**Writing About Poetry** *This page is brought to you by the OWL at Purdue (https://owl.english.purdue.edu/).*

**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.

**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 analyze 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?

**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.)
* **synechdoche:** 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

**Diction/Word Choice:** How does the author’s choice of words help sell the message of the poem? What does the word choice tell you about the author and the time period? How does word choice help set the tone of the poem? When referring to a specific word, put that word in italics or quotes to set it apart in the sentence.

**What style should I use?**It is useful to follow some standard conventions when writing about poetry. First, when you analyze 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. The most common citation format for writing about poetry is the MLA.

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