

Poetry Explication

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

Remember, you are not just summarizing the poem in your paper; that doesn't qualify as analysis or explanation. Instead, you need to make an argument about what you see in the poem. Do you 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's a good idea to break down your 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 you can begin a deeper analysis of the poem, you need to make sure you understand the basic situation and ideas being presented in the poem by completing the following steps:

1. Read the poem silently, then out loud.

Do this to familiarize yourself 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? As you read aloud, 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 you see a comma—this will make it easier to read for meaning.

2. Paraphrase the poem.

Write a paragraph in which you sum up, in your own words, what you see to be the poem's main idea. You may also want to paraphrase the poem line by line. Doing this will help you uncover the basic meaning of the poem and draw attention to the ways in which the poem's original form conveys that meaning. Make sure to look up in the dictionary any words that you don't understand.

3. Identify the speaker and the intended audience.

What can you 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? Be sure to make notes about how you were able to infer 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 you 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 you analyze a poem, the majority of your time should be spent 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. To get started on analyzing the language of a poem, complete the following steps:

6. Consider the poem's diction.

Think about the poem's word choice. Are there 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 appear to mean two things at the same time? Are there any other examples of verbal wit?

7. Identify any figures of speech.

Think about how words or phrases in the poem may have both literal and figurative meanings. Is there 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 there any important symbols 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.

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