

a kwikguide to analysing poetry

1. Plan
2. Write
3. Check

1. Plan

With any poem, it is very important to get a "well-rounded feel" for what the poem is generally all about and what the poet is trying to achieve. Read the poem several times, if possible coming back to it over a period of days. At GCSE level, most poems you will study have several "layers" of meaning so you must consider both the "**surface**" and the "**deeper**" levels within the poem.

The poet's **intention** in writing the poem will have developed out of some **motivation** or **inspiration** (i.e. why the poet felt it important to write about this subject). You must try to develop insights into what this motivation might have been.

This motivation may well relate in some way to the **context** in which the poet lived and wrote - the effect of **time**, **place** and **situation**. Think about the way the poet might have reacted to the ideas and general beliefs that prevailed in the society in which the poet lived.

Make notes of the **ideas**, **feelings** (i.e. **moods** and **tones of voice**) and **images** the poem creates as it progresses and its meanings develop. Especially notice how these ideas and images are sequenced and are built up - this forms the **structure** of the poem. Look at each image or idea and work out **how** it was created (i.e. the **methods** or **techniques** the poet has used for the reader to respond to); ask yourself **why** such methods and structures might have been chosen.

You should also consider if particular fashions in writing (called **literary traditions**) are obvious within the poem. These may have influenced the **form** or **style** (see below) the poet chose for the poem in a way that is important to its overall effect or meaning (hint: this may be difficult - often such things may only be discernible to a more experienced reader of poetry).

As complex as many poems may seem to be, a poet's raw materials are simple enough: nothing more than words. And - believe it or not - words have just **two** main qualities that poets can put to use: **form** and **content**.

FORM and CONTENT

This is a useful way of considering the effects that are possible using words. You will read below what each term means, but you should realise that - in reality - the two are intimately combined and cannot be truly separated. However, they are a helpful way of looking at the effect words can be used to create meaning.

What is FORM?

Form is a technical word used to describe what something looks or sounds like. This could be the way a poet uses lines or stanzas (i.e. verses) to add to the meaning or impact of the poem in some way. Form does not change the meaning of a word but it can add something useful to the meaning or visual impact of the poem. Form is to do with the SHAPES and SOUNDS of words and poets are very good at using PATTERNS OF SHAPE AND SOUND to help them make more meaningful poems.

Poets use the form when they use different lengths of line, stanzas and poems - also when they end a line in the middle of a sentence; they also use form when they use the patterns of sound words make, such as **rhythm** (i.e. by repeating a sequence of stresses), **rhyme** (i.e. by repeating a sequence of final sounds), **alliteration** (i.e. by repeating a sequence of initial consonants), **assonance** (by repeating a sequence of inner vowel sounds) and **onomatopoeia** (by using a word that sound like what it means).

Here are some more examples of the way a poet can use the form of words:

- sentence style and length: extra short ("minor") sentences can stand out and seem more like real speech patterns;
- line endings;
- using a traditional, rather formal sounding rhythm such as "iambic pentameter";
- creating a natural pause between words (called a caesura);
- running a sentence on beyond its line or stanza (called enjambment);
- using a traditional form such as a sonnet.
- using formal looking arrangements of stanzas or verses.

What is CONTENT?

The content of a word, phrase or sentence is the meaning it contains. Poets choose their words very precisely and structure them with care to increase their effect and meaning to suit their purpose best.

Remember that some words and phrases can have more than a surface meaning. All words have a basic meaning (which is known as the word's **denotation**; what a word **denotes** can be found in a dictionary). But some words, especially when used in particular contexts or ways, have extra "layers of meaning". These "associated meanings" are called the **connotation** of the word, i.e. what it **connotes** or suggests). Imagine the meaning of the word "rose" to a gardener (which would be its **denotation**) and the meaning to a lover (which would be its **connotation**).

Connotation is the lifeblood of poetry. Poets use connotation when they choose words or phrases that "paint pictures" or create a strong image or feeling. The use of metaphor and personification are ideal ways to create strong images. This kind of language is called "figurative language". Another use of connotation is **irony**. This is when the poet says one thing, but the reader detects that what he or she means is something rather different (sarcasm is a rather offensive or coarse kind of irony intended to hurt someone's feelings). When a poet uses connotation, the reader becomes naturally more involved with the words of the poem because their mind is caused to do a little extra "work" in finding the meaning and this deepens the effect the poem creates.

What is STYLE?

Style refers to the way a writer chooses suitable and effective language for a particular purpose and audience. When you discuss "style", you are looking for and commenting on only the particular choices of words and phrases (which must be something to do with the way they LOOK, SOUND or MEAN) that the poet seems to have made to add to the overall effect or meaning of the poem.

TIP

Imagining yourself in the poet's place, time and situation can help you to develop the insights needed to provide answers to the all-important questions: **why** (reasons and intentions) and **how** (reasons and methods).

2. Write

- a. Read the question with great care and make sure you highlight its key parts or bullet points as these **must** be covered in your answer.
- b. Begin to tackle the question immediately, **avoiding waffle and wasted words**: simply state which poems you are writing about and how they will help you answer the question; next, briefly summarise what each poem is about generally (its **theme**) and specifically (its **content**); end the first paragraph by briefly suggesting what each poet's overall message for their poems is and why you feel the poets were motivated to write about these subjects in this way.
- c. If you intend writing a thesis essay, now is the time to state your thesis.
- d. Spend the remainder of your essay exploring the poet's methods (see above) in a way that allows a full answer to the question to develop. If your essay is a thesis essay, the remainder of the essay should be used to support your thesis by providing analysis, evidence and insight from within the poems.

e. Conclude by restating the main point of the essay and by summarising your major points (but keep this short and avoid repeating them in exactly the same way). Finish with a brief statement of your personal interest in the poets and their poems.

f. You will probably be asked to compare two or more poems in your GCSE examination. Remember that when you compare and contrast poems, it is best to write about similar or contrasting ideas or methods side by side as you progress (i.e. you use each paragraph to cover a similar aspect or part of each poem). This can be difficult, however; an alternative approach is to write about the first poem in full, then move on to the second. As you write about the second, you can then compare and contrast it to the first and so on. If even this proves difficult, you can write about each poem and in your final paragraphs compare and contrast them - **never fail to compare and contrast when you are asked to write about more than one poem.**

3. Check

Read each sentence after you have written it

Write using a variety of sentence types and styles but remember especially that shorter sentences are often more interesting because they are crisper and clearer. An occasional ultra-short sentence can add real impact to writing. **Never fail** to re-read your sentences after writing them to check that they are **complete** in their sense, **accurate** in their grammar and spelling and follow on logically and smoothly from the last.

Check every paragraph.

A paragraph is a written discussion that covers a single topic - one topic among the many that are needed to cover the subject matter of the whole piece of writing. One of the sentences in the paragraph, and quite often the first one, is called the "topic sentence". This is the sentence that introduces, or tells "in a nut shell", what the paragraph is going to be about. The remaining sentences do no more than expand and explore the ideas raised by the topic sentence in more depth. No points that are unrelated to the main topic should be covered in the same paragraph.

Each paragraph should flow smoothly from its predecessor. This is achieved by the use of a subtle "hook sentence" at the end of the paragraph; this is a sentence that "hooks" into the new topic of the next paragraph. **To correct a missed paragraph simply put this mark where you want in to be: // then, in your margin write: // = new paragraph. The examiner will not mark you down for this so long as you have not forgotten all of your paragraphs.**

Examine each comma

Over, or misuse, of commas is a common and important error that can lose many marks. Many of you will occasionally use a comma instead of a full stop to end some of your sentences. You are failing to recognise where the end of the sentence should have been. Too much of this leads to a dreary and difficult-to-read style because it destroys the clarity and crispness that is a necessary part of all good writing.

A sentence is a group of words that is about one main idea or "thought". It should seem "complete" to its reader. Sentences that drift into several ideas, or which seem incomplete, are less clear and interesting to read. Ending a sentence with a comma (or even nothing but a space) instead of a full stop will allow it to "run on" or drift in this way. Try to use commas only to mark off **parts** of a sentence so that the sentence reads more smoothly or makes clearer sense.

Look at every apostrophe.

Look at the words you have used that end in "s". Are they all plurals? If so the chances are they do *not* need an apostrophe. Apostrophes are used to show when a letter has been missed out (as in: *shouldn't*) and when two nouns belong to each other (as in: *the school's entrance*). Also... make sure that when you write, "it's" you do mean, "it is" (as in *it's cold*) not "belonging to it" (i.e. as in: *its surface*).