

Poetry: How to read and annotate it

Poetry often employs several elements at once, so you will want to read it more than once to digest the context and elements at work. Navigating through a lengthy poem can be challenging but you can start by visually assessing (or paying attention to how the poem looks) the poem. Recall that in poetry, the main character is the speaker.

- What does the poem look like? Does it have several stanzas or just one continuous section?
- Are there multiple ideas present within the poem? Do they appear in a pattern?
- Pay close attention to shifts in ideas, rhyme, and tone.
- How long are lines? Does it change throughout the poem?

Now look at the title of the poem. What is the title of the poem? What does it foreshadow for you as a reader?

Does it reference a piece of work or social element familiar to you?

Read the poem to yourself once without annotating to get a feel for the poem's ideas.

Is there one broad theme in the poem? Is there a story occurring within the poem?

What senses are used? (Sight, smell, touch, sound, taste)

Now read it a second time aloud. How do the words sound? Are certain words stressed and others not?

After reading the poem a couple times, think back to the title, does the content of the poem relate to the title? Is there a play on words?

Where is the poem's setting? What images come to mind? Are there any words or phrases unfamiliar to you?

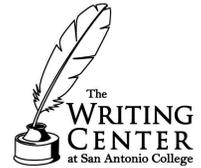
Examine the word choice of the speaker. How does this effect your interpretation?

Are there any sudden breaks or enjambments used?

Now you can start annotating.

With a writing utensil, take note of anything that catches your attention. Some of the questions mentioned before will help you in this process.

You want to note why an area in the poem is marked. This really is for your benefit, so you can abbreviate as long as you can go back later on and identify this annotation's purpose. You can write down any questions that come to mind as you are reading.



Think about the background of the poet. What social or economic events were present?

Break down the poem and re write it in your own words

Compare your paraphrased version of the poem to the original.

For very difficult poem, pick 3 elements in the poem.

What do they add to the poem?

How do they function? Do they complement or contrast one another?

Why would the poet use these elements?

Now pick 3 elements you do not like or cause difficulty.

How do they function? Do they work together with the previous 3 elements or separately?

What is their relationship to the poem as a whole?