?
- What is the effect of the metaphors on the tone and theme of the poem?

**3) Symbolism:**

- Are certain objects or actions developed in the imagery symbolic of an abstract idea?
- Do these symbols reoccur?
- Do they help to create an allegory?

**Form: How does the form of the poem correspond to theme and main idea of the work?**

**1) Structure:**

- Does the poem follow a formal poetic structure such as a sonnet, haiku, sestina, ode, blues poem, etc.?
- If so, what are the characteristics of that form?
- How does it deviate from that form?

## 2) Stanza and Lines:

- Are stanzas and lines consistently the same length?
- Do they follow a particular pattern?
- Are there any stanzas, lines, words, or that diverge from the pattern?

## 3) Rhyme Scheme:

- Does the poem follow an identifiable rhyme scheme corresponding to a specific poetic form?
- What kind of rhyme is used internal or end rhyme, slant or true rhyme, etc.?
- Is it consistent or scattered throughout?
- If not, where does the rhyme change or appear and why?
- What is the overall purpose or effect of the rhyme scheme?

## Syntax: How do the poet's syntactical choices change or expand the ideas in the poem?

### 1) Enjambment:

- How are lines broken?
- Are they broken before a grammatical or logical completion of a thought to create an enjambment?
- Or are they end-stopped, breaking after the completion of a sentence or other grammatical pauses?
- How does the use of enjambment create a duality of meaning in the lines?

### 2) Verbs:

- Are verbs active or passive?
- What tense does the poet use?
- Is it consistent?
- How does tense consistency (inconsistency) affect the passage of time within the poem?

### 3) Sentence Structure:

- Does the poet use complete sentences, fragments, or a combination of both?
- Is there a pattern?
- How does the poet's sentence choices contribute to the understanding of the poem?
- Within the sentence, is the word order natural or grammatically irregular?

### 4) Punctuation:

- How is punctuation used or not used?
- Is it consistent with grammatical conventions?
- What effect does the punctuation create on how the poem is read?
- How does it affect the speed?
- Where are the pauses?
- Does the poet use italics, bold fonts, dashes, or any other uncommon fonts or punctuation devices?
- If so, why?

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## NOW THAT YOU HAVE YOUR OUTLINE COMPLETED, HOW DO YOU TIE IT ALL TOGETHER?

### 1) Look through the outline that you have made and mark which of your sections are the most insightful.

- Which tell the most about the layers of the poem?
- Which ones break down the poem into its smallest pieces?

Which ones bring out ideas that readers would not notice if they only read it once?  
Which ones show your understanding of poetry the best?

## 2) Analyze the poem:

Since your analysis should make up the bulk of your essay, approach it with care. Knowing that you will not be able to address every aspect of the poem, select the elements which work together to create special effects.

Look beyond the surface meaning of the words and start to think about how the techniques used in the poem add depth to its meaning.

How do the elements work together?

Do they complement each other, do they create tension, or both?

Think in terms of cause and effect and look for relationships within the poem itself. For example, if you see a pattern of imagery which suggests something about the speaker, look at other areas of the poem for more evidence along the same lines.

In poetry, form and content are inseparable, so you must not overlook the relationship between what the speaker says and how he or she says it.

## 3) After you have chosen those portions of your outline, you need to form a thesis statement.

What is a thesis statement?

*A Thesis statement is a statement, NOT a question, that sets forth the basic argument of a writer or speaker, who then proves it.*

Look at what you have ready to go.

What can you PROVE with your information?

How can you make all the information work together to prove your thesis statement?

## 4) Review your notes. Look for patterns and themes.

Formulate a thesis statement that will allow you to explain the relationships and the effects of elements in the poem.

If you can, indicate in the thesis the areas or features of the poem important to your argument (a pattern of imagery, for instance, or a series of crucial lines).

Remember, your thesis statement must argue a point; instead of simply saying that a poet uses certain poetic devices, you must give some indication in your thesis as to how those devices work and what they do to the poem's meaning.

You do not need to go into elaborate detail in your thesis, but MUST show the relationship between the poem and your argument.

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**Once you have a plan, an outline, and a thesis statement that you can prove, you are ready to write a poem analysis paper!**

### **Interpret the poem:**

Using your analysis of how the poem works as your evidence, interpret the poem -- answer the question, "So what is this poem all about?"

In the interpretation, you bring together your analysis of the elements in the poem and show what they mean to the poem as a whole.

You may suggest an interpretation of the speaker's state of mind, the poem's subject, or the nature of the experience which the poem creates. For example, does Poe's "The Raven" describe a dream? A drug-induced hallucination? A recollection? Why do you think so?

What evidence, from your analysis, supports your idea?

The main argument of your paper should begin to take form as you struggle with this process.

You have great freedom in interpreting a poem, provided that your assertions are solidly linked to your

evidence.

Interpretation that does not align with your analysis will be invalid.

*In the words of M. H. Abrams, editor of the Norton Anthology of Poetry,  
"There is no one, right interpretation of a poem- but there is one which is more right than any of the others."*

The multi-faceted nature of poetry demands that you know where you are going before you begin to construct your written argument, which is why the description and paraphrase stages are so important. Your selective analysis emerges from them in the form of an argument that is limited to a manageable set of ideas. After you have thought through these stages and taken good notes, you should be ready to begin writing your essay.

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## **LETS GET DOWN TO WRITING!!!**

**1) Your first paragraph should make your reader comfortable with the poem by identifying the poet, offering a brief, general description of the poem and, most importantly, leading into the thesis and development of the argument by narrowing and limiting the subject.**

It may be helpful to imagine the introduction as a funnel, initially appealing to your reader from a wide perspective and then swiftly directing him or her into the body of your essay.

Avoid sweeping, abstract statements or statements which you cannot concretely link to your thesis. The more quickly you get away from the general and focus on the specific, the sooner you will engage your reader.

**2) The approach you undertake in your thesis determines the organization of the rest of the essay.**

Some arguments lend themselves to a linear presentation. For example, if you choose to trace the development of the speaker according to the recurrence of an image throughout the poem, you might want to go through the poem chronologically to show how that image changes in significance from line to line or stanza to stanza.

You need not limit yourself to such a presentation, however, many poems are difficult to explain chronologically; some poems are better suited to a non-linear argument which reflects cycles or other patterns in the poem.

If you organize your argument according to the patterns you choose to address, your argument might move through the poem several times, according to the instances of the images and their contextual significance. For example, one word may have a formal relationship to numerous other words in the poem. The word "snow" has a relationship to the word "flow" in that they rhyme, and to the word "ice" in that they are both associated with winter.

To discuss the significance of these relationships, you may find yourself jumping around the poem. That's fine, as long as you make your argument clear and keep your thesis in sight.

**3) Each paragraph should consist of a point which is credible, relevant to your thesis, and analytical.**

Remember that you are arguing for a certain position and need to convince your reader of that position.

At the beginning of each paragraph, tell your reader the focus of your argument in that paragraph by starting with a topic sentence.

The rest of the paragraph should address the assertion with convincing evidence.

The effectiveness of your argument depends heavily on how well you incorporate evidence into your paragraphs.

**4) You cannot create a compelling argument without evidence to back it up, but you must present that evidence in the context of your own argument.**

Merely including a line or a passage in your paper without linking it to your argument will not be convincing.

Try incorporating your evidence into a "sandwich" of information which will allow your reader to receive the full impact of the lines.

Before the quotation, describe the evidence in terms of the poem. Where is it located in the poem? Is it part of a pattern? Let your reader know what he or she should be looking for.

After the quotation, if the passage is particularly difficult to understand, you should explain problematic syntax or vocabulary.

Then, you must analyze the quote and show how that quote supports the claims you are making in your thesis. This is the most important part of your paper; it is where you make your interpretation clear to the reader and where you prove your thesis.

Don't assume that the quotation will speak for itself—it is your JOB to explain it.

**5) Conclusions take many forms.**

In your conclusion you can emphasize crucial ideas, raise questions about the poem, or connect the poem to other literary works or experiences.

This is where you can offer your interpretation of the poem, which by now should be convincing to your reader since you have presented your evidence in the body of the paper.

You may raise new ideas in a conclusion, provided that they are solidly linked to the development of your argument.

Remember, you have flexibility, but your conclusion should flow naturally from the body of your paper.

**6) Be sure to cite your evidence properly.**

Citing from a poem is different from citing from a prose text.

Because the line form of poetry is so important, you must indicate where lines end by separating them with a slash mark "/".

If you are quoting more than three lines, single space the passage, indent, and present the passage as it appears in the poem.

Follow the quotation with the appropriate **line numbers enclosed in parentheses**.

Taken from: UWC poetry analysis <http://projects.uwc.utexas.edu/handouts/?q=node/34> and Hamilton Univ. writing about poetry [https://my.hamilton.edu/academics/resource/wc/Writing\\_About\\_Poetry.PDF](https://my.hamilton.edu/academics/resource/wc/Writing_About_Poetry.PDF)