

READING BETWEEN THE RHYME: WRITING ABOUT POETRY

No. 22 in the Writing Center Handout Series

Writing about poetry is not very different from writing about other topics. There are some techniques, however, that can help analyze and write about poetry. Remember that all standard rules of writing apply for essays on poetry (even though the poets might not have adhered to those rules!).

Ways to Write About Poetry

Explication unfolds the meaning of a poem; it involves analyzing the formal techniques the poet uses to present an interpretation of the poem.

Analysis deals with a certain part of a poem and relates it to the work as a whole. For example, you can analyze the death imagery of a poem.

Comparison & Contrast involves looking at two different poems that are usually connected in some way—they may share a common theme or technical device.

Some tips for writing about poetry:

Pay attention to language

Look up any words you may not understand. Be sure you grasp the meaning of the words and how they are being used. Sometimes looking up words you think you know can reveal definitions that add meaning to the poem.

Relate style and meaning

Be aware of style, or poetic techniques. Don't ignore the technical aspects of a poem when you focus on the meaning of the poem. At the same time, don't block out your interpretation of the poem when discussing the elements of style. Try to relate the meaning (*what* the poem is saying) to the poetic techniques (*how* the poem says it).

EXAMPLE:

Eliot's replacement of the formal poetic restrictions of rhyme scheme and meter, along with his unconventional use of punctuation, express the fragmentation of values and the breakdown of coherent society that he observed during the aftermath of WWII.

Move from literal to interpretive

A poem often works on two levels – the literal (what it is saying) and the thematic (what it suggests). Begin with the literal level of the poem, and then move into making an interpretation by providing evidence that supports interpretive points. If you interpret a line of a poem, for example, make sure you demonstrate *how* you reached that particular conclusion. Make sure to take your reader with you whenever you make an interpretation. Show evidence that proves your interpretation but also relates it to the literal meaning of the poem. Don't assume what you're out to prove.

EXAMPLE:

The theme of "To His Coy Mistress" is deeper than mere sentimentality and romanticism; Marvell's wit and his use of strong, sometimes astonishing images poignantly illustrate man's morality and the inexorable press of time.

Quote correctly

As with other literature, it is very important to include quotations from the poem as evidence to support your points. When quoting several lines of poetry, separate the line breaks with a slash (/). If you're quoting more than four lines, start the quote on a new line and indent it (see St. Martin's Handbook)

For more information on this topic, see:

The New St. Martin's Handbook, pages 384-385, 407, 632-635

To Read a Poem by Donald Hall

The Discovery of Poetry by Frances Mayes

Thinking and Writing About Literature by Michael Meyer



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