

How to Write about a Poem

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1. Before you begin, go through the poem systematically, analyzing its argumentative structure, tone, and imagery and looking for striking effects achieved by means of diction, meter, rhyme, alliteration, and so on. (See "Charting a Poem.") Who is the speaker? What situation is established or taken for granted? Is there an implicit narrative? Does the poem's argument have a striking turn? How does it achieve closure? With what final attitude or feeling does it leave the reader?
2. Break the poem down into quotable, separately analyzable segments. If the poem has stanzas of moderate length—up to eight, perhaps ten lines or so—they make a natural unit for quotation. Or you may break them into half-stanzas. It is common practice to quote sonnets quatrain by quatrain, then the couplet. If the poem is too long to be analyzed line by line, you must choose what to include and what to pass over with summary. With a short poem, you may be able to analyze it comprehensively. With a longer poem, you may need to emphasize one or two of the aspects I mentioned in number 1 above in order to make the subject manageable.
3. To begin your essay, you may write a brief introduction or you may dig into the analysis right from the first paragraph. Proceed by quoting and analyzing each segment for its contribution to the structure and meaning of the poem. Then, before going on to the next segment, explain how the most striking effects are achieved or enhanced by the manner of expression. Take it for granted your reader knows that, for instance, the poem is in iambic tetrameter, has an alliteration in the first line, or a slant rhyme at the end of line three, but, if these choices are significant, say what they accomplish in the poem. If necessary, re-quote lines or phrases to make it easy for your reader to follow your observations. (If you are emphasizing one aspect of the poem's meaning or technique, obviously you should focus primarily on effects relevant to that aspect.)
4. Conclude the way you would in any other essay, by reinforcing the significance of your main points or widening the focus of consideration. Writing about poetry, it is important to consider

the overall aesthetic success of the poem (In what does it succeed? In what, if anything, does it fall short?). A good conclusion might touch on what place this poem holds among the author's works (an anomaly? a high point?), among works of its genre, or the poetry of its period.