

## Writing About Poetry: Q and A

**Q: So what is a poetry paper, and how is it different from summary papers or compare-and-contrast essays?**

A: A poetry paper is actually called an **explication**, or a **close reading** of a poem. It is a line-by-line commentary about what is happening there. However, when writing an explication, is it important to remember that it is more than just a long summary. Although you may have to summarize the poem in certain parts of your paper (like in the introduction or conclusion), or you may choose to paraphrase a few lines that don't contain things related to the focus of your paper, an explication is far more complex. It is, in fact, a **close reading** of a poem **based on a claim that you have made about it**. Generally, good explications go line by line, picking out every detail in the poem that supports your **argument**.

**Q: Whoa, you just said “argument.” Do poetry papers have those?**

A: Yes, they do. Poetry explications should have a central argument or **thesis** that guides your analysis. And remember, theses often start by asking general questions like:

- What does this poem "mean"? What is the **author (or speaker)** trying to say in it?
- What is the major "**theme**" of the poem: loneliness, love, racism, or what?
- How will my explication help my readers understand the poem in a fresh, interesting way?
  - Once you have chosen a theme, try to shape your observation into a more **developed** statement. For example, John Donne's sonnet "Death Be Not Proud" is certainly about death, but it is also doing something else: the speaker is arguing that, because Death is only the end of a life on earth, it is not something to be afraid of, since, according to the Christian beliefs of the speaker, it is only temporary, and will no longer exist when God returns to earth. Be sure to ask the **big questions**, but always allow them to lead you to a **specific argument** about the poem.

**Q: Okay, I have an argument and I think I'm ready to write. So how do I prove it?**

A: The key thing to remember about explications is to **analyze**. Pick apart the **language** of the poem. Look for things such as **symbolism, imagery, metaphor, tone, syntax, irony, allusion**, etc. **Show** how the language of the poem is connected to its content and/or theme. For example, don't just stop at the observation that Hughes *uses* a metaphor—make an argument about **how** that metaphor helps him do what he does in his poem. Also, if applicable, attend to the **form** of the poem (**identify the type of poem, line-breaks, rhythm, stanza breaks, rhyme scheme**, etc.). Again, connect your observations about form to your interpretations of the content or theme.

**Q: Cool. Thanks for your help. Is there anything else I should keep in mind?**

A: Sure. There are some **general tips** for about writing about poetry **on the back** of this sheet:

### General Tips for Writing About Poetry

#### Let's Start With the "DON'TS" (or "AVOIDS"):

- **AVOID** talking about the poem in terms of "**today's society.**" If you feel that the social, cultural, and/or historical context discussions are important, or that the author is trying to say something really cool to or about society, then meet the poem on its own turf: Ask yourself: What was happening in ~~society~~ the country, or in a specific community when the poem was written? **Why** are those facts important to my explication of the poem? Also, **avoid** using words like "**timeless**" or "**universal**"—every poem has its own context, and words like that often make your reader wonder if you're trying to avoid the work of discussing that poem on its own terms.
- **AVOID** saying things that are **meaningless** or **obviously true**: "Countee Cullen's poem makes use of diction and syntax." Of course—a lot of poems do. Instead, ask yourself if there is something distinctive or unusual about his use of diction. If so, then what purpose does it serve in this poem?
- **AVOID** evaluating the poem in simple terms like "**good**" and "**bad.**" This also includes statements like "Brooks' poem is a **realistic** example of a guilty mother." Lots of poets might like to do that, but **why** is that "realism" important? Try to find something unique or interesting about her portrayal of the mother that makes the poem different from other poems about mothers.

#### And Now for the "DO":

- Organize the essay in a purposeful manner. You don't have to write a standard five-paragraph essay, but you *do* need to give your reader a sense that your paper is headed somewhere. Here are a couple of conventional ways to organize poetry explications:
  - **In the order of the poem.** Lead the reader through the poem, explaining how each part of the poem illuminates a different aspect of your argument. (The key here is to make sure that each part of the paper—while connected to the same thesis—doesn't merely reiterate the same thing. Each paragraph should do something slightly different, so that the paper *develops* your argument instead of merely reiterating it over and over.) And don't fall into the trap of starting every sentence with the phrase "**In Line...**" Mix it up a little. Try throwing in a few phrases like:
    - The poem begins....**
    - In the next/following line...**
    - The speaker immediately adds....**
    - She then introduces....**
    - The next stanza begins by saying....**
  - **By formal/stylistic device.** E.g. you might have one paragraph on syntax, one on meter, etc. Again, the key is to show **how** these different devices illuminate different aspects of the argument. **Don't** just repeat, "Cullen's use of diction [insert thesis here]"; "Cullen's use of imagery [insert thesis here]"; "Cullen's use of meter [insert thesis here again]." Show how each of them **proves** your argument **in different ways**, or how they illuminate certain **complexities** in your argument.
  - **By thematic element.** A poem will have several thematic elements going on (sometimes even seemingly contradictory ones), with each contributing to the meaning in a different way, and you can definitely write about them in the same paper. Just remember, **be specific**. Even two poems written by the same author on the same theme probably present that theme in different ways each time.