

How to approach a poetry essay question

Critical appreciation of a poem

If you are required to write a **CRITICAL APPRECIATION OF THE POEM**, in the form of an essay, try using the **SIFT** method, where you consider the *Sense, Intention, Feeling* and *Tone* of the poem.

For details of the SIFT method, refer to the **HOW TO SERIES** on our website:

How to approach your poetry exam (seen poetry) <https://www.macrat.co.za/resources/additional-resources>

You will need to structure your content, gleaned using the SIFT method, as per the hints and tips on the next page.

Answering a specific essay question on a poem

It is important to take some time to consider what is required of you. Then you need to plan before you start writing your essay. This time will not be wasted! It will make all the difference once you start writing.

Consider: What does the question require of you?

The question will tell you what the examiner is expecting. You should look for the key elements in the wording of the question and ascertain from the key words what is required.

There are usually **THREE types of keywords**:

- 1) **DIRECTION KEY WORDS (DWs)** Here you are being DIRECTED – what must you DO:
e.g. explore, compare, contrast
- 2) **KNOWLEDGE KEY WORDS (KWs)** These relate to what you KNOW – the selected subject matter/which aspects of the poem you should focus on.
- 3) **RESTRICTION KEY WORDS (RWs)** These RESTRICT/LIMIT you – the constraints of the topic i.e. you might not need to write all you know, but only provide information related to certain aspects.

Let's look at this example:

Felix Randal essay question

The question may begin with an extract from the poem.

The question continues: In 'Felix Randal', the speaker contemplates what he sees as significant aspects of the life and death of the farmer.

With close reference to the diction, imagery and tone, discuss how the above statement is reflected in the poem.

DW: *Discuss*: this means you should give your opinion, explain and elaborate. (The focus is on how the diction, imagery and tone in this extract reflect what the speaker sees as significant aspects of the life and death of the farmer). You need to decide what your opinion is on this statement; you need to explain your opinion, then quote to support your opinion.

KW: Focus on the *diction, imagery and tone* to show that the *statement* is correct.

RW: refer to diction, imagery and tone of the extract but also to what the speaker says in the whole poem.



Given these parameters, jot down what you know. Make notes around the quote and link your ideas to other parts of the poem if you think they are relevant.

Now organize your material according to the hints and tips provided on the next page. This approach will help you to plan your essay well before you start writing.

Planning a poetry essay

Hints and tips on what to include in each part of the essay.

For all paragraphs

- ✓ Short sentences are more persuasive (and you make fewer grammatical errors)
- ✓ Use present tense
- ✓ Don't use 'I'
- ✓ The word 'when' is very useful as it can set up a sentence to include a quote e.g. When the poet/speaker says 'XXXXXX' it clearly shows
- ✓ Use conjunctions and/or linking words to let your argument flow
- ✓ Include words from the topic to ensure you are doing what you said you would do [in your statement of intent].

Introduction

- ❖ Opening statement – link to the topic/theme/poet.
- ❖ Mention whatever the topic is asking: it will probably be related to the poem's overall message and/or the poetic techniques used.
- ❖ Define terms (if needed/referred to in the question/extract): e.g. sonnet, dramatic monologue, ode
- ❖ End with a statement of intent – what are you planning to show/say/prove: This essay (*not "I"*) will prove/explore/compare/analyse/assess the extent to which
use wording from the essay topic, integrate it, so that you know you are sticking to the topic... by looking at 1.....2.....3.....
NOTE: If this sentence is getting too long, add another sentence: Furthermore/In addition 4..... and 5..... will be analysed etc...

Body of essay

- ❖ Aim for 3-5 paragraphs
- ❖ Don't number your paragraphs. Usually the paragraphs will centre on the poem's message and techniques, but this will depend on the wording of the topic. Use one paragraph per pertinent point.
- ❖ Use conjunctions or linking words (e.g. however, furthermore, additionally, in contrast to) or some of the words from the previous paragraph as you move from one paragraph to the next. The aim is to show cohesion.
- ❖ Always double check that you are addressing the topic, and remember to add quotes (which don't need to be long) to support your comments/arguments. They should be embedded in the same or similar sequence as your text. This shows the examiner that you understand the sequence of your chosen text. If you are addressing two texts, then a good linking word is WHILE e.g. While Shakespeare introduces several images associated with ships and navigation, Donne uses the Biblical allusion to the Parable of the Talents.
- ❖ If your argument needs to point out a contrast, your last paragraph is a useful place to add this contrast e.g. paragraphs 1 and 2 have all explored why Shakespeare is conventional, then the third paragraph can explore the ways in which he broke sonnet traditions and used the rhyming couplet.

Conclusion

Now, you will be ready to conclude. It is very clichéd to say *In conclusion* but you need to make it clear that you are summing up/ending your essay. You could try *Thus, it can be seen that ...* (go back to the topic) OR *Finally, it is clear that.....*

CHECKLIST

Introduction

- Address topic, give context, include statement of intent

Body

- 3-5 paragraphs
- All paragraphs relate to topic
- One key idea per paragraph
- Use present tense these apply to all paragraphs
- Short sentences
- Use linking words within and between paragraphs
- Quotations included – can be direct/indirect speech
- Quotes and references match the sequence of the prescribed text/s
- Keep reminding marker that you are addressing the topic systematically (use synonyms for words in topic and introduction)

Conclusion

- Hint that it's the last paragraph
- Double check that you've done what you said you'd do
- NO new points
- Sum up what you argued; use strong, positive words e.g. This essay **has** shown/exposed/analysed It **is** clear then, that ...



The best way to develop your essay writing technique is by practicing. Ask your teacher to set a few essays for you and then prepare answers for assessment.