# Analyzing Poetry

Because it often condenses meaning and defamiliarizes language, poetry can be a particularly confounding type of literature for those who are unaccustomed to studying it. This handout will help you understand and analyze poetry by learning the elements and poetic tools used to build poems.

**Getting Started**:

1. Give yourself a lot of time to read the poem several times. Try reading it out loud. Also try listening to audio recordings of poems, if available.
2. Have a copy of the poem that you can take notes on. As you read, write down every observation, question, or feeling you get from the poem as you read. Pay special attention to how the poem begins and ends.
3. Use your notes as entry points to begin your investigation and analysis of the poem. Ask yourself what elements in the poem lead you to a particular observation and how the poet achieves this effect.
4. Always keep in mind that the poet uses poetic devices to achieve a particular effect. Breaking up the poem into formal poetic components enhances your understanding of the poem’s overalltheme, tone, and/or general purpose. Build on your observations by considering how each poetic element contributes to meaning. In other words, use form to understand the content and create a thesis about the poem.

Here are some elements and corresponding poetic devices you can focus on. Note: Many of these divisions are arbitrary. Poetic elements frequently overlap, so you may find many in the same poetic line.

**Poetic Situation:** Start by considering speaker, address, and the occasion for expression. Also attend to how the tone of the speaker and the context of the work affects your understanding of the poem.

1. **Speaker:** Readers often assume that poems function as vehicles for the poet’s subjective expression, but many poems are clearly not autobiographical, so it is helpful to ask yourself if the speaker is the poet or a specific persona. Is there specific biographical context that helps you know? How is the speaker involved in the poem? Is the speaker an omniscient narrator or casual observer? Is the speaker from an identifiable time period? How does knowing the historical context of the poem change your understanding of the speaker’s perspective?

1. **Address:** Is someone directly addressed in the poem? Does the poem use the second person pronoun *you*, and if so, do context clues suggest who that person could be? Does the poem use poetic apostrophe?
2. **Tone:** How is the tone of the poem developed through the language used to create imagery? How does diction influence the understanding of the tone? Does the tone change as the poem progresses? Is it consistent at the beginning and ending of the poem?
3. **Tension:** What is the conflict or point of tension in the poem? Is there an external or internal conflict? Physical, spiritual, moral, philosophical, social, etc? How is the tension in that conflict developed with poetic elements? Is it resolved?
4. **Context:** When was the poem written? What were the historical, political, philosophical, and social issues of that time? Does that change your understanding of the poem’s theme? Did poets during that time period follow particular style? Is the poem consistent with the literary conventions of that era? How is it inconsistent?

**Form**: How does the form of the poem correspond to theme and main idea of the work?

1. **Structure:** Does the poem follow a formal poetic structure such as a sonnet, haiku, sestina, ode, blues poem, free verse, blank verse, elegy, etc.? If so, what are the characteristics of that form? How does it deviate from that form?
2. **Stanza and Lines:** Are stanzas and lines consistently the same length? Do they follow a particular pattern? If so, can they be described as couplets, quatrains, sestets, octaves, etc.? Are there any stanzas, lines, or words that diverge from the pattern?
3. **Rhyme Scheme:** Does the poem follow an identifiable rhyme scheme corresponding to a specific poetic form? How would you describe the rhyme that is used (internal or end rhyme, eye rhyme, full rhyme, etc.)? Is it consistent or scattered throughout? If not, where does the rhyme change or appear and why? What is the overall purpose or effect of the rhyme scheme?

**Imagery:** How does theimagery construct the poem’s theme, tone, and purpose?

1. **Visuals and Sensory**: Are the images literal or figurative, abstract or concrete? What sensory experiences are evoked? Are certain images repeated?
2. **Metaphor:** Does the poet use metaphors to make comparisons and express images or abstract ideas? Is there an extended metaphor (conceit)? What is the effect of the metaphors on the tone and theme of the poem?
3. **Symbolism**: Are certain objects or actions developed in the imagery symbolic of an abstract idea? Do these symbols reoccur? Do they help to create an allegory?

**Language:** How does the language and rhythm contribute to the meaning, purpose, or emotional force?

1. **Word Choice:** How would you characterize the poet’s diction? Is it formal, conversational? Does the poet use a specific dialect for the speaker? What are the connotations and denotations of particular words? Are certain words repeated? Are they abstract or concrete, literal or metaphorical?
2. **Rhythm**: Does the poem have an identifiable rhythm arranged in the meter (iambs, spondees, trochees, anapests, dactyls, etc)? How many syllables and feet are in each line? Does it follow a pattern? What syllables are stressed and unstressed? How does alliteration, assonance, or consonance enhance the rhythm and musicality of the poem?

**Syntax**: How do the poet’s syntactical choices change or expand the ideas in the poem?

1. **Enjambment:** How are lines broken? Are they broken before a grammatical or logical completion of a thought to create an enjambment? Or are they end-stopped, breaking after the completion of a sentence or other grammatical pauses? How is punctuation used or not used? What effect does the punctuation create on how the poem is read? How does it affect the speed? How does the use of enjambment create a duality of meaning in the lines?
2. **Verbs:** Are verbs active or passive? What tense does the poet use? Is it consistent? How does tense consistency (inconsistency) affect the passage of time within the poem?
3. **Sentence Structure:** Does the poet use complete sentences, fragments, or a combination of both? Is there a pattern? How does the poet’s sentence choices contribute to the understanding of the poem?

See Poetic Devices UWC handout for definitions of the underlined words.