

## Poetry Analysis

*“If I read a book [and] it makes my whole body so cold no fire ever can warm me I know that is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off I know that is poetry.”*

-Emily Dickinson

Consider the following: poetry exists to communicate significant human *experience*. It uses language that communicates more efficiently and more intensely than ordinary language.

Poetry analysis may be new to most new undergraduates. When analyzing a poem, I challenge you to walk through these steps before drafting an essay. An essay on a poem might even address most or all of these categories (if they are useful to your reading/interpretation):

### **The speaker:**

Name the speaker (not necessarily the author). Describe the identity of the speaker. What kind of person is the speaker? In what role does the speaker function? What kind of voice does the speaker have? *This step determines much of the interpretative universe for the items below (often crucial to an interpretation of poetry).*

### **The audience:**

Whom does the speaker address? How do you know the audience? What do you know about the audience?

### **The occasion:**

What is the setting in time? What event is taking place, if any?  
Describing the occasion requires your imagination.  
Describe the situation addressed by the poem.

### **The purpose:**

What human *experience* does the poem allow you to have? How does the poem broaden your *experience* through reading? How does the poem deepen your *experience*? How does the poem allow you to have this experience?

### **Tone:**

Describe the tone (name it). How does the poem create the tone? Does the tone change? Does the tone or a change in tone allow you to discuss the meaning of the poem? Consider the vocabulary list for tone attached below.

### **Sound:**

Consider speaking the poem aloud to yourself or an audience. What sounds do you notice when reading the poem aloud? Poetry is a sensual experience.

### **Imagery:**

What are the prominent images in the poem? How does the poem create these images? What do they mean?

### **Figurative language:**

Does the poem contain meaningful metaphors (words not meant to be taken literally)?  
Does the poem use symbolism (words that have both literal AND figurative meaning)?  
For example, in the sentence, “a raven landed on my doorstep,” the raven literally appears on the doorstep, but it may also suggest a sense of imminent doom.”  
Does the poem contain personification? How? Why? To what effect?  
Does the poem contain allegory or direct allusions to other works, events, or ideas?  
Does the poem contain verbal irony (intended meaning is opposite of literal meaning)?

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### Paraphrase:

Restate the poem in your own words. When analyzing a long poem, consider paraphrasing only 4-5 lines (or a short section) at a time during the various stages of your analysis, so readers do not lose sight of the actual text. A paraphrase should proceed line-by-line through the poem and restate each line without jumping around.

### Pose questions:

What questions does the poem raise? Is there a point (or many points) of uncertainty where meaning is obscure or where multiple interpretations could occur? Focus on these points of indeterminacy and explore how possible readings might fit in with other details.

### Rhythm and meter:

Can you identify changes in meter or rhythm or meter that are significant to the meaning of the poem? Does syntax, diction, or word choice contribute to the rhythm of a poem? Are the lines “end-stopped,” or do they “run-on” (the running-on of a line into another line is called an enjambment)? Do these structures allow you to address meaning?

### Drafting an analysis:

Consider writing a journal entry that highlights your response to the poem. Consider writing an explication of the poem’s meaning. Consider the best way to organize an essay that uses the above items to construct an argumentative and interpretive analysis.

### Describing Tone

This is a list of possible descriptive adjectives that may help name the tone or the voice in a piece of writing. Of course, the list is not comprehensive or restrictive - but it could stir some ideas.

Bitter	Sardonic	Petitioning
Pleading	Bleak	Urgent
Nostalgic	Playful	Admonitory
Dreamy	Severe	Authoritative
Preachy	Pedantic	Mournful
Lonesome	Solemn	Sombre
Regretful	Confident	Discriminating
Fearsome	Dismal	Hostile
Cynical	Derisive	Defiant
Contemplative	Earnest	Reassuring
Disdainful	Sardonic	Melancholic
Plaintive	Vindictive	Angry
Skeptical	Mocking	Imperative
Morose	Biting	Sarcastic
		Scornful
		Satiric
		Apathetic

### Source:

The guidance above was largely influenced by Laurence Perrine’s book on poetry analysis called *Sound and Sense*:

Perrine, Laurence. *Sound and Sense*. San Diego: Harcourt, 1987.