

How to do a Poetry Analysis

This activity forms the basis for practically every assignment and every poem in this unit. It's what helps students generate their own ideas. Here's how the progression usually works.

Using the provided graphic organizers becomes much more effective once students understand the basics of annotating and analyzing a poem.

Poem #1

1. Go over the basics of annotating a poem.
2. Instruct students to annotate the poem on their own paper as you wander about the room.
3. Keep mental notes on which students have intelligent answers.
4. Feel free to mark a few things on the poem on the board.
5. Start handing out dry erase markers, preferably to those students you noticed had intelligent answers.
6. Instruct students to write their annotation on the board.
7. Engage in a class discussion. Your role as instructor is to guide them to come up with their own theme.
8. Use the included graphic organizers. The theme graphic organizer will work with just about any poem. Other graphic organizers work well with the included poems in this unit.

Note: The first poem will take about the entire class period. Pace yourself accordingly. This lesson seems a little intimidating the first time. Trust me: a little encouragement and guidance will produce some of the best class discussions and intelligent thought of the school year.

Poem #2

Do the same thing as poem #1. The process will be a little smoother.

Poem #3

Do the same as poem #1, except this time add a writing component—a 1-paragraph poetry analysis. I've thrown in a rubric for this. Make the first one practice.

Poems #4-?

Students should be self-sufficient at this point. Options include small group analysis and annotating multiple poems and analyzing them together.

The Basics of Annotating a Poem

1. **Print out the poem.** Most poems can be found online. If you have a book you're allowed to write in, then write in it.
2. **Annotate the poem** using the following steps:
 - identify the rhyme scheme
 - identify the meter and any examples of straying from the meter
 - if the poem is difficult, summarize each stanza
 - circle important words, ambiguous words, and words you need to look up
 - circle examples of figurative language
 - write questions
 - write down insights.
3. **Draw conclusions** based on the information you gathered while annotating.
4. **Write the poem analysis.** The following steps are for how to write a paragraph analysis:
 - a. The topic sentence should state the poem's theme (one that may not be so obvious).
 - b. The examples, facts, citations from the poem you're analyzing should support your topic sentence.
 - c. Provide analysis explaining how your facts support your topic sentence.
5. **Impress your friends and neighbors** with a brilliant poem analysis.

Poetry Analysis Paragraph

Student Name: _____

CATEGORY	4	3	2	1
Topic Sentence	The topic sentence contains the name of the poem and the author of the poem in a smooth flowing manner and clearly states the theme of the poem.	The topic sentence contains the name of the poem the author of the poem and clearly states the theme of the poem.	The topic sentence clearly states the theme of the poem.	The topic sentence states the theme of the poem.
Examples from the Poem	All supportive facts are reported accurately.	Almost all supportive facts are reported accurately.	Most supportive facts are reported accurately.	NO facts are reported OR most are inaccurately reported.
Analysis	Relevant, telling, quality analysis give the reader important insights that goes beyond the obvious or predictable.	Analysis and information are relevant, but not all examples are sufficiently analyzed.		Analysis is unclear or not related to the topic. Analysis is shallow and/or obvious.
Grammar & Spelling (Conventions)	Writer makes no errors in grammar or spelling that distract the reader from the content.	Writer makes 1-2 errors in grammar or spelling that distract the reader from the content.		Writer makes more than 2 errors in grammar or spelling that distract the reader from the content.
Flow & Rhythm (Sentence Fluency)	All sentences sound natural and are easy-on-the-ear when read aloud. Each sentence is clear.	Almost all sentences sound natural and are easy-on-the-ear when read aloud, but 1 or 2 are stiff and awkward or difficult to understand.	Most sentences sound natural and are easy-on-the-ear when read aloud, but several are stiff and awkward or are difficult to understand.	The sentences are difficult to read aloud because they sound awkward, are distractingly repetitive, or difficult to understand.
Voice	The writer seems to be writing from knowledge or experience. The author has taken the ideas and made them "his or her own."	The writer seems to be drawing on knowledge or experience, but there is some lack of ownership of the topic.	The writer relates some of his own knowledge or experience, but it adds nothing to the discussion of the topic.	The writer has not tried to transform the information in a personal way. The ideas and the way they are expressed seem to belong to someone else.

Walt Whitman pays tribute to Abraham Lincoln in "O Captain! My Captain!" The poem takes the form of an ode, characterized by sustained noble sentiment and appropriate dignity of style, and as with most odes begins with an apostrophe. The fallen captain, to whom the speaker alludes is Abraham Lincoln. The poem is an extended metaphor: (1) Lincoln is the captain who has "fallen cold and dead," having been assassinated shortly after the Civil War had ended; (2) the "fearful trip" is the Civil War; (3) "the prize we sought" is the preservation of the Union, something which both Whitman and Lincoln felt was the supreme reason for fighting the war; (4) "the ship" is the United States.

The poet's grief is accentuated by the contrasting celebrations of victory and lamentations of death. The poet recognizes the importance of victory, calling out "Exult O shores, and ring O bells!" (23), but his "mournful tread" prevents him from truly taking part in the festivities. The image of the dead captain, "O heart! heart! heart! / O bleeding drops of red" (5-6), haunts the poem and the reader is constantly reminded that he has "fallen cold and dead."

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