

HOW TO ANALYZE POETRY:
Questions that you can ask to unlock the secrets of poetry

Directions: Read the poem several times before you start asking questions or taking notes. **BE PATIENT!** Expect to spend at least 10-15 minutes engaged in the following process:

1. Read the poem **twice** through. Read deliberately but in a natural, unrushed pace.
2. Then read it once **aloud** to get a feel for the rhythm and rhyme of the poem.
3. Now, ask yourself the following questions related to **Context, Content, Diction, Imagery, and Structure**, and then try to find the answers by scanning the poem. Take notes as you do this. Not all of these questions will yield any interesting or insightful answers, but ask them anyway.
4. After asking questions, **paraphrase** the poem in a short paragraph.
5. Make an **explication** (i.e. explanation and interpretation) of the poem. How do the prominent literary elements affect the **reading** (i.e. interpretation) of the poem?

Context of the Poem

1. What do you learn about the **setting** of this poem in terms of place or time?
2. Who is the **speaker** in this poem? What kind of person is he or she?
3. What is the perspective or **point of view** of the speaker? First person (“I”) or Third person (“He” or “She”)? Is the speaker an interested participant or aloof and disinterested?
4. To whom is the speaker talking? In other words, who is the speaker’s intended **audience**? Can the audience be extended to a larger group of people or even you, the reader?
5. What is the poet’s **tone**, or attitude, toward the poem? **Ironic**, (dis)interested, serious, playful, melancholy?

Content & Ideas of the Poem

6. What do you learn about the poem from the title?
7. What is the topic of the poem? What is the poem about? Does it tell a story? Is the ending surprising?
8. What is the purpose of the poem? (i.e. Does the poet have something important to say in the poem?)
9. State the poem’s central idea or **theme** in a single sentence.

Diction (the author’s choice of words)

10. What words leap out at you while reading?
11. Are there any unfamiliar words? Bizarre or invented words? Why do you think the author chose to use these words?
12. Does the author use everyday words or elevated, highfalutin words?
13. Do any of the words have **symbolic** meaning? Do any words have double meanings?
14. Are there any **allusions**? Literary allusions? Cultural allusions? Classical allusions? Religious allusions? Historical allusions?

Imagery & Figurative language

15. Are there any predominant **images** in the poem that appeal to a person’s senses: sight, sound, taste, etc?
16. Does the author use comparisons such as **metaphors** or **similes**?
17. Does the author use **irony**?
18. Does the author use **paradox, overstatement, or understatement**?
19. Is the poem **allegorical**? (i.e. is it really about something else?)

Structure

20. What **rhyme**, if any, is used? What effect does this have on the poem?
21. Does the poet use any sound repetition? **Assonance** or **consonance**? **Alliteration**?
22. What **meter** is used? Does the poem have a certain **rhythm** or cadence to it?
23. What is the format of the poem? 4-line stanzas? Sonnet? Is there any particular indentation?
24. Does the poet use any peculiar punctuation, capitalization, or indentation? (e.g. Dickinson and E.E. Cummings)? If so, what effect does this have on the poem?
25. How does the structure of the poem and its content relate?