

HANDY-DANDY GUIDE TO ANALYZING POETRY

1. Look at the **title** of the poem. (If it's a good poem, the title will be important.) Why do you think the poet used the title.
2. Try to determine the **subject** or **topic** of the poem. In a word or phrase, what is the poem "about" – love? death? disappointment?
3. Look at the **images** in the poem—the descriptions and suggestions of what you can see, hear, smell, taste, and feel. Try to "cluster" the images. For instance, are there lots of round things? Old things? Natural things? Living things? Dead things? What do the images suggest to you?
4. Look at the **form** the poem takes on the page. Are the **stanzas** uniform or are they different from one another? Is there a lot of "white space," or are the stanzas long and dense? What does the form suggest about the poem?
5. Look at the **lines**. Are they long or short? Are they **end-stopped** (ending with a period or comma), or **enjambéd** (run onto the next line)? What do the lines suggest about the poem?
6. Look at the **last word in each line**. In a good poem, you'll get a sense of what the poem is "about" just by reading the last word of every line. Are the last words short and strong, or long and soft? Do the last words **rhyme**? If so, look at the relationship between the rhymed words. Are they opposites? Do they suggest an idea?
7. Listen to the **sounds** in the poem. Read it aloud. Are there a lot of hard sounds, like "ck" and "tr," etc? Are there a lot of soft sounds, like "p," and "f"? Are there a lot of long vowels, like "ee" and "oo"? What mood or emotion do the sounds create?
8. Is there anything unique or surprising about the poem—a list of questions? Unexpected form? etc. (Often the surprises are really, really "key" to understanding the poem.)
9. Look at the **diction**—the word choices. Is the diction casual or formal? Is it slang? Is it romantic and wistful, or harsh and direct? What does the language/word choice suggest about the poem?
10. Look at the **speaker** of the poem. From whose point of view is it presented? Whom does the speaker address/speak to? What is the nature of the relationship between the speaker and those whom the speaker addresses?

OVER ----->

11. What is the **situation** in the poem? For example, a father and son who were estranged addressing one another? A mother talking to her absent daughter? A person in pain reaching out to the audience?

12. Finally, and this is the **ULTIMATE QUESTION**: what is the **tone of voice** in the poem. That is: what is the poet's attitude, or emotion. For instance, say you're reading a poem about death. Given your analysis of the poem, what is the speaker's attitude and emotion toward death? Does the speaker seem to welcome death as an escape? Why do you think so? Does the speaker seem bitter towards death? Explain. Does s/he seem paralyzed and numb? Explain.

13. **EXTRA-INSIGHTFUL**: does the poet use the speaker to express his or her own attitude? In other words, are the poet and the speaker pretty much "the same" person? Or, does the poet use the speaker ironically—for example, in a poem about the hurtfulness of hatred, the poet might create an ignorant, hateful speaker who speaks ugly words. The poet would use this speaker "ironically"—the speaker says the opposite of what the poet really feels.