

1ENG321 Guide to reading and writing about poetry

The following guide is from the Purdue University Online Writing Lab

Available at:

https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/subject_specific_writing/writing_in_literature/writing_about_poetry.html

Writing About Poetry

Writing about poetry can be one of the most demanding tasks that many students face in a literature class. Poetry, by its very nature, makes demands on a writer who attempts to analyse it that other forms of literature do not. So how can you write a clear, confident, well-supported essay about poetry? This handout offers answers to some common questions about writing about poetry.

What's the Point?

In order to write effectively about poetry, one needs a clear idea of what the point of writing about poetry is. When you are assigned an analytical essay about a poem in an English class, the goal of the assignment is usually to argue a specific thesis about the poem, using your analysis of specific elements in the poem and how those elements relate to each other to support your thesis.

So why would your teacher give you such an assignment? What are the benefits of learning to write analytic essays about poetry? Several important reasons suggest themselves:

To help you learn to make a text-based argument. That is, to help you to defend ideas based on a text that is available to you and other readers. This sharpens your reasoning skills by forcing you to formulate an interpretation of something someone else has written and to support that interpretation by providing logically valid reasons why someone else who has read the poem should agree with your argument. This isn't a skill that is just important in academics, by the way. Lawyers, politicians, and journalists often find that they need to make use of similar skills.

To help you to understand what you are reading more fully. Nothing causes a person to make an extra effort to understand difficult material like the task of writing about it. Also, writing has a way of helping you to see things that you may have otherwise missed simply by causing you to think about how to frame your own analysis.

To help you enjoy poetry more! This may sound unlikely, but one of the real pleasures of poetry is the opportunity to wrestle with the text and co-create meaning with the author. When you put together a well-constructed analysis of the poem, you are not only showing that you understand what is there, you are also contributing to an ongoing conversation about the poem. If your reading is convincing enough, everyone who has read your essay will get a little more out of the poem because of your analysis.

What Should I Know About Writing about Poetry?

Most importantly, you should realize that a paper that you write about a poem or poems is an argument. Make sure that you have something specific that you want to say about the poem that you are discussing. This specific argument that you want to make about the poem will be your thesis. You will support this thesis by drawing examples and evidence from the poem itself. In order to make a credible argument about the poem, you will want to analyse how the poem works—what genre the poem fits into, what its themes are, and what poetic techniques and figures of speech are used.

What Can I Write About?

Theme: One place to start when writing about poetry is to look at any significant themes that emerge in the poetry. Does the poetry deal with themes related to love, death, war, or peace? What other themes show up in the poem? Are there particular historical events that are mentioned in the poem? What are the most important concepts that are addressed in the poem?

Genre: What kind of poem are you looking at? Is it an epic (a long poem on a heroic subject)? Is it a sonnet (a brief poem, usually consisting of fourteen lines)? Is it an ode? A satire? An elegy? A lyric? Does it fit into a specific literary movement such as Modernism, Romanticism, Neoclassicism, or Renaissance poetry? This is another place where you may need to do some research in an introductory poetry text or encyclopaedia to find out what distinguishes specific genres and movements.

Versification: Look closely at the poem's rhyme and meter. Is there an identifiable rhyme scheme? Is there a set number of syllables in each line? The most common meter for poetry in English is iambic pentameter, which has five feet of two syllables each (thus the name "pentameter") in each of which the strongly stressed syllable follows the unstressed syllable. You can learn more about rhyme and meter by consulting our handout on sound and meter in poetry or the introduction to a standard textbook for poetry such as the Norton Anthology of Poetry. Also relevant to this category of concerns are techniques such as caesura (a pause in the middle of a line) and enjambment (continuing a grammatical sentence or clause from one line to the next). Is there anything that you can tell about the poem from the choices that the author has made in this area? For more information about important literary terms, see our handout on the subject.

Figures of speech: Are there literary devices being used that affect how you read the poem? Here are some examples of commonly discussed figures of speech:

metaphor: comparison between two unlike things

simile: comparison between two unlike things using "like" or "as"

metonymy: one thing stands for something else that is closely related to it (For example, using the phrase "the crown" to refer to the king would be an example of metonymy.)

synecdoche: a part stands in for a whole (For example, in the phrase "all hands on deck," "hands" stands in for the people in the ship's crew.)

personification: a non-human thing is endowed with human characteristics

litotes: a double negative is used for poetic effect (example: not unlike, not displeased)

irony: a difference between the surface meaning of the words and the implications that may be drawn from them

Cultural Context: How does the poem you are looking at relate to the historical context in which it was written? For example, what's the cultural significance of Walt Whitman's famous elegy for Lincoln "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed" in light of post-Civil War cultural trends in the U.S.A? How does John Donne's devotional poetry relate to the contentious religious climate in seventeenth-century England? These questions may take you out of the literature section of your library altogether and involve finding out about philosophy, history, religion, economics, music, or the visual arts.

What Style Should I Use?

It is useful to follow some standard conventions when writing about poetry. First, when you analyse a poem, it is best to use present tense rather than past tense for your verbs. Second, you will want to make use of numerous quotations from the poem and explain their meaning and their significance to your argument. After all, if you do not quote the poem itself when you are making an argument about it, you damage your credibility. If your teacher asks for outside criticism of the poem as well, you should also cite points made by other critics that are relevant to your argument. A third point to remember is that there are various citation formats for citing both the material you get from the poems themselves and the information you get from other critical sources. The most common citation format for writing about poetry is the Modern Language Association (MLA) format.