

Break Glass in Case of Emergency

a last-minute guide to approaching your A1 paper 1 exam

I. HOW TO READ AND ANNOTATE

POETRY

At some point you should go over that Poetry Analysis Guide hand-out I gave you at the very beginning of the year. Until then, it's worth going over the process of annotating a poem. When you read a poem, be conscious of your task to analyze the language (the literary devices) and discuss the ideas (the literary features). Here are some specific strategies that might help you out:

- ⇒ **Look at the verbs.** Even though poems are usually quite abstract and nonlinear, they often have *something* going on and/or are trying to say *something*. Often this *gist* of the poem can be found in the verbs.
- ⇒ **Find the tension.** No literature is without tension: whether it's a conflict of desires, opposing forces, miscommunication, balanced dichotomies, or awkward feelings. If you can locate a tension, you are on your way to having something to say.
- ⇒ **Look for patterns.** When you are annotating the poem, it might help to connect words with similar connotations or to draw attention to a recurring image (or color, type of word, etc.). Once you start finding patterns, it will help you determine more easily the speaker's attitude toward her subject.
- ⇒ **Look for shifts.** If you can find moments—words, phrases, line breaks, stanza breaks, change in point of view—in which the direction or feel or thrust of the poem shifts—that might help you find the tension. (Look for words like "but," "yet," "now," "however," "and," "though," and "so".)
- ⇒ **Be able to subdivide your literary devices and literary features.** (Note: you need not include every observation in your analysis. If you point out some literary/stylistic element, make sure you also discuss its effect.)

Formal Elements

- sound devices include assonance, consonance, alliteration, onomatopoeia, rhyme, meter, etc.
- stylistic devices include repetition, parallelism, pacing, syntax, phrasing, diction, etc.
- structural elements include stanzas, line breaks, meter, end-stop, enjambment, caesura, etc.

Elements of Meaning

- figurative language includes metaphor, simile, personification, hyperbole, metonymy, etc.
 - descriptive language includes imagery, diction (connotation and denotation), etc.
 - "meaning" is often discussed through tone, motif, symbolism, and theme
- ⇒ Aim your annotations and note-takings toward a specific thesis statement. Before you even begin writing, make sure you have identified as many relevant literary devices and features (remember: that's one of the criteria on the rubric) and you can say something intelligent about the effect(s) of these.

PROSE

- ⇒ Unlike the poem option, the prose passage is an *excerpt*, a small portion of a larger work. This will affect your analysis. You might want to speculate (acknowledging that it's merely speculation) about what the passage suggests about the larger work. Pay attention to title of the work from which the passage has been selected; look also at the date, the author (in case you are familiar with his work), and, if provided, where in the complete text the passage comes from.
- ⇒ Annotate the passage just as you would the poem: look at verbs, shifts, patterns in diction and imagery, etc. If it helps you to think of the prose passage as a poem, go for it; it may open up more possibilities.
- ⇒ The prose passage, however, may require you to look more at the following literary devices and features:
 - **character** (appearance, speech, actions, thoughts, development, inner conflict, epiphany, foil, etc.)
 - **setting** (era, time of year, time of day, duration, place, environment, atmosphere, mood, etc.)
 - **point of view** (1st person, 3rd person limited, 3rd person omniscient, 3rd person objective, etc.)
 - **plot** (exposition, conflict, suspense, turning points, resolution, etc.)
 - **style** (diction, syntax, pacing, dialogue, repetition, etc.)
- As you identify these things, begin creating equations to work toward a thesis statement. For example, the character development + the setting = paradox. Or diction + point of view = reader's suspense. Or imagery in setting + lack of conflict resolutions = tone. Look at how form and meaning connect. That will help you aim toward a workable thesis statement.
- Don't forget: it's not enough to say Marxist, feminist, and psychoanalytic in your essay. You have to be able first to show that you can do a formal analysis of the text before you can show that it *invites*, for example, a Marxist reading, or that it might *suggest* feminist undertones, or that a psychoanalytic *approach* may shed more light on the main character's development. Etc.