

# Writing About Poetry

WRITING SERVICES - UNCW - WESTSIDE HALL, 1ST FLOOR - 962-7857

Writing about poetry is similar to writing about other topics, although certain techniques help in this particular area. Even though not all poets have followed the standard rules of writing, they do still apply to you and your essay.

## **Methods:**

**Explication** is a way of interpreting the poem based on its formal elements. Explication searches for the meaning of the poem as a whole.

**Analysis** focuses on a specific aspect of the poem. By delving into certain parts of the poem you may find a key to the overall theme of the poem. For example, a poem that uses a lot of spring imagery may be about life and birth; where as a poem with autumn images may be talking about aging and death.

**Comparison and Contrast** is a way of looking at other poems besides the one you are writing about so that you can explore the ways in which your poet used technical devices and themes versus how other poets have done so. This will increase your understanding of not only the poem you are writing about, but also the general nuances of poetry as well.

## **Tips:**

### **Focus on Language**

Do not skip over any word you are not completely familiar with. Poems are short; therefore every single word is extremely important and has been meticulously chosen for a reason. Looking up words may reveal alternate definitions that help your understanding of the poem.

### **Combine style and meaning**

In poetry, meaning is just as important as method, and vice versa. When writing about one, incorporate, do not ignore the other. When talking about style – the poetic techniques – make sure to say how it creates meaning in the poem. In other words: relate *what* the poem is saying to *how* it says it.

Example:

Sylvia Plath's use of tank imagery and German language in her poem "Daddy" work to illustrate her father as a relentlessly cruel being, much like the Nazi war machine.

### **Start with the literal and then interpret**

Many times, poetry does two things. It says something (literal) and then it suggests something further (interpretive). Always start by describing what the poem is actually doing; from there you may interpret additional meanings. To make sure your reader follows along with you, be sure to demonstrate *how* you made your interpretation. Do this by taking your time and exhibiting your evidence; do not leap to conclusions unless they are clear.

Example:

"The Road Not Taken" by Robert Frost does more than simply describe two foliated paths in a New England forest. The speaker's task concerning which path to choose, and his potential for regret, reflects the human struggle to shape one's life through critical decisions.

### **Quote Correctly**

Supporting your points with quotations from poems is critical to displaying your understanding and strengthening your argument. Line breaks should be separated with a slash (/). If the quoted passage is longer than four lines of poetry, start a new line and indent it (see [St. Martin's Handbook](#)). Include the line numbers at the end of the quote.

For more information on this topic see:

*The New St. Martin's Handbook*, pps. 384-5, 407, 632-5

*To Read a Poem* by Donald Hall

*The Discovery of Poetry* by Frances Mayes

*Thinking and Writing About Literature* by Michael Meyer

Created by:  
Jay Whitaker