

how to read a poem in 6 easy steps

1. Decide what the poem's topic is. Some common topics of poems are death, life, love, beauty and the artistic process. Here are some keys to doing this:
 - ◆ Decide if it is **lyrical** or **narrative**. Then either be able to identify the idea or the story which is the focus of the poem.
 - ◆ Pay attention to the title, if there is one. The poet will often title the poem as a clue to his or her intention (or not give a title to avoid doing so).
2. "Translate" the poem.
 - ◆ Define difficult words, with a dictionary and/or by context.
 - ◆ Ignore the lines; write your own sentence for each of the sentences in the poem.
3. Check the **context**. Here are things to look for:
 - ◆ Place it in its **literary period** and identify attitudes of the period toward the topic of the poem. Also, look for major literary themes, influences, and stylistic conventions.
 - ◆ Look at the author. He or she is likely to have major themes and techniques as well. Also, look for biographical connections to the poem.
 - ◆ What **genre** is the poem? Knowing the generic conventions may be helpful.
4. Make a hypothesis of the poem's **theme**. This will be the author's attitude about the topic.
 - ◆ Let's say you decided the poem is about death. By the time you are done with this process, you should be able to say, "*The theme of this poem is that death is _____ because _____.*" Come as close as that as possible, but you should at least be able to identify a positive or negative attitude at this point.
5. **Analyze**. Go look at the elements of the poem and see how they react to your hypothesis. Do they support it? Do they contradict it? Do they provide more detail? Take notes on this: record the meaning of each element you can identify as meaningful. Here are some elements to look at. Refer to your lecture notes for these elements.
 - ◆ **Figurative language & imagery**
 - ◆ **Diction: connotation & tone**
 - ◆ **Rhetorical devices**
 - ◆ **Sound devices: alliteration, etc.**
 - ◆ **Meter, rhythm, rhyme, and structure**
6. **Revise your hypothesis**. Make it as specific as possible. Not all of the elements you had identified will support your thesis implicitly, but none should contradict it, either. Some things to remember as you write your analysis:
 - ◆ Remember that your goal is to explain how the author gets his or her point across, so be sure you can connect your elements to your theme. This is not a scavenger hunt.
 - ◆ Depending on the length of the response and the poem, you may not need to use all of the elements you discovered as support. Choose different elements, not just different examples of the same element, unless you choose to focus on that one element in the thesis statement, or are asked to do so.
 - ◆ While the context may be helpful, the response to the poem should probably not include that information, unless asked for, as an element of the introduction or conclusion, or in passing within the body of the essay. Stay focused on the poem itself.