

How to Write an Essay on Poetry

The AP Poetry Question will task you to write a well-developed essay in which you analyze how a poet uses literary devices—sometimes called poetic devices or literary techniques—to either

- contribute to the meaning of the work,
- convey mood,
- reveal the speaker’s complex attitude (toward a subject),
- reveal the complex relationship between two people or things, etc.¹

There are two ways to approach such questions: (1) focus on the literary devices, which is the traditional method; (2) focus on the progression of ideas. Of course, we are splitting hairs here as these two approaches are similar and have overlapping elements. However, some writers may prefer the nuances of one approach over the other.

I. Focus on Literary Devices

You probably learned this first writing structure in AP English Language. With this approach, the thesis statement lists the literary devices you will discuss and their overall effect. Then each topic sentence focuses on one literary device and its specific effect.

For example:

On Richard Wilbur’s “The Death of a Toad”

- Thesis: Wilbur uses structure, syntax, diction, imagery, and other formal literary elements to reveal his respect for the fallen toad, an otherwise uninspiring figure.
- TS #1: The choppiness of the stanzas and the lack of any visible form of meter contribute to the image of the mortally wounded frog’s staggering into the shade and dying.
- TS #2: Wilbur’s syntax promotes his ironic thesis of amphibian pride under mortal conflict.
- TS #3: Wilbur’s diction captures his admiration for the toad and his dignified death.
- TS #4: Finally, Wilbur is able to conjure up many strong images that lead to an understanding of his response to the toad’s death.

The problem with this approach is that writers cannot always identify the literary devices used in the poem. As such, writing topic sentences becomes an impassable hurdle.

¹ This list goes on and on. Be prepared to write about anything.

II. Focus on the Progression of Ideas

Above all, AP graders want to see that you understand and can explain the meaning of a poem. Of course, it would be great if you could identify the literary devices (by name), but if you cannot, this might be the approach for you.

In this approach, analyze the poem one chunk at a time. Instead of analyzing at how a literary device functions throughout the entire poem, focus on each idea developed in the poem. More often than not, a poet will take her time to develop an idea. She will introduce the idea early on and then slowly add more and more meaning to it. Or she just might transform the idea altogether.

Consider William Shakespeare's "Sonnet 29." In the first quatrain, the speaker bemoans his accursed fate. Here, Shakespeare shines a light on a common feeling: the frustration with life. In the second quatrain, Shakespeare further develops this idea. His speaker's despair deepens as he laments the many things he lacks: friends, success, skills, etc. But in the third quatrain, Shakespeare changes course, and his speaker realizes what he does have: a woman he loves. In the concluding couplet, the speaker is no longer frustrated with life as just the thought of his loved one brings him happiness. The theme is clear: above all else, love is all people really need.

If I were writing an essay on "Sonnet 29," I would structure my essay around the structure of the poem, the sonnet. The following example does exactly the same with Shakespeare's "Sonnet 95."

On William Shakespeare's "Sonnet 95"

- Thesis: Shakespeare warns his young friend of the risks involved with the overindulgence of sexual activity.
- TS #1: In the first quatrain, Shakespeare presents the young man to the readers by contrasting his beauty and his character.
- TS #2: The second quatrain focuses on the manner in which others view this young man.
- TS #3: In the third quatrain, Shakespeare returns to his emphasis of the idea that the young man's elegance covers his sins.
- Conclusion: The closing couplet marks the turn of Shakespeare's sonnet.

Notice the progression of ideas. The writer explains how each stanza conveys and builds on a particular idea: the perception of the young man. This approach benefits those who understand the ideas expressed in a poem more than the literary devices.

Something to keep in mind: if the writing prompt states that you must address a particular device, you must analyze it. However, you don't have to include the device in the thesis statement or topic sentence. Just make sure to analyze an example of it in your essay.