

Analyzing the Poetry Analysis Essay

Duration

Two 40-minute class sessions

Resources

1. Student Handout: Poetry Analysis Prompt
2. Study Guide: Poetry Analysis Study Guide
3. Student Handout: Poetry Analysis Activity
4. Teacher's Handout: Poetry Analysis Activity
5. Scoring Rubric for Question 1: Poetry Analysis



Objectives of the Lesson

- To apply the Poetry Analysis rubric to a student essay
- To analyze a poem for poetic elements
- To develop a poetry analysis essay

College Board Objectives from the 2019–20 CED

- **LAN 7:** Develop textually substantiated arguments about interpretations of part or all of a text.
- **LAN 7.D:** Select and use relevant and sufficient evidence to both develop and support a line of reasoning.

The following skills are practiced and assessed as progress monitoring, but are not explicitly taught in this lesson.

- **LAN 7.A:** Develop a paragraph that includes 1) a claim that requires defense with evidence from the text, and 2) the evidence itself.
- **LAN 7.B:** Develop a thesis statement that conveys a defensible claim about an interpretation of literature and that may establish a line of reasoning.
- **LAN 7.C:** Develop commentary that establishes and explains relationships among textual evidence, the line of reasoning, and the thesis.
- **LAN 7.E:** Demonstrate control over the elements of composition to communicate clearly.

Student Activities

- Dissecting the prompt
- Analyzing the passage with a partner
- Developing the poetry analysis essay

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How to Use These Lessons

These lessons are designed to monitor students' progress in developing a poetry analysis essay. Beginning with the Marco Learning Poetry Prompt provided, students will first work in partners to analyze the Phillis Wheatley poem. Students will be looking to see how Wheatley uses poetic elements and techniques to convey a complex portrayal of death. Then, students will develop their own full poetry analysis using Marco Learning's Prose Analysis Essay Study Guide. This activity allows students to support one another as they work through a difficult task. Additionally, it allows you as a grader to target students' strengths and weaknesses in both reading and writing.

LESSON ONE: ANALYZING THE POETRY PROMPT

Dissecting the Prompt

- Begin by dividing students into partners.
- Give each student a copy of the Student Handout: Poetry Analysis Prompt, and each person a copy of the Student Handout: Poetry Analysis Activity. (Students will be working together, but they will need to record their thoughts on their own paper so that they have the ideas available to them individually when they write their essays on day two.)
- To begin this lesson, it is important for students to closely read the prompt and dissect it for information. Ask students to read the prompt and to underline critical information and highlight or circle what their task is. Students may do something similar to what you see below:

In the following poem by Phillis Wheatley (1773), the speaker addresses the tragedy of three deaths. Read the poem carefully. Then, in a well-written essay, analyze how Wheatley uses poetic elements and techniques to convey a complex portrayal of death.

- After reading and dissecting the prompt, handout the "Poetry Analysis Essay Study Guide." Direct their attention to the introduction and the Common Poetic Elements in the top side-box. Explain to students that since this is a practice exercise, they will be working with the elements in this box as the focus of their analysis.

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It would be a good idea and would save class time to have students read the rest of the study guide for homework in preparation for their essay the next day. You want students to have as much time with their partners to focus on the analysis exercise for today.

Analyzing the Passage

- After analyzing the prompt, students are ready to work through the poem. Remind them that they are looking for which poetic elements and techniques convey a complex portrayal of death. *Students will need to do more than just say that the poem deals with the complex portrayal of death. They will need to explain what specifically is complex and why that complexity is important to the overall interpretation/purpose of the poem.*
- For this activity, students are looking for evidence of poetic techniques that demonstrate this complexity. They should focus on looking for the elements listed on the study guide: rhyme, meter, form, repetition, symbolism, imagery, and diction (and yes, all of them appear/function in this poem). When students find a piece of evidence that supports the complex portrayal of death, they need to:
 1. Determine which elements this evidence falls under.
 2. Write the line in the space under the “evidence” column.
 3. Write a sentence explaining the effect the use of this device/technique has on the overall interpretation of the poem, in the “effect” column.
 4. Wait to fill out the last box for homework.
- With five minutes left in the period, students can combine partners to create groups of four. In that small group, students can share what evidence they found and what effect they think that evidence has.
- For Homework: Ask students to draft a statement on the bottom of their chart that addresses:
 1. How Wheatley portrayed Death in the first two stanzas of the poem
 2. How Wheatley portrayed Death in the last stanza of the poem
 3. What Wheatley’s predominant goal is in this poem
 4. Why she ended the poem in the way that she did

This statement will be the basis of the introductory paragraph that students write during the next lesson.

This could be completed independently, but you may want students to complete this part of the lesson with their partners. This will allow them to have discussions about which pieces of evidence are most effective in demonstrating specific poetic and literary techniques.

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LESSON TWO: ANSWERING THE POETRY PROMPT

Reviewing the Study Guide and Their Homework Statements

- Encourage students to take out their homework and share their statements with their shoulder partners. Have the partner green-light the statement or offer revision suggestions. This should take about three minutes. Students who did not do their homework will not be able to participate in this part of the lesson, but they can still write the essay even if they didn't do their homework; they just don't have the head-start that the other students do.
- Ensure that each student has a copy of the "Poetry Analysis Study Guide," the "Student Handout" of the prompt, and their completed charts from yesterday. They will need to reference these as they write their essays. If you haven't reviewed the study guide with students, now would be a good time to do so.

Remember, the poetry analysis essay is incredibly difficult for many students. Therefore, we recommend that you allow students to use resources to help them work through the essay. As the semester continues, you may add parameters such as allowing students only one resource of their choice, and so on.

Writing the Poetry Analysis Essay

- As students prepare to write the essay, make sure that they have their charts from yesterday's lesson. Encourage students to reference them if needed. Allowing them to view the chart while they write will hopefully result in better analysis, and it will allow you, the grader, to more effectively monitor students' abilities to create commentary. They have illustrated that they can identify the poetic devices, but can they explain how those devices convey the complex portrayal of death in the poem? Can they evaluate how the choices Wheatley makes demonstrate her thoughts on death? This should be evident in student essays.
- For this essay, we recommend that you time the students. It is imperative that students start working under a time constraint early in the year—perhaps not in the first few weeks, but once they develop a comfort level with the content. Students have already read the poem and developed somewhat of an outline with the chart; therefore, we believe 40 minutes is an appropriate amount of time to accomplish this task. As always, modify as you see fit.

As students finish their essays, we recommend that you ask them to highlight their thesis statements in one color, their evidence in another color, and their commentary in a third color. This simple task allows the students to see the balance of evidence and commentary within their essay. Additionally, it will help you grade more efficiently!

Poetry Analysis Prompt

Question 1

Suggested time: 40 minutes

(This question counts for one-third of the total essay section score.)

In the following poem by Phillis Wheatley (1773), the speaker addresses the tragedy of three deaths. Read the poem carefully. Then, in a well-written essay, analyze how Wheatley uses poetic elements and techniques to convey a complex portrayal of death.

In your response you should do the following:

- Respond to the prompt with a thesis that presents a defensible interpretation.
- Select and use evidence to support your line of reasoning.
- Explain how the evidence supports your line of reasoning.
- Use appropriate grammar and punctuation in communicating your argument.

On *Death's* domain intent I fix my eyes,
Where human nature in vast ruin lies,
With pensive mind I search the drear abode,
Line Where the great conqu'ror has his spoils bestow'd;
5 There there the offspring of six thousand years
In endless numbers to my view appears:
Whole kingdoms in his gloomy den are thrust,
And nations mix with their primeval dust:
Insatiate still he gluts the ample tomb;
10 His is the present, his the age to come
See here a brother, here a sister spread,
And a sweet daughter mingled with the dead.

But, *Madam*, let your grief be laid aside,
And let the fountain of your tears be dry'd,
15 In vain they flow to wet the dusty plain,
Your sighs are wafted to the skies in vain,
Your pains they witness, but they can no more,
While *Death* reigns tyrant o'er this mortal shore.

The glowing stars and silver queen of light
20 At last must perish in the gloom of night:
Resign thy friends to that Almighty hand,
Which gave them life, and bow to his command;
Thine *Avis** give without a murmur'ring heart,
Though half thy soul be fated to depart.
25 To shining guards consign thine infant care
To waft triumphant through the seas of air:
Her soul enlarg'd to heav'nly pleasure springs,
She feeds on truth and uncreated things.
Methinks I hear her in the realms above,
30 And leaning forward with a filial love,
Invite you there to share immortal bliss
Unknown, untasted in a state like this.
With tow'ring hopes, and growing grace arise,
And seek beatitude beyond the skies.

Write or type your response in this area.

THE POETRY ANALYSIS ESSAY

The Poetry Analysis essay includes a prompt and a poem. The prompt gives a preview of the poem, then asks a specific question about how the author uses poetic or literary elements and techniques to accomplish a particular goal. The prompt will instruct you to do the following four things in your essay:

- Respond to the prompt with a thesis that presents a defensible interpretation.
- Select and use evidence to support your line of reasoning.
- Explain how the evidence supports your line of reasoning.
- Use appropriate grammar and punctuation in communicating your argument.

How to Approach it

You have 40 minutes to write each essay. Below we've provided guidelines for how much time to spend on each step, but these are not set in stone. As you practice, you can experiment with whether you'll do better with a little more time for reading, a little more time for planning, exactly the suggested times, or something else.

1. Read the prompt—2 minutes

- Read carefully, and identify what the question is asking. Read twice to be sure you understand.
- There's no need to read the four bullet points (reproduced above)—they'll be the same on every exam.

2. Read the poem—8 minutes

- While reading the poem, focus on the task presented in the prompt. Your essay needs to address the question in the prompt to earn points.
- Read the poem through once, focusing on a basic, literal understanding. Translate difficult language to yourself as you go, and if there's a part you can't make any sense of, skip over it.
- Read the poem through a second time, looking for evidence you can use in your essay. Look for literary or poetic elements that you can identify and underline them, then make notes in the margins about what you notice. Don't worry about interpretation at this point; just focus on identifying things that stand out to you.
- It doesn't matter if you can attach a fancy name to any particular technique the author uses; you just need to be able to identify it. You might note that lines in a poem don't form complete sentences without being able to name that "enjambment," and you'll still get your point across.

COMMON POETIC ELEMENTS

As you read the text, here's a partial list of literary elements you can look for. You won't find all of these things in every poem, nor is this list exhaustive; it's just meant to help you get started thinking about how to read a poem:

- **Rhyme:** no need to name the scheme, just note whether the poem rhymes, throughout or just in a particular spot.
- **Meter:** does the poem have a regular meter? Or is it more free-form?
- **Form:** is the poem broken up into stanzas or not?
- **Repetition:** are there particular words, sounds, or phrase structures that are repeated?
- **Symbolism:** are there things in the poem that represent something other than what they are literally?
- **Imagery:** does the poem include descriptive language that appeals to your physical senses?
- **Diction:** how does the author's word choice contribute to your understanding of the poem?

NOTES

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3. Write a Thesis—3 minutes

- Look at your notes about evidence that you identified in step 2, and look for trends.
- Think about your overall impression of the poem, and how the evidence you identified contributes to that impression.
- Write down a 1–2 sentence draft thesis statement. Don't worry about perfection here—you can revise it as you write your essay in step 5.

4. Plan the Essay—3 minutes

- *Introduction:* your first paragraph should set the stage for your analysis of the poem and end with your thesis. The thesis statement can earn you a point, so make it easy for the graders to find it.
- *Body paragraphs:* plan to write two well-developed body paragraphs in which you cite the evidence you identified in the poem and provide commentary on how it contributes to your interpretation of the poem. In planning your essay, note what the main focus of each paragraph will be (this can either be a specific poetic or literary element, or it can be a theme of the poem that is achieved through more than one element). In your outline, also jot down specific line numbers, so you know where to find the relevant evidence while you're writing.
- *Conclusion:* the most important part of the conclusion is that you have one. If it's really well-written, it can contribute to a point for sophistication, but there is no credit just for having a conclusion, so don't get stuck trying to compose the perfect wrap-up to your essay.

5. Write—24 minutes

Monitor the time you spend writing, as the proctor won't tell you when to move on to the next essay.

- Write as fast as you can while still keeping your handwriting legible. Also write as much as you can—longer essays tend to earn more points.
- Don't worry if your body paragraphs don't seem to logically flow from one to another—your graders understand that this essay is essentially a rough draft.
- Focus more on explaining how the evidence you cite connects to your interpretation of the poem than on your writing style or vocabulary. Evidence and commentary are worth up to four points, while sophistication is only worth one point, and you have limited time.

SCORING THE ESSAY

Thesis: 0–1 points

Evidence & Commentary: 0–4 points

Sophistication: 0–1 points

NOTES

Write or type in this area.

Poetry Analysis Activity

What do you notice and what is the effect on the overarching meaning of the poem?

Poetic Element/ Technique	Evidence	Effect
Rhyme		
Meter		
Form (stanzas and shifts)		
Repetition		
Symbolism		
Imagery		
Diction		
Other		

Analysis Statement

Create a statement that addresses each of the following questions about the poem. You will use this statement to help guide the introductory paragraph of your essay.

- How does Wheatley portray Death in the first two stanzas of the poem?
- How does Wheatley portray Death in the last stanza of the poem?
- What is Wheatley's predominant goal in this poem?
- Why did she end the poem in the way that she did?

Write or type your response in this area.

Poetry Analysis Activity

The suggestions in this chart are just that, suggestions. Students may come up with their own evidence, interpretations, and effects, and as long as they are based in text, we want to encourage multiple correct readings of poems.

What do you notice and what is the effect on the overarching meaning of the poem?

Poetic Element/Technique	Evidence	Effect
Rhyme	<i>The poem is organized into rhyming couplets, ending with the words "arise and skies."</i>	<i>By ending with words that bring our eyes to the heavens, it ends the poem with a hopeful tone despite the painful topic of death that is being explored.</i>
Meter	<i>Each line has approximately 9 syllables in it.</i>	<i>The syllables of this poem march across, line after line, in a predictable fashion, much like a funeral procession.</i>
Form (stanzas and shifts)	<i>There are three stanzas in this poem, and there are two shifts.</i>	<p><i>The first shift is between the first and second stanza, and it shifts from a broad, overarching look at the subject of Death and then shifts to a direct address to the woman who has lost her brother, sister, and a child. This shift has a zooming-in effect, so rather than speak about Death the tyrant, Wheatley is able to discuss the death of this woman's loved ones.</i></p> <p><i>The second shift occurs after the second stanza when Wheatley begins to take a more positive tone with the poem, focusing more on the skies, the Almighty, and hope for the future.</i></p>
Repetition	<i>The personification of death is repeated through the first two stanzas.</i>	<i>The repetition in this poem is more a repetition of a concept than it is a repetition of an image or a word. In the first two stanzas, we are brought back to the tyrannical nature of Death, he is "the great conqu'ror" with "spoils" in his "gloomy den." He is "insatiate" and "gluts" himself on the souls of humanity. Wheatley ends stanza two with the statement that "Death reigns tyrant o'er this mortal shore," and the effect of this tirade is that it highlights the dramatic shift to lightness and hope in the third stanza.</i>

<p>Symbolism</p>	<p>Here, students may argue that heaven and hell are symbolic and that the opening of the poem symbolizes a type of purgatory/hell type space with the "drear abode" and the "gloomy den," and the third stanza symbolizes a more heavenly atmosphere with the "silver queen of light" and the "shining guards."</p>	<p>Students may approach this differently. Some students may not see this as symbolic because for them heaven and hell are not symbolic; they are real. Tread lightly here. Let them interpret how they feel most comfortable. Regardless of personal beliefs, the effect of this shift from purgatory/hell to heaven is supposed to be calming and reassuring.</p>
<p>Imagery</p>	<p>"Whole kingdoms in his gloomy den are thrust, Whole kingdoms mix with their primeval dust"</p>	<p>The imagery here is the endlessness of death, the countless bodies that meld together in the underworld because death has consumed so much of humanity. These two lines are supposed to express the universal nature of death and also the vastness of this shared experience.</p>
<p>Diction</p>	<p>"To shining guards consign thine infant care/ To waft triumphantly through the seas of air"</p>	<p>By choosing "shining" guards, Wheatley is able to provide hope and a heavenly-feel to where the baby resides after death. The idea of consigning is that goods are destined for someone else, so by choosing this word, it implies that destiny was involved in the death of the child, removing potential for blame from the parents. If the baby is "wafting" in a "triumphant" manner through the skies, then she has no cares or worries holding her down, and the parents can rest at ease that their daughter is happy where she is. These are intended to be comforting words to the parents.</p>
<p>Other (Students may find something else they feel is note-worthy.)</p>	<p>Closing 4 lines</p>	<p>These last four lines offer hope and happiness to the parents because Wheatley describes the daughter as inviting them into heaven. The poem ends with hope that there is a future to look forward to where the family can be together once more. It is better than ending with "Death's domain" where the poem started.</p>

Analysis Statement

Create a statement that addresses each of the following questions about the poem. You will use this statement to help guide the introductory paragraph of your essay.

- How does Wheatley portray Death in the first two stanzas of the poem?
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Sample Statement

Phillis Wheatley begins this poem with a condemning tone towards Death and his role in humanity, but then, before the last stanza, she shifts to a tone of hope and reassurance that despite the experience of death, the family's daughter is safe and happy in heaven, thus providing the comfort to the parents that the poem was intended to provide.

Questions to Ask

Write or type your response in this area.

Scoring Rubric for Question 1: Poetry Analysis

THESIS	0 POINTS		1 POINT			ROW A	
	Does not meet criteria for any of the following reasons: <input type="checkbox"/> No defensible thesis <input type="checkbox"/> Simple restatement of prompt only <input type="checkbox"/> Summary of poem with no connection to prompt <input type="checkbox"/> Describes poetic features without making a claim		<input type="checkbox"/> Defensible interpretation of the poem <input type="checkbox"/> Responds to the prompt				
EVIDENCE & COMMENTARY	0 POINTS	1 POINT	2 POINTS	3 POINTS	4 POINTS	ROW B	
	<input type="checkbox"/> Simple restatement of thesis (if existing) OR <input type="checkbox"/> Incoherent writing OR <input type="checkbox"/> Prompt not addressed OR <input type="checkbox"/> No textual references made	EVIDENCE: <input type="checkbox"/> Generalized evidence AND COMMENTARY: <input type="checkbox"/> Summary of poem rather than discussion of details or poetic techniques <input type="checkbox"/> Literary elements and devices mentioned but not explained	EVIDENCE: <input type="checkbox"/> Some specific evidence <input type="checkbox"/> Relevant evidence AND COMMENTARY: <input type="checkbox"/> Some evidence tied to thesis <input type="checkbox"/> Mixes specific evidence and broad generalizations <input type="checkbox"/> Lacks a line of reasoning and progression of ideas <input type="checkbox"/> Simplistic, repetitive, or inaccurate explanations	EVIDENCE: <input type="checkbox"/> Sufficient and relevant evidence AND COMMENTARY: <input type="checkbox"/> Words and details from poem build the interpretation <input type="checkbox"/> Multiple claims are included <input type="checkbox"/> Slight lapses in support of key claims	EVIDENCE: <input type="checkbox"/> Specific and relevant evidence AND COMMENTARY: <input type="checkbox"/> Offers support for all claims <input type="checkbox"/> Well-organized line of reasoning with multiple supporting claims and clear explanations <input type="checkbox"/> Explains the significance of specific words and details, and connects them to the interpretation <input type="checkbox"/> Explains writer's literary techniques with multiple examples that are tied to the interpretation		
	0 POINTS		1 POINT				ROW C
	Does not meet the criteria for any of the following reasons: <input type="checkbox"/> Sweeping generalizations of context <input type="checkbox"/> Ineffective use of language <input type="checkbox"/> Oversimplifies the poem's complexities <input type="checkbox"/> Thematic interpretation not consistently developed <input type="checkbox"/> Alternative interpretations missing or only hinted at		<input type="checkbox"/> Demonstrates sophisticated thinking <input type="checkbox"/> Develops a complex literary argument <input type="checkbox"/> Explores complexities and tensions in poem <input type="checkbox"/> Places interpretation into a larger context <input type="checkbox"/> Employs a vivid and persuasive writing style <input type="checkbox"/> Engages in multiple interpretations of the poem				

TOTAL POINTS EARNED: / 6