

A QUICK GUIDE TO ANALYZING POETRY

Poetry may seem complex and difficult to understand -- but you don't need to be an expert to analyze a work of poetry! With the right plan of action and a little bit of poetry knowledge, you can successfully analyze any poem and discover all that this beautiful art form has to offer!

Fun fact: In 1999, UNESCO declared March 21 as World Poetry Day!¹

STEPS TO ANALYZING A POEM

Start by analyzing the separate elements of the poem to understand the poem as a whole. Your goal in analyzing a poem is to understand its meaning and to appreciate it more.

Here are some helpful steps to analyzing a poem:

1. **Read the poem AT LEAST twice.** The first time, read the poem to yourself slowly, making sure that you do not miss any words or details. The second time, read the poem out loud, paying attention to the rhythmic flow of the poem's words, syllables, and patterns of emphasis.

Optional: watch a video or listen to a recording of someone reciting the poem. Pay attention to how the speaker interprets the rhythm and expression of the poem.

2. **Examine the title of the poem.** The title often hints at the core theme or message of the poem. Think about how the title relates to the poem and what it might reveal about the poem's message.
3. **Identify the speaker of the poem.** Determine whether the poem is written in the first person, second person, or third person. See if the contents of the poem reveal anything about the speaker's age, gender, or identity.

Remember: the speaker and the author of the poem are usually not the same person. For now, we are just going to focus on understanding the speaker and leave the author for later.

4. **Evaluate the tone of the poem.** What is the speaker's tone of voice? If the poem lacks an identifiable speaker, what mood permeates the poem?
5. **Study the language of the poem.** Make note of any figurative language in the poem, and consider the way it is being used to describe or emphasize certain elements of the poem.

Common examples of figurative language include the following:

- **Metaphor** – a direct comparison between two things or creating a connection between two dissimilar things. Here is an example of a metaphor from Emily Dickinson's poem "Hope," in which Dickinson compares hope to a bird:

*"'Hope' is the thing with feathers –
That perches in the soul –²*

- **Simile** – a comparison using "like," "as," or "than." Here is an example of a simile from "Harlem" by Langston Hughes, in which Hughes compares a deferred dream to a raisin:

“What happens to a dream deferred?
Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?”

- **Personification** – a description of a nonhuman form as if it were a human or had human qualities. Here is an example of personification from John Donne’s Holy Sonnet 10, “Death, Be Not Proud,” in which Donne treats death as though it can feel pride like humans do:

“**Death, be not proud**, though some have called thee
Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so;”

- **Oxymoron** – a phrase that unites two contradictory words. Here is an example of an oxymoron in Book I of John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, in which Milton refers to “darkness visible”:

“As one great Furnace flam'd, yet from those flames
No light, but rather **darkness visible**,”

- **Alliteration** – a repetition of consonant sounds within words in a phrase or a line. Here is an example of alliteration from a line of “Pied Beauty” by Gerard Manley Hopkins:

“With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;”

6. **Research the background of the poem.** Learn about the poem’s historical context – when it was written, where it was written, its original language, and any events, philosophies, or religions that might influence the poem’s content. Also, learn about the author of the poem – the author’s worldview, religion, personal experiences, and other important life aspects.
7. **Paraphrase the poem.** Carefully read through each line of the poem, put each line into your own words, and write down your paraphrase. If you run into any figurative language or vague phrases, translate them into simpler terms without changing their intended meaning. Once you have paraphrased each line of the poem, re-read your entire paraphrase to understand the poem better.
8. **Finally, discern the message of the poem.** Based on your paraphrase of the poem and the other aspects of the poem you have analyzed, ask yourself the following question: what is the message of the poem?

¹ UNESCO. (n.d.). World poetry day. Retrieved from <https://en.unesco.org/commemorations/worldpoetryday>

² This poem and all other poems were retrieved from the Poetry Foundation: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems>

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