

TEN TIPS FOR ANALYZING POETRY

1. Try to figure out the meaning of the poem.

Ask yourself questions like: What happens in the poem? What is the poet trying to say? How forcefully does he/she say it? Which lines bring out the meaning of the poem? Note that the last lines of a poem are usually important as they either emphasize or change the meaning of the poem.

2. Imagery is a common technique used by poets to get their meaning across.

Ask yourself: Which images have been chosen? Are they all related? Is there one overall image or are several different images used? What feeling is given by which image? Evaluate the poet's images.

3. Look for symbols.

The poet may use images that suggest certain concepts like love, youth, and death. What meaning do these symbols contribute, and how effective are they?

4. Look at the poet's choice of words.

The poet's choice of words is usually very important. Try to determine why the poet used particular words and whether or not these words stand out. Determine how these particular words contribute to the meaning of the poem. Also, look for words that are repeated. What effect does this add to the poem?

5. Determine the voice and tone of voice of the poem.

Does the poet take on another persona? What is the poet's mood (angry, regretful, suicidal, ardent....) What words or images bring out this mood? What is the poet's relationship with the reader? Is the poet trying to persuade, to amuse, or is he/she reflecting on the state of the world?

6. Determine if the poem has a storyline.

Ask yourself: Are there conflicts? Are these conflicts resolved? Are the characters shown fully or in part? What role do they play? Does suspense play a part?

7. Look for a rhyme scheme.

Does the rhyme scheme have any significance? Does the rhyme scheme draw attention to certain words or ideas? Is the poem in free verse (without a rhyming scheme)?

8. Determine the poem's structure.

Is it in regular stanzaic form (two or more equal clusters of lines) or irregular form? If irregular, why? The form of a poem (how it looks on the page) is often contributes to its meaning.

9. Determine the poem's type.

Is the poem a lyric? A sonnet? A narrative? What is the significance of this type of poem? What characteristics of this type of poem are found?

10. The above points are just suggestions!

All of the above points *could* be discussed when analyzing a poem. However, don't just go through these points mechanically. Each poem is unique, so you'll have to decide which points are most important for your poem and then try, when writing your paper, to link together the different points. Although your own impressions about a poem are essential, don't forget that you can ask your teacher for specific details!