

Writing a Poetry Commentary

Writing a poetry commentary can be a very daunting task. There are a variety of different ways that the response to the poem can be structured but essentially you must cover 3 key areas

- **Interpretation**
- **Language**
- **Structure**

It is always more effective if you start with the whole poem's ideas in general and then become more specific as the commentary progresses.

With every poem you look at, the first question is 'What is it about?'

Once this is established, you can start to consider other questions:

- What kind of feelings does the poem create?
- What kinds of patterns in the poem create those feelings?
- Who is the speaker and who are the audience?
- Whose point of view is being expressed?

By this stage, you will be looking for how the poet has made you feel the way you do.

- What do the words mean and why did the poet choose those words in particular?
- What kinds of sound patterns are there?
- What pictures/images are created?

The first question is essential; the other questions attempt to explain the methods used by the poet to create meaning, but if you don't begin by explaining what the poem is about, there is no meaning.

Of course, the meaning may not be straightforward. Sometimes a mood is created without any clear sense of the poem having a story or a plot. It is perfectly acceptable to recognise this aspect of poetry. Avoid a narrow reading in which the poem can only be about one thing. It is a healthy critical approach to acknowledge that the language of the poem may lend itself to alternative readings. That doesn't mean that anything goes. Your explanation of meaning will be supported with evidence from the poem, and will not be a wild assertion based on something you might have read about the poet's life.

Structuring the commentary

Paragraph One (Interpretation)

The first paragraph should present the large issues; it should inform the reader what the poem is about and the essential ideas and message the poem conveys. You are not required to write a formal introductory paragraph; the writer should simply start commenting from the start (your interpretation)

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The next paragraphs (language and structure)

These paragraphs develop the general ideas in more detail and look at how the language and structure of the poem is used to portray the poem's ideas/ message, etc.

This is where you discuss the literary terms in detail and constantly use P.E.E!

Conclusion

Poetry commentaries do not need a formal conclusion. There are a variety of options available. If you have approached the poem chronologically, then finish by discussing the last stanza, if you have taken a thematic approach, then end with your final idea.

Tips for success

- Set out clearly your interpretation of the text and then discussion of language and structure will naturally follow.
- Refer to the speaking voice in the poem as "the speaker" or "the persona." For example, do not write, "In this poem, Wordsworth says that London is beautiful in the morning." However, you can write, "In this poem, Wordsworth presents a speaker who..." We cannot absolutely identify Wordsworth with the speaker of the poem, so it is more accurate to talk about "the speaker" or "the persona".

- Use the present tense when writing the commentary. The poem, as a work of literature, continues to exist!
- To avoid unnecessary repetition of vocabulary, the following list suggests some verbs you can use when writing the commentary:

dramatizes	asserts	contrasts	addresses
presents	posits	juxtaposes	emphasizes
illustrates	enacts	suggests	stresses
characterizes	connects	implies	accentuates
underlines	portrays	shows	enables

Use modal verbs (they offer options for possibility and suggestion – rather than definitive decision). It is perfectly acceptable to offer more than one perspective or interpretation, which demonstrates a high level of understanding.

Common Modal Verbs

Can	Ought to
Could	Shall
May	Should
Might	Will
Must	Would

- Support all your points with evidence from the text
- Never simply state that something in the poem exists. You need to explain the reason for its inclusion and the effect it has in the poem/ on the audience. This involves an analysis of the language.
- Write in clear paragraphs that are linked together with transitional phrases and use a variety of sentence structures. It is especially important vary the start of your sentences.
- Discourse markers are a helpful tool to aid the development of diversity and variety in your writing. Discourse markers are the words and phrases that link ideas. If you integrate them subtly into your writing it becomes more fluent, textured and most importantly more pleasurable to read