

Poetry Question Notes



General Strategies for the Poetry Analysis

1. The poet is not the speaker; the poet is not the speaker. The poet uses literary devices and the speaker well, speaks.
2. Write in present tense.
3. One very useful approach is to begin by identifying three key elements of the poem: the speaker, her subject, and the dramatic situation.
4. Make sure your topic sentences are explicit about your structural choices. Dunn opens the poem (lines 1-14)... or Dunn's first two stanzas...
5. Almost every poem has a series of natural divisions. Look for transitions in theme, subject matter, tone, or chronology and use those for dividing the essay.
6. You are proving a thesis in a poetry explication. Don't forget to write your paper with the central thesis in mind.
7. As you read, look for unusual, distinct or clever phrasing of words or phrases. If a poet violates an expectation of language or presents an idea in an entirely new way, there is likely a reason that you can explore.
8. Look for powerful phrases that have an impact, because of meaning or sound quality. Look for metaphor, symbolism, sound devices.
9. Identify "cool" ideas that you can write about. In other words, if a poem references a historical event or philosophical ideal that you are familiar with, you certainly want to write about it.
10. Don't fixate on the things that you don't know; focus on the things that you do. In a poetry explication where you are only given ten minutes to read a poem, there is no way that you can expect to get everything. Emphasize your strengths and focus on those.
11. **Weave in nuggets** from the text of the poem(s). Don't use full quotations, but brief critical nuggets from the text.
12. **Weave** in the use of poetic devices; don't force them in. You want to demonstrate knowledge of the devices and their application, but they are tools, not the focal point of your writing.
13. Don't write excessively about sound devices, meter, and rhythm unless you a) have little else to write about or b) are very good at it. They can be really powerful tools for analysis, but are often over-used and trite observations.
14. Make sure that you do more than identify particular devices and techniques. Readers of the essays expect analysis of how the devices function in the piece.

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURES

- Natural Divisions of the poem (ideas, stanzas, themes)
- Sub-theses
- Literary Devices (only if you must)

INTRODUCTION "FORMULA"

Template

[short phrase from the poem/passage from the prose]:
[Author's] [good strong adjective], [good strong adjective] language forces the reader to examine an interesting...

Example

Black, slack, earthsoup: poet Mary Oliver's rich, evocative language forces the reader to examine the question of the nature of life, using the most unlikely symbol, a swamp.

