



**Academic Support Center
Writing Center**

Examining Poetry—Close Reading or Explicating a Poem

In order to gather the full relevance and potential of a piece of literature, it's necessary to push beyond the surface of the text, to question and analyze it, and to allow our own imagination to interact with that of the author and his or her work. Thus, close reading or explication requires closely analyzing the text line by line in chronological order and examining the elements in the poem as a whole to determine the author's intention.

The following are steps to guide you in close reading a poem:

Reading for comprehension:

1. Start by getting a sense of the literal events of the passage.
2. Note the situation and attitude of the narrator or speaker.
3. Note the general *point* of the passage.

At this point, we have accomplished an explication of the basic, *literal* meaning of a literary passage. Now, we have to start asking questions.

Questioning the passage:

1. What is revealed about the narrator in this passage?
2. What is revealed about other characters in this passage?
3. Is there an underlined meaning in the passage?

Analyzing the language:

1. Take note of the author's use of language and figures of speech.
2. Look at how the author uses adjectives and descriptive phrases.
3. Note the types of pronouns and other words that are used, and what they refer to.
4. Identify the central metaphors, symbolism, and/or other literary terms that are used in the passage.

Try to draw connections of this passage to other related passages or literary works.

Below are some of the elements that can be used to explicate a poem:

Speaker: Is the narrator possibly speaking from first-hand experience, personal thoughts, observations, and/or emotions? Is the narrator writing about someone else's?

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? What are the most important concepts expressed in the poem? (Source: OWL at Purdue)

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, satire, an elegy, or even a lyrical work of poetry? Does it fit into a specific literary movement such as Modernism, Romanticism, Neoclassicism, or Renaissance poetry? To understand these movements, some research may be necessary. (Source: OWL at Purdue)

Tone or Mood: What kind of emotion or tone does the poem seem to project? Is it angry, tumultuous, peaceful, loving, unsettled, etc.? Is the author using irony, satire, etc., to ridicule? "Listen closely to the emotions expressed in the work of poetry. Does the poem inspire emotion as read: joy, sorrow, anger, heartache, loneliness? How a work makes you feel is as important as the structural theme of the work. Always remember that poetry was to be read aloud. To get the best feel for the rhyme as well as the mood, read the work aloud and to oneself as many times as possible. The more one reads a work of poetry the more information they will unpack from it." (Source: OWL at Purdue)

Versification: Look closely at the poem's rhyme and meter. Is there an identifiable rhyme scheme? Are there a set number of syllables in each line? (Source: OWL at Purdue)

Writing Techniques: Do lines end with punctuation (end-stopped), flow without pause (enjambment), pause in the middle of a line (caesura), or use a mixture of both? Why could the author be using such techniques?

Etymology: Word choice and meaning are very important to poetry. What does a specific word mean? Has the word been placed for a desired emotional response? Can that word mean more than one thing? What is the source or etymology of this word? Did this word mean something else at the time it was written? Lines of poetry can be taken apart word by word; at the word level, poetry can express much. (Source: OWL at Purdue) Is the author using a mixture of words of the connotations (feelings or ideas words suggest) and the denotations (literal or primary meanings) of words?

Figures of speech: Are there literary devices used that affect how you read the poem? The OWL at Purdue provides 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 examining relate to the historical context in which the author created it? For example, what is 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 researching the subjects of philosophy, history, religion, economics, music, or the visual arts. (Source: OWL at Purdue)

Imagery: Is the author using adjectives and adverbs to depict literal or figurative imagery? How does this imagery contribute to the mood, if at all?

After close reading/explicating:

Interpret the passage: Now that you've done the work of taking apart the elements of the passage and compared it with other similar passages, you should be ready to offer a **creative interpretation** of it. What do the different elements tell us about the view of the writer? Do you agree or disagree with what the writer is saying? Think about these questions while coming up with a thesis. Then use the elements discussed above to support your thesis.