

HOW TO ANALYZE A POEM

1. TO BEGIN

Read the poem all the way through *at least twice*. Read it aloud. *Listen* to it. Poetry is related to music, so the sound is important. You listen to your favourite CDs many times; the principle is the same. It takes time to fully appreciate and understand a work of art. Make a note of your first impressions or immediate responses, both positive and negative. You may change your mind about the poem later, but these first ideas are worth recording.

2. LITERAL MEANING AND THEME

Before you can understand the poem as a whole, you have to start with an understanding of the individual words. Get a good dictionary. Look up, and write down, the meanings of:

- words you don't know
- words you "sort of know"
- any important words, even if you do know them. Maybe they have more than one meaning (ex. "bar"), or maybe they can function as different parts of speech (ex. "bar" can be a noun or a verb). If the poem was written a long time ago, maybe the history of the word matters, or maybe the meaning of the word has changed over the years ("jet" did not mean an airplane in the 16th century). An etymological dictionary like the Oxford English Dictionary can help you find out more about the history of a particular word.

Use an encyclopaedia or the Internet to look up people and places mentioned in the poem. These **allusions** may be a key to the poet's attitudes and ideas.

As you pay attention to the literal meanings of the words of the poem, you may see some patterns emerging. These patterns may relate to the **diction** of the poem: does the poet use "street talk" or slang, formal English, foreign language phrases, or jargon?

Your goal, now that you've understood the literal meanings, is to try to determine the **theme** of the poem – the purpose the poet has in writing this poem, the idea he wants to express. In order to discover the theme, however, you need to look at the poem as a whole and the ways the different parts of the poem interact.

3. TITLE

Start your search for the theme by looking at the title of the poem. It was probably carefully chosen. What information does it give you? What expectations does it create? (For example, a poem called "The Garden of Love" should cause a different response from the one called "The Poison Tree.") Does the title tell you the subject of the poem (ex. "The Groundhog")? Does the title label the poem as a specific literary type? (ex. "Ode to Melancholy"; "Sonnets at Christmas") If so, you should check what characteristics such