

WRITING ESSAYS ON POETRY

No matter what approach you take in any of the kinds of essays discussed below, always keep in mind: one interpretation or approach to a text doesn't exclude others; two different interpretations or approaches can even be part of a single, coherent essay.

ESSAYS ABOUT SPEAKERS

The speaker in a poem is quite often simultaneously the central character and the central consciousness from whose point of view the poem is written. Some other approaches include:

- More character-focused essays that might:
 - show how a speaker embodies a particular worldview or way of looking at something, perhaps by showing how the speaker's view contrasts with other views articulated directly or indirectly within the poem;
 - show how and why a speaker experiences a conflict between specific ways of looking or being; or
 - show how the speaker's attitude toward, or thoughts about, something or how our vision of the speaker's character changes over the course of a poem; or
- More point-of-view-focused essays that show precisely how the poet's choice of speaker contributes to the poem's overall meaning, perhaps by considering how the poem would change if written in the voice and through the eyes of a different speaker.
- Or, you might consider the relationship between poet and speaker. For instance, how might certain biographical facts about an author affect a reader's interpretation of the theme(s) of a particular poem or about the likeness between speakers of different poems by a single poet.

HELPFUL TIPS

- When writing the latter poet-and-speaker type of essay, keep in mind that biographical information about an author can only supplement, not supplant, evidence from within the poem itself. Information about an author might help draw our attention to particular details within a poem that might then open up an interpretation, but such information cannot in any way substitute for the poem or make the poem be about something it isn't.
- Note, too, that if such an approach seems too biography oriented, you might instead focus on historical contexts, such as issues of race or ethnicity—for example, knowing Jericho Brown is an African American man may make us attend to cultural issues explored in his poetry that are by no means purely "personal" or "autobiographical."
- Also, don't confuse the speaker with the author. For example, the speaker in Margaret Atwood's *The Journals of Susannah Moodie* should not be confused with the author, since Atwood is writing through the first-person perspective of an historical figure; in that case, you might consider the autobiographical aspects or historical contexts of Susannah's life.
- Begin writing about your poem(s) by ignoring any information you have about the authors, essentially drafting the essays you would write in the absence of such information. Then, return to your draft, adding a second section to the essay in which you flesh out other interpretations opened up by biographical or contextual information; assess and expand upon how these interpretations might complement (or contradict) each other.

ESSAYS ABOUT THEME AND TONE

- Analyze the relationship between tone and theme of a given poem, as follows:
 - the ways in which tone is conveyed to express a theme;
 - the ways that tone contributes to the meaning (or theme) of the poem and to the attitude the poem as a whole encourages us to adopt toward a particular subject, character, or situation; or
 - the ways in which shifts in tone over the course of the poem reveal changes in the speaker's attitude toward, or view of, a subject, person, situation, or theme.

HELPFUL TIPS

- Considering how tone contributes to theme tends to help students produce better essays; or, write an essay that analyzes more than one poem, comparing what two poems say or ask about a given topic or theme and what tones they convey.
- Make sure you *analyze* and not simply describe the tone of a poem; you want to avoid characterizing the tone without really saying much about *why* tone matters to an understanding of the poem and its theme. Another way to avoid this problem is to develop a thesis that focuses on the different, even competing, tones that coexist in a single poem (or two contrasting/comparable poems).
- Using words such as *conflict* can help you focus on the idea that something is *at issue* in texts rather than being decided and simple in the way that "theme" can often seem to be. One might, for example, argue that a poem explores the conflict between the speaker's two different views of his father and his childhood, or, that a poem explores the different experiences and tastes of two characters. The task of papers focusing on such conflicts would be to name and fully characterize these two competing views, to explore how and why they are at conflict within the text, and to suggest how, or if, the conflict is eventually resolved. Obviously, *conflict* may mean something different or work differently in poetic texts than it does in fiction or drama, but it's still a helpful and viable way to talk about theme.
- The conflict approach has the added advantage of helping students structure their essays effectively, encouraging them to organize their arguments not according to the structure of the poem itself (thus producing a kind of stanza-by-stanza exposition) but according to the logic of their own ideas about the different views expressed in the poem, the way those views conflict, and the way the poem does or does not resolve the conflict.

ESSAYS ABOUT SITUATION AND SETTING

- Though attention to situation and setting are obviously crucial to effectively reading and writing about poetry, it's both rare and difficult for students to write effective essays that focus solely on the situation and setting of a single poem. In general, essays that compare at least two poems that focus on similar situations and settings are more workable than those focusing on the situation and setting of a single poem. If you want to go this route, you might, for example, choose one of the following:
 - compare the way a time of day, a particular season, or place is described and exploited for poetic effect in two poems; or
 - compare two poems that look at a similar situation from different angles.

HELPFUL TIPS

- These kinds of essays essentially demand that students consider the symbolic resonance of particular situations and settings. For example, to compare the way spring functions in Shakespeare's "Spring" and Hopkins's "Spring and Fall," almost necessarily entails considering both the traditional symbolic meanings of *spring* and the way each poem exploits and/or revises those traditional meanings. In such an essay you would thus be focusing on the literary elements of situating/setting and symbol.
- With this kind of comparative approach, you might focus your analysis and organization of the essay through considering one or more of the following questions:
 - What's similar and different about the way the situation or setting is characterized in each poem?
 - What might the situation or setting symbolize in each poem?
 - What issues does each poet raise through the depiction of the situation or setting?

ESSAYS ABOUT LANGUAGE

- These kinds of essays focus on specific details of word choice in order to deepen or complicate an interpretive understanding of one or multiple poems. There are various approaches you might take when writing about language, such as comparing how a poet uses precise versus ambiguous diction in a single poem, or, comparing one poet's use of specificity/precision relative to another poet's use of ambiguity.

Precision and Ambiguity

- Focus on the function of a single word, phrase, or line in a poem. This approach requires you to focus tightly on the text rather than to wander into generalities, because it ironically tends to encourage you to produce a truly coherent, idea-focused essay that analyzes the poem as a whole rather than a kind of stanza-by-stanza "exposition." The single-word analysis often works best when you focus not on a word that is the explicit focus of a poem but on a word that might at first seem unimportant to the poem.

Imagery & Figures of Speech: Metaphor and Personification/Simile and Analogy

- Focus on a metaphor or simile, analyzing either the way in which this figure of speech changes over the course of a poem or the way in which different figures work together in a poem. In either case, however, you need to make sure you truly analyze the way in which different figures and/or different turns on the same figure contribute to the development (of intensity, complication, conflict and resolution, etc.) that takes place over the course of the poem. Otherwise, your essay might devolve into lists of figures or of versions of a figure that don't really add up to a single, coherent argument about the text as a whole.

Symbol

- A version of the metaphor/simile assignment works well if you want to write about a symbol or symbols in a particular text; in contrast, you might want to write about multiple texts and the way in which different poets handle a particular traditional symbol.

Associative Language/Denotation vs. Connotation

- You might also write about how poets use word families (i.e., sets of words that connote a similar feeling or sensibility). That is, look for word choice patterns that seem to convey the same sense or atmosphere. An interesting technique to help you think further about word "families" is to play word association using a Venn diagram:

- Take two descriptive words, like “calm” and “soft.” Then brainstorm as many words that fit within that family. The more dissimilar the descriptive words are, the more challenging the brainstorming becomes. (And remember that the words you brainstorm do not also have to be descriptive. They can be nouns or verbs, for instance, that *connote* the feelings suggested by the other two words.) So “breeze” might fit in the overlap between “calm” and “soft.”
- Here are other possibilities: “relax”; “pleasant”; “hammock”; “evening”; “moonlight.” Notice that the words themselves are varied, but they all seem to fit in the same basic family. Poets often use word choice to create a certain atmosphere, so they might talk about lying on a hammock in the evening, bathed in moonlight. The poem *suggests* both calmness and softness without ever using those terms directly. (This is the fundamental difference between showing in a poem, which is what good writers do, and telling in a poem, which is what novice writers do.)
- For this approach, you might also consider how *alternate* wording choices—what isn’t actually in the poem but could have been—might produce a very different feel. For example, why might the author have chosen strong, active verbs, or words associated with death, rather than more common, but less evocative, language? One way to brainstorm this is to choose a line or short section from your selected poem(s) and alter a few words or just one word (the fewer words altered the harder this becomes). The goal of the alteration is to change the “feeling” communicated by the line or phrase. (Keep in mind here the distinction between denotation and connotation; referring to the dictionary or denotative definition of a word can seem quite limited relative to its connotative meanings.) So, in short, ask yourself this question: can you alter the feeling of a poetic line without completely rewriting it? This will help you consider just how significant individual word choice really is. By focusing on how connotation works, you can begin to see how poets use words very intentionally to communicate meaning and to impart atmosphere.

HELPFUL TIP

A common trap that students can fall into when looking closely at details of word choice and order is that they produce writing that is little more than a list of related words. The essay will start to read something like “And then, in the next stanza, the poet uses another dark-sounding word...” This is a good start, working *toward* an essay that looks at word choice, but it needs some larger thesis in place. Generally, it works best for students to first address the overall theme or meaning or tone of a piece, and then to support that general claim with evidence from the text in the form of individual word choices.

ESSAYS ON SOUND (AND SENSE)

- In this approach, you might focus on meter, rhythm, rhyme, or other “sound effects” (e.g. alliteration, assonance, consonance) to analyze how one or more of these contribute to the overall sense of the poem(s).
- Make sure you focus on the *relationship* between sound and sense rather than compiling a list of random observations about a poem’s rhythm, meter, or sound patterns.
- Essays that focus on sound and sense work well in combination with any of the above approaches exploring speaker, tone, or language.

ESSAYS ABOUT INTERNAL STRUCTURE & EXTERNAL FORM

- For this kind of essay, you might analyze on its own either the structure or form in a particular poem; the interrelation of structure and form in a particular poem; or how the internal structure of a particular poem, such as a sonnet, works with and against that imposed or at least suggested by the (sonnet's) traditional form. You can also adapt any of these approaches to a comparative analysis between two different poems.
- You want to avoid simply identifying the structure in terms of some rigid formula or framework. Instead, a more effective analysis of structure is made possible when you focus on identifying and thinking about the significance of a particular poem's key divisions, turning points, or "hot spots"—that is, a significant structural component that relates to some other important element of the text, particularly (but not exclusively) speaker and theme or conflict. A hot spot, in other words, often signals or overlaps with a development in the poem's or speaker's view of the situation or the theme. Only by considering structure in relation to one or both of these other elements can you effectively go beyond mere observations about structure into an effective analysis of the *significance* of structure.
- Another, sometimes related, problem is the tendency to substitute for a real holistic analysis of structure a kind of exposition in which the essay essentially mimics or takes its own structure from the structure of the poem, being organized not in terms of *your* ideas about the poem as a whole but in terms of the order of the poem. For example, "In the first two stanzas of the poem . . . , in the second two stanzas . . . ," and so on. Instead, you should focus not on the parts in and of themselves but on how and why the parts fit and work together. One way to focus on how parts fit together is to generate claims (or actual theses) that characterize the overall movement or development within a poem. For example, "The speaker initially thinks X but by the end of the poem has come to see Y," or "The reader is initially encouraged to think X but is ultimately encouraged to think Y instead."

STRUCTURE-FOCUSED WRITING/DRAFTING EXERCISE

As suggested above, we can often most effectively begin to analyze structure by first identifying the major breaks or shifts or turns in a poem, the points at which the speaker or the poem as a whole seems to shift focus logically or emotionally or temporally. Thus, a good brainstorming exercise is to identify such moments in the poem you're working on and generate claims about the number of "parts" the poem has. Once you've generated such basic claims, however, the real work begins, for you now have to brainstorm about the significance and meaning of the division(s), considering some or all of the following questions:

- How would you characterize each of the parts you've identified? What makes this part distinctive (in terms of tone, imagery, etc.)?
- How and why does each part follow from, and develop on, the last? Even if the poem's structure is descriptive or chronological, there is probably a deeper or more speaker- or theme-related "development" here. How would you characterize it?
- How do these structural breaks work with or against more formal breaks (such as stanza and line divisions, shifts in rhyme scheme, etc.)?
- How and why, exactly, do all the parts comprise a whole, and how would you characterize the overall movement or development of the poem across all its parts?