



Poetry Explications

A-State Online Writing Center

What are poetry explications?

A poetry explication is an analytical essay that comments on a poem's elements and possible meanings. In other words, writers make connections between the narrative of the poem and the literary choices the poet uses to convey that narrative such as imagery, tone, rhythm and meter, and word choice.

Reading & identifying analysis points

Before writing your essay, it's best to take the time to read the poem to yourself at least twice to gain an understanding of the plot, structure, narrator's point of view (POV), and main ideas. Remember that you need to separate the narrator of the poem from the poet, particularly if you know the poet's identity. Do not conflate the poet's POV and personal life with the narrator's life.

When you begin looking for major ideas and connections between poem elements, consider these questions:

- What are the major themes?
- How is the poem structured and broken up into lines and stanzas?
- Who does the narrator or speaker seem to be addressing?
- What are the major conflicts and plot points?
- What is the overall tone? Are there shifts in tone?
- Is there a location described?
- Are there patterns you can note throughout the poem? Are there patterns in word choice, imagery, structure, syntax, rhyme, rhythm, and other elements?

Determining these answers are helpful when writing your analysis.

General outline

Briefly summarize the poem's narrative in the introduction of your essay for context. Then develop a clear thesis statement that addresses your major analysis points. You should choose two to three areas of focus such as theme, sound, and/or imagery, which you can show through supportive evidence. It's up to you and what you notice when reading.

Introduction example Poem: “Curiosity” by Alastair Reid

“Curiosity” remarks on pursuing a passionate life full of daring, even if it leads to pain for oneself and for others. The author of the poem uses the common phrase “Curiosity killed the cat” to illustrate this point and create a division between the daring “cats” of the world versus the perhaps more stable and more reputable “dogs” (line 26) and “doggy circles” (line 11) who do not question social norms or hunger for more in life. The author is addressing everyone as a crowd that the speaker is a part of by using “us” (line 16, 23). Furthermore, the speaker notes that even if the path taken is “dangerous” (line 6), “unlucky” (line 2), or “irresponsible” (line 27), this will still yield, if the “cats” of the world succeed, an interesting tale worth sharing and a lesson worth learning in order to say one has actually lived a full life.

Throughout the body of the essay, address each analysis point as you would in any analytical essay. You can devote each section to a specific element of focus. Furthermore, write definitive statements from a third-person POV. Don’t reference your opinions from a first-person POV with “I” statements such as “I think” or “I feel.” You also don’t want to seem arrogant with statements like “The author clearly indicates” or “It is obvious that the author…” when poems can have multiple interpretations.

For instance, you can provide an assertion like, “The speaker has renounced love as it is sick and for the sick; he is healthy for positioning himself against the current.” This statement is declarative without referencing your personal opinion explicitly or seeming too authoritative regarding the content matter.

When you conclude your essay, briefly summarize your main points, but leave the reader with a thought-provoking note. On the other hand, you can also conclude your essay by addressing your analysis of the poem’s ending.

Conclusion example Poem: “Curiosity” by Alastair Reid

Overall, “Curiosity” portrays the speaker’s intent to divulge his secret to life, which is instructing others to live adventurously, even if the majority of people believe him and those who follow this path to be foolish and unstable. The speaker acknowledges this path is potentially lonely and littered with hardships and adversaries, but he remarks continually that the only way to live and to love is to be passionate. The true dead are those that cannot understand this mode of pathetic living. The clever use of “cats” versus “dogs” to distinguish these two sets of people provide a relatable, simple visual for readers.

General tips

- Don't simply summarize or paraphrase the poem line by line or stanza by stanza.
- Don't choose an element to write about if you don't fully comprehend it.
- Use present tense when making references such as "The narrator speaks to..."
- It's better to underwrite and be concise than to overwrite and become unclear.
- Don't excessively quote from the poem, but do use examples to support your main points, as when writing any analysis essay. When you do quote from the poem, cite lines in this format: (lines x-x) or (x). "X" in this example refers to line number.
- Make sure to proofread before you turn in the assignment.

Sample poetry explications

1. http://www.clt.astate.edu/wnarey/Shakespeare%20files/sample_poetry_explication.htm
2. <https://writingcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/poetry-explications/>

Sources & more resources

- <https://www.utoledo.edu/al/english/programs/ma-literature/how-to-explicate.html>
- <https://twp.duke.edu/sites/twp.duke.edu/files/file-attachments/poetry-explication-1.original.pdf>
- https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/subject_specific_writing/writing_in_literature/literary_terms/index.html
- <http://www.unm.edu/~hookster/Elements%20of%20Poetry.pdf>