

WRITING ABOUT POETRY

I. Reading Strategies

- **Get to know the poem.** Critically consider all aspects of the poem: the meanings of individual words, the way the words sound, the amount of syllables per line, how many sentences there are, the shape of the poem on the page, etc. Pay attention to the connection between the form and content: What is significant about the relationship between *what* the speaker says and *how* they say it?
- **Read and reread.** Read the poem several times, *both silently and aloud*. Your ears will notice things your eyes miss. Look up words you don't know, and even words you do that may have multiple meanings! The Oxford English Dictionary is a great resource for this research.
- **Annotate!** Find a note-taking system that you can easily follow, such as Post-Its/flags, highlighting, and/or writing on a separate paper. Use your system to note repetitions of, and patterns in, meter, rhyme, images, phrases, themes, and ideas.

II. Defining Argument

- Your goal is to identify and discuss a relationship between the literary devices of the poem and their thematic implications. Ask yourself: How do the poem's elements work together? Do they complement each other? Do they create tension? Both? What does that show? The thesis develops out of questions like these.

Example Questions: What is Seamus Heaney describing in the poem "Digging"? Why does he use the metaphor of digging? How does it relate to his concept of identity? Why do you think so? What evidence supports that idea?

- To turn your thoughts into a thesis, try breaking them down into: (1) what the literary device is; (2) how it demonstrates your claim; and (3) so what if it does—what does the relationship show about the poem as a whole?

Example Thesis: In "Digging" by Seamus Heaney, the act of digging serves as the poem's central extended metaphor, paralleling the act of writing as a creative excavation of the speaker's familial and cultural history with the manual labor of his forebears, to highlight writing as a process of coming to self-knowledge and the imperative role that memory and inheritance play in the negotiation of his identity.

III. Determining Organization

- **Argument progression:** Choose an organizational structure that fits your argument; for example, don't organize the paper by the poem's progression unless it contributes to your argument.
- **Topic sentences:** These clearly explain the paragraph's argument. Their order should show a logical sequence of thought that reflects the structure of your thesis/argument.
- **Evidence:** Evidence concerns who, what, and when: the facts. Quotes are the main form of evidence to prove your claim. Integrate quotes with context from text.

Example: The speaker illustrates the distinct mastery of his father, a potato farmer, and his grandfather, a peat farmer, through two flashbacks into their respective drill and bog

where they serve as experts “root[ing] tall tops” and “nicking and slicing [peat] neatly” (Heaney 12, 22).

- **Analyzing evidence:** Quotes don’t speak for themselves; use your analysis to argue **how** and **why** your evidence supports your claim and to **explain your claim’s implications** for the text.

Example: The use of flashback underscores the necessary role of memory in the speaker’s ability to understand his sense of self. Moreover, using two flashbacks into memories of his father and grandfather emphasizes the inescapability of his agricultural inheritance. The images presented in the flashbacks employ technical diction, such as “rooting” and “nicking and slicing,” related to the respective crops his ancestors cultivated. The consonance of “tall tops” and internal rhyme of the latter phrase, however, demonstrate the speaker’s poetic expertise and precision in turn. He admits, “I’ve no spade to follow men like them” (27). He highlights the spade as the tool which defines his ancestors’ expertise and shows that the way he digs contrasts theirs. He digs by writing.

- **Tense:** Use **present tense** to refer to events that occur in a poem. Use **past tense** to refer to historical events that happen outside of the text.

Example of present tense: The simile of the pen as the gun shows the pen to be a symbol of power.

Example of past tense: Seamus Heaney published the autobiographical collection *Death of a Naturalist* in 1966.

- IV. Citations:** When citing poetry, refer to *line numbers*. If your poem is not numbered, take the time to do that. When referring to multiple lines, indicate where lines end by separating them with a slash “/”.

Example: He begins with a corporeal image of a hand and a pen: “between my finger and my thumb / The squat pen rests; snug as a gun” (Heaney 1-2).

V. Key Terms in Poetry

- **Speaker vs. Poet:** The speaker of the poem is often not the same as the poet themselves, so when you write, use language like “the speaker states.”
- **Lines, Sentences, and Stanzas:** A **line** is a single row of words, which does not have to be a full sentence. For analysis, it is worth counting the syllables in each line to see if there is a pattern. Lines end in **line breaks**, which can be end-stopped or enjambed; end-stopped lines have a period, whereas enjambed lines don’t end with punctuation. Some, but not all, poems have full **sentences**, which can end at any point in the line. A **stanza** is a group of lines visually separated from other groups; blank lines between stanzas are **stanza breaks**. Stanzas can also be called verses.