

Approaching a Poem: As you work toward understanding a poem, try the following:

1. Ask yourself: What is the **situation**? (That is, what's going on here?) Who is the **speaker**? Consider age, sex, relation to people or events mentioned, feelings expressed, anything else that helps identify the person saying these words.
2. **Paraphrase**, that is, briefly restate in your own words what the poem says. Use the same point of view (e.g., first person) used in the poem. For a short poem, can you paraphrase what the whole poem says? For a long poem, paraphrase each section. Paraphrase will sometimes be impossible!
3. Note **images** (the representation in language of sensory experience. Often visual, but not always.) What images do you notice? How does each image function in the poem?
4. Note **repetitions**—repeated words, phrases, sounds, images...anything. These may include variations on a single motif. Example: buds, leaves, tender shoots: all these green growing things contribute to a motif of natural growth.
5. Note **contrasts**. Are there images of strong lasting things and images of decay and destruction? Does the voice sound first smug and then pleading?
6. Note **figures of speech**, also called figurative language. Examples: metaphors (She's an angel); similes (she's like an angel); personification (the cruel sea); apostrophe (Defined as an address to an absent figure or to a thing as if it were present and could hear. Ex: "O rose, thou art sick!")
7. Note **figures of sound** (or special sound effects): alliteration (repetition of consonant sounds, especially at the beginning of words. Example: false phantom friend); assonance (repetition or similar vowel sounds in stressed syllables. Example: light/bride); consonance (this also means the repetition of consonants. Ex: fail/peel); onomatopoeia (use of words that imitate sounds. Example: hiss, buzz).
8. Note **diction**. That's the kind of language used. Look at the connotations of words (smell, aroma, perfume, stench). Notice the verbs. Look at the realms from which words are taken—law, astronomy, botany....Can you characterize the diction as simple, conversational, complex, technical, archaic, childlike, flowery....
9. Note **tone**. Tone expresses an attitude toward the subject. Examples: angry, affectionate, thoughtful, frantic, ironic, playful...
10. Note **allusions**. Does the poem refer to contemporary, historical, literary, or mythological characters, places, or situations? Look them up if you don't recognize them.
11. Note **form**: number of lines, number of stanzas, rhyme, meter, line length, stanza length
12. **Think about how each element contributes to the total effect and experience of the poem.** Good questions to ask: how does this image (metaphor, allusion, etc.) add to the feeling or atmosphere of the poem? Can I connect it with anything else I've noticed in the poem?