

POETRY ANALYSIS

English

READING POETRY:

Interpreting poetry may seem intimidating to those who are not used to reading poems. Unlike prose, poetry is often written in ambiguous language that can seem like a kind of secret code.

It may be difficult to know where to begin when approaching a new poem, but the key is to keep an open mind. Poetry sometimes requires extra effort to understand, but the result can be very rewarding once you come to appreciate the poet's language.



STEPS TO BEGIN A POETRY ANALYSIS:

Approaching poetry analysis methodically can help you decode a poem that seems confusing. The steps outlined below are a good starting point to help you begin your analysis. Remember that these steps are just a recommendation. You might find it more helpful to accomplish these steps in a different order or to repeat previous steps as you go along. Like with writing, everyone has a different process for achieving their end goal when it comes to understanding poetry.

Tip: As you complete these steps, take notes on your copy of the poem. Write comments and ideas about possible interpretations in the margins and underline or highlight words or lines that you think might be important.

1. READ THE TITLE:

It seems like an obvious step, but reading the title is a crucial component to understanding a poem. The title should be considered part of the poem. A poem's title can give you important context before you even begin analyzing it. Sometimes, the title may be the only direct reference to its subject, other times, it may be more ambiguous.

As you complete the remainder of these steps, keep referring back to the title and ask yourself why the poem chose such a title. If the poem is untitled, consider why the poet chose not to name their work.

2. READ THE POEM SLOWLY:

Read the poem *carefully*. Do not rush through the lines just to get to the end. Take the time to allow each line to sink in—even if the meaning remains unclear. Read the poem in full, worry about understanding it later—it will likely be easier to make sense of the earlier lines once you have read the entire poem.

3. LOOK UP UNFAMILIAR WORDS:

Look up any unknown words in the dictionary. Sometimes, learning the meaning of one or two new words in a poem will fill in some of the gaps that made the poem confusing in the first place.

You should also look up words that seem out of place even if you think you know their meanings. Sometimes, a word may have several other meanings that you were unaware of.

Tip: The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) is a useful resource for understanding the historical context of words. The OED lists all the meanings a word has had since it first appeared in the English language.

This is especially helpful for the analysis of older poems. A word used in a poem from a previous century might mean something different than what it means today.

4. READ THE POEM ALOUD:

Read the poem again, aloud if possible. Poetry is meant to be read aloud. Reading a poem out loud can give you a better sense of its cadence, rhythm, and rhyme.

5. EXAMINE THE POEM'S STRUCTURE:

Begin to break down the poem on a structural level. Examine how does the poem looks, visually, on the page. The arrangement of margins and line positioning are often a deliberate creative feature of the poem. Note if the poem is divided into regular sections (stanzas), or irregular groups of lines (verse paragraphs).

Note the poem's cadence (how it flows) and identify the poem's meter and rhyme scheme (if it has one). It might be helpful to write the rhyming pattern on the side of each line like so:

See the people passing by	A
Shoulders hunched against the wind ,	B
Oblivious to the crystal sky	A
Stretched above their heads .	C

Note: For more information about meter and rhyme see the "Figurative Devices" handout.

6. IDENTIFY THE POEM'S FORM:

Based on the structural features examined in step 5 try to identify what form of poetry is being used.

Some Common Forms of Poetry:

Ballad: Poetry consisting of narrative verse, written in rhyming quatrains.

Sonnet: 14-line, rhyming poetry, usually dealing with love.

Blank verse: Poetry with no rhyme scheme written in *iambic pentameter* (the form used in most of Shakespeare's work)

Free verse: Poetry with no set structure or rhyme scheme (the most common form of modern poetry).

Epic: Lengthy narrative poetry, usually relating to adventure.

Haiku: 3-line poetry with 5 syllables in the first and third lines and 7 in the second, usually relating to nature.

7. STUDY THE POEM'S LANGUAGE:

The most significant factor when analyzing poetry is, of course, the language that the poet uses.

To analyze a poem's language, make note of the following elements:

Point of view: How is the poem narrated? Does it use first-, second-, or third-person point-of-view?

Diction: What kinds of words does the poet use? Are there any patterns in the types of words used?

Punctuation: How is the poem punctuated? Is this punctuation conventional?

Imagery: What kinds of images does the language evoke?

Figurative language: What kinds of figurative language does the poet use?

Note: For more information about figurative language see the "Figurative Devices" handout.

8. CONSIDER WHY EACH ELEMENT OF THE POEM WAS CHOSEN:

After you have identified the elements of the poem's form and language, begin to evaluate what each of those elements accomplishes.

Ask yourself why the poet chose to use that particular form of poetry, point of view, diction, punctuation, imagery, or figurative language. What might have been their goal in choosing each element?



Examples of analyzing the effect of poetic elements:

The harsh alliteration of “b” and “d” in the opening line: “Bent double, like old beggars under sacks” contributes to the brutal atmosphere in “Dulce et Decorum Est” by Wilfred Owen.

The third-person point-of-view in “Helen” by H.D. conveys a sense of detachment between the poet and her subject.

The irregular, free-verse structure of Allen Ginsberg’s “Howl” allows the poet to liberally explore his ideas as if writing his entire stream of consciousness.

9. CONSIDER WHAT THE POEM’S THEME MIGHT BE:

What overarching message can you take away from the poem?

Consider how the elements you evaluated in steps 7 and 8 might develop a theme. How do those various elements support your chosen theme? In other words, how does the “evidence” of your analysis from step 8 prove that your theme is valid?

Common errors to avoid when analyzing a poem’s theme:

As you try to determine the poem’s theme you must avoid drawing unsupported conclusions.

When considering a poem’s theme, **do not confuse the poet with the speaker**. It can be difficult to find the line between the poet’s voice and the speaker’s—sometimes that line is even deliberately blurred. Even though the poet’s voice and the speaker’s may be the same, we generally must assume that they are different.

Further, it is not effective analysis to make assumptions about the poem based on details about the poet’s life that came from outside of the poem. Such details might be helpful for context, but they do not belong in a formal poetry analysis.

Compare a faulty argument based on biographical details to a revised argument based on concrete evidence from the poem:

Faulty: Sylvia Plath had a strained relationship with her father in real life, so her poem “Daddy” is reflecting on that.

Revised: The violent and supernatural diction used in Sylvia Plath’s poem “Daddy” conveys the speaker’s feelings of resentment and fear toward their father.

Likewise, it is important not to read too much into a single line of poetry. While imagination is an important part of appreciating poetry, it is nevertheless important to avoid drawing overly stipulated conclusions.

Exploring the deeper meaning behind simple lines is good practice but extrapolating elaborate backstories from them or getting hung up on their literal meanings can be problematic.

Compare an overly extrapolated argument to a revised argument based on simpler, more supportable evidence:

Faulty: In Adrienne Rich’s “A Valediction Forbidding Mourning”, the line “They gave me a drug that slowed the healing of wounds” means that the speaker had a tragic experience with drug abuse.

Revised: The line “They gave me a drug that slowed the healing of wounds” indicates the speaker’s inability to cope with pain and suggests a disconnection between the speaker and their environment.

Tip: If you are uncertain about the validity of an argument in your poetry analysis, ask yourself how you know what you are claiming is true.

Can you back up your statement with **evidence from the poem**? If you cannot, then your argument does not belong in a formal analysis.

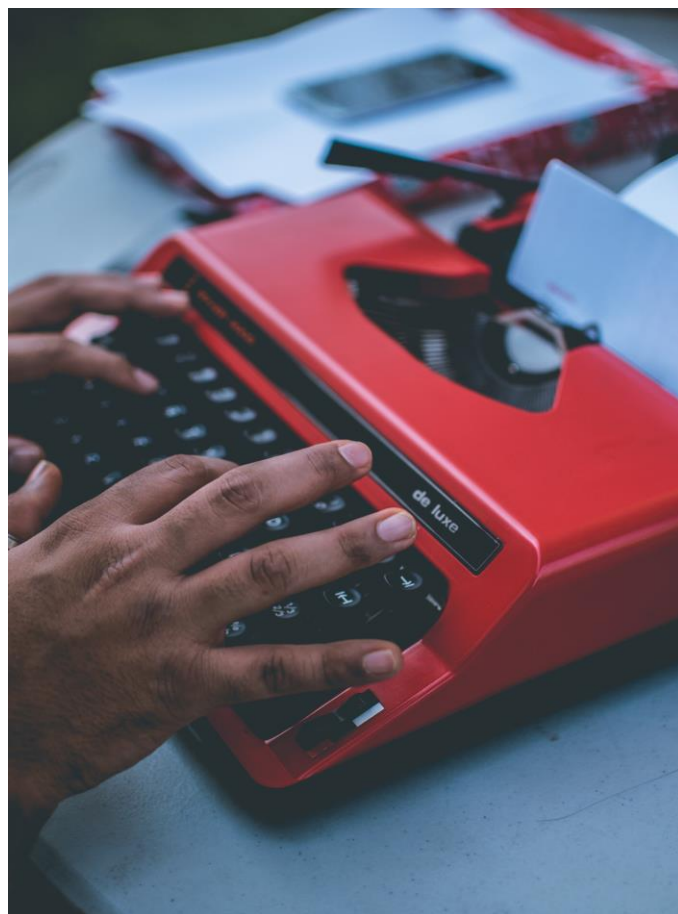
Keep it simple; the theme you come up with should be something that you can interpret from material in the poem alone.

10. READ THE POEM ONE LAST TIME:

Reread the poem once more for things you might have missed. Now that you have considered the various elements of the poem, you may be able to notice subtle details that slipped your attention before.

Examine the poem in its entirety. Put all of your former analyses together. Analyzing poetry is all about drawing connections between the words on the page and the meaning that can be extrapolated from them. Therefore, you will also need to make connections between each step of your analysis to fully understand a poem.

Like any other skill, interpreting poetry takes practice—the more poetry you read, the easier you will find future analyses. Once you feel more comfortable analyzing poetry, you will hopefully be able to gain a better appreciation for the poems you encounter so they will seem less elusive and more enjoyable to read.



Sources:

(MLA 8th Edition)

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