**Poetry Analysis Guide**

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Poetry Strategies & Questions for Poetry Analysis

Plato said that in any journey toward knowledge, the question is more important than the answer: is it through the journey there that the learning occurs. The below questions directed toward interpreting a poem are strategies that can be learned when approaching a poetry analysis. Ask yourself these questions when reading a poem and brainstorming for this section of the AP exam.

1. **Levels of Meaning Questions:**

   - **Level 1 Questions:** What’s on the page? What are concrete words, denotations, and details?
   - **Level 2 Questions:** What’s between the lines? What are connotations and implied meanings? What’s ambiguous?
   - **Level 3 Questions:** What’s off the page? What broader issues or philosophies does the poem present?

2. **What, How, Why Questions:**


3. **SOAPS:** (acronym)
   - **S** = Subject: what is the subject of the poem?
   - **O** = Occasion: what is the occasion in the poem?
   - **A** = Audience: who is to hear or read the poem?
   - **P** = Purpose: what is the purpose of the poem?
   - **S** = Speaker: who is saying the words of the poem?

4. **TP-CASTT:**
   - **T** = Title: before reading the poem, speculate on its title
   - **P** = Paraphrase: summarize the poem in your own words
   - **C** = Connotation: what is the implied meaning of the poem beyond what’s on the page?
   - **A** = Attitude: what is the speaker and the author’s attitude (tone)?
   - **S** = Shifts: is there a shift in the speaker’s attitude?
   - **T** = Title: reread the title again- does it take on a deeper or more specific meaning after reading the poem?
   - **T** = Theme: what is the poet’s purpose or final meaning (thesis)?

5. **DIDLS:** (especially good for analyzing tone in poetry)
   - **D** = Diction: what are some of the words that are specific (denotation) and ambiguous (connotation)? Why did the poet choose these particular words?
   - **I** = Images: what words vividly appeal to the senses?
   - **D** = Details: what are facts that are included and omitted?
   - **L** = Language: what kind of language if used: formal, informal, colloquial, idioms, etc.?
   - **S** = Sentence Structure: how does the form and structure of the poem influence the reader’s attitude?
Reading poetry well is part attitude and part technique. Curiosity is a useful attitude, especially when it’s free of preconceived ideas about what poetry is or should be. Effective technique directs your curiosity into asking questions, drawing you into a conversation with the poem.

In Great Books programs, the goal of careful reading is often to take up a question of meaning, an interpretive question that has more than one answer. Since the form of a poem is part of its meaning (for example, features such as repetition and rhyme may amplify or extend the meaning of a word or idea, adding emphasis, texture, or dimension), we believe that questions about form and technique, about the observable features of a poem, provide an effective point of entry for interpretation. To ask some of these questions, you’ll need to develop a good ear for the musical qualities of language, particularly how sound and rhythm relate to meaning. This approach is one of many ways into a poem.

**Getting Started: Prior Assumptions**

Most readers make three false assumptions when addressing an unfamiliar poem. The first is assuming that they should understand what they encounter on the first reading, and if they don’t, that something is wrong with them or with the poem. The second is assuming that the poem is a kind of code, that each detail corresponds to one, and only one, thing, and unless they can crack this code, they’ve missed the point. The third is assuming that the poem can mean anything readers want it to mean.

**William Carlos Williams** wrote a verse addressed to his wife in the poem “January Morning,":

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All this-
  was for you, old woman.
I wanted to write a poem
that you would understand.
For what good is it to me
if you can’t understand it?
  but you got to try hard-
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Williams admits in these lines that poetry is often difficult. He also suggests that a poet depends on the effort of a reader; somehow, a reader must “complete” what the poet has begun.

This act of completion begins when you enter the imaginative play of a poem, bringing to it your experience and point of view. If a poem is “play” in the sense of a game or a sport, then you enjoy that it makes you work a little, that it makes you sweat a bit. Reading poetry is a challenge, but like so many other things, it takes practice, and your skills and insight improve as you progress.

Literature is, and has always been, the sharing of experience, the pooling of human understanding about living, loving, and dying. Successful poems welcome you in, revealing ideas that may not have been foremost in the writer’s mind in the moment of composition. The best poetry has a magical quality—a sense of being more than the sum of its parts—and even when it’s impossible to articulate this sense, this something more, the power of the poem is left undiminished.
Poems speak to us in many ways. Though their forms may not always be direct or narrative, keep in mind that a real person formed the moment of the poem, and it’s wise to seek an understanding of that moment. Sometimes the job of the poem is to come closer to saying what cannot be said in other forms of writing, to suggest an experience, idea, or feeling that you can know but not entirely express in any direct or literal way. The techniques of word and line arrangement, sound and rhythm, add to—and in some cases, multiply—the meaning of words to go beyond the literal, giving you an impression of an idea or feeling, an experience that you can’t quite put into words but that you know is real.

Reading a Poem Aloud

Before you get very far with a poem, you have to read it. In fact, you can learn quite a few things just by looking at it. The title may give you some image or association to start with. Looking at the poem’s shape, you can see whether the lines are continuous or broken into groups (called stanzas), or how long the lines are, and so how dense, on a physical level, the poem is. You can also see whether it looks like the last poem you read by the same poet or even a poem by another poet. All of these are good qualities to notice, and they may lead you to a better understanding of the poem in the end.

But sooner or later, you’re going to have to read the poem, word by word. To begin, read the poem aloud. Read it more than once. Listen to your voice, to the sounds the words make. Do you notice any special effects? Do any of the words rhyme? Is there a cluster of sounds that seem the same or similar? Is there a section of the poem that seems to have a rhythm that’s distinct from the rest of the poem? Don’t worry about why the poem might use these effects. The first step is to hear what’s going on. If you find your own voice distracting, have a friend read the poem to you.

That said, it can still be uncomfortable to read aloud or to make more than one pass through a poem. Some of this attitude comes from the misconception that we should understand a poem after we first read it, while some stems from sheer embarrassment. Where could I possibly go to read aloud? What if my friends hear me?

The Line

What determines where a line stops in poetry? There is, of course, more than one answer to this question. Lines are often determined by meaning, sound and rhythm, breath, or typography. Poets may use several of these elements at the same time. Some poems are metrical in a strict sense. But what if the lines aren’t metrical? What if the lines are irregular?

The relationship between meaning, sound, and movement intended by the poet is sometimes hard to recognize, but there is an interplay between the grammar of a line, the breath of a line, and the way lines are broken out in the poem—this is called lineation. For example, lines that end with punctuation, called end-stopped lines, are fairly simple. In that case, the punctuation and the lineation, and perhaps even breathing, coincide to make the reading familiar and even predictable. But lines that are not end-stopped present different challenges for readers because they either end with an incomplete phrase or sentence or they break before the first punctuation mark is reached. The most natural approach is to pay strict attention to
the grammar and punctuation. Reading to the end of a phrase or sentence, even if it carries over one or several lines, is the best way to retain the grammatical sense of a poem.

But lineation introduces another variable that some poets use to their advantage. Robert Creeley is perhaps best known for breaking lines across expected grammatical pauses. This technique often introduces secondary meaning, sometimes in ironic contrast with the actual meaning of the complete grammatical phrase. Consider these lines from Creeley’s poem “The Language”:

Locate I
love you some-
where in

teeth and
eyes, bite
it but

Reading the lines as written, as opposed to their grammatical relationship, yields some strange meanings. “Locate I” seems to indicate a search for identity, and indeed it may, but the next line, which continues with “love you some-,” seems to make a diminishing statement about a relationship. On its own, “eyes bite” is very disturbing.

Hearing Creeley read his poems can often be disquieting, because he pauses at the end of each line, and these pauses create a kind of tension or counterpoint in relation to the poem’s sentence structure. His halting, hesitant, breathless style is immediately recognizable, and it presents writers with new ideas about meaning, purely through lineation. But many poets who break lines disregarding grammatical units do so only for visual irony, something that may be lost in performance. Among metrical, free verse, and even experimental poets of today, there are those who do not interrupt grammatical sense when reading a poem aloud as much as they interrupt it in the poem’s typography. What to do as a reader? Try a variety of methods. It’s fun to “Creeleyize” any poem, just to hear what the lineation is doing. But if the results seem to detract from the poem’s impact, in terms of its imagery or concept, drop the literal treatment of line breaks and read for grammar or visual image. Reading a poem several ways allows you to see further into the poem simply through repetition.

With poets who use techniques drawn from music—particularly jazz, such as Michael S. Harper or Yusef Komunyakaa—or poets like Walt Whitman who employ unusually long lines, there may be another guiding principle: breath. Some poets think of their words as music flowing from a horn; they think of phrases the way a saxophonist might. Poems composed in this way have varied line lengths but they have a musicality in their lineation and a naturalness to their performance. They may have a recognizable sense of measure, an equivalent duration between lines, or, for the sake of contrast, one rhythmic pattern or duration that gives way to successive variations.

For some poems, visual impact may also be important. In “shaped poetry,” as well as many other types of writing that are meant to be seen as a painting might be seen, the line is determined by its placement in space. Some visually oriented poets present real challenges in that the course of the poem may not be entirely clear. Visual choices presented by the poet may be confusing. Sometimes the arrangements of words on a page are intended to
represent different voices in a dialogue, or even a more complex discourse on a subject. Overlapping and layering might be the poet’s intent, which no single voice can achieve. It’s best to be aware that poems with multiple voices, or focuses exist and, again, looking for the inherent rules that determine the shape of the poem is the best approach.

Remember that the use of these techniques, in any combination, pushes the words of the poem beyond their literal meanings. If you find more in a poem than the words alone convey, then something larger is at work, making the poem more than the sum of its parts.

**Starting the Conversation**

We mentioned earlier that encountering a difficult poem is like a game or sport, say rock climbing, that makes you work a bit. The idea of finding handholds and footholds and ascending one bit at a time is apt. But some climbs are easier than others; some are very easy. You may enjoy an easy climb for a while, but you may also find that you want a bigger challenge. Reading poetry works the same way, and, fortunately, poets leave trails to help you look for the way “up” a poem. You’ll have to do some work, hard work in some cases, but most of the time, the trails are there for you to discover.

At the Great Books Foundation, we believe that the best way to discover and learn about a poem is through shared inquiry discussion. Although your first experience of the poem may be private and personal, we think talking about the poem is a natural and important next step. Beginning with a focus question about the poem, the discussion addresses various possible answers to the question, reshaping and clarifying it along the way. The discussion should remain grounded in the text as much as possible. Responses that move away from what is written into personal anecdotes or tangential leaps should be gently urged back into analyzing the text. The basis for shared inquiry is close analyzing. Good readers “dirty the text” with notes in the margins. They make the inquiry their own. We encourage you to write your own notes in this book.

**Talking Back to a Poem**

It would be convenient if there were a short list of universal questions, ones that could be used anytime with any poem. In the absence of such a list, here are a few general questions that you might ask when approaching a poem for the first time:

- Who is the speaker?
- What circumstances gave rise to the poem?
- What situation is presented?
- Who or what is the audience?
- What is the tone?
- What form, if any, does the poem take?
- How is form related to content?
- Is sound an important, active element of the poem?
- Does the poem spring from an identifiable historical moment?
- Does the poem speak from a specific culture?
- Does the poem have its own vernacular?
- Does the poem use imagery to achieve a particular effect?
- What kind of figurative language, if any, does the poem use?
- If the poem is a question, what is the answer?
- If the poem is an answer, what is the question?
- What does the title suggest?
- Does the poem use unusual words or use words in an unusual way?
You can fall back on these questions as needed, but experience suggests that since each poem is unique, such questions will not go the necessary distance. In many instances, knowing who the speaker is may not yield any useful information. There may be no identifiable occasion that inspired the poem. But poems do offer clues about where to start. Asking questions about the observable features of a poem will help you find a way in.

We’ll now bring inquiry to bear on two very different poems, each of which presents its own challenges:

- “The Red Wheelbarrow” by William Carlos Williams
- “Diving into the Wreck” by Adrienne Rich

Text and Context

Some people say that a poem is always an independent work of art and that readers can make full sense of it without having to use any source outside the poem itself. Others say that no text exists in a vacuum. However, the truth lies somewhere in between. Most poems are open to interpretation without the aid of historical context or knowledge about the author’s life. In fact, it’s often best to approach a poem without the kind of preconceived ideas that can accompany this kind of information. Other poems, however, overtly political poems in particular, will benefit from some knowledge of the poet’s life and times. The amount of information needed to clearly understand depends on you and your encounter with the poem. It’s possible, of course, even for someone with a deep background in poetry to be unaware of certain associations or implications in a poem. This is because poems are made of words that accumulate new meanings over time.

Consider this situation, a true story, of a poet who found a “text” at the San Mateo coast in northern California. As she scrambled over rocks behind the beach, near the artichoke fields that separate the shore from the coast highway, she found a large smear of graffiti painted on the rocks, proclaiming “La Raza,” a Chicano political slogan meaning “the struggle.” She sat down and wrote a poem. Why? her poem asked. I understand, she wrote, why someone would write La Raza on the side of a building, or on public transport. There it would be seen and would shout its protest from the very foundations of the oppressive system. But why here, in nature, in beauty, so far from that political arena. Couldn’t you leave the coast unspoiled? Then, one evening while reading the poem in Berkeley she got her answer. A man came up to her and asked her, “Do you want to know?” “I beg your pardon,” she said. “Those fields,” the man went on, “were where Chicanos had been virtually enslaved, beaten, and forced to live in squalor for decades.” The landscape was not innocent of political struggle. The text was not out of place.

Embrace Ambiguity

Here’s a tricky issue: the task is to grasp, to connect, to understand. But such a task is to some degree impossible, and most people want clarity. At the end of class, at the end of the day, we want revelation, a glimpse of the skyline through the lifting fog. Aesthetically, this is understandable. Some magic, some satisfaction, some “Ahhh!” is one of the rewards of any reading, and particularly the reading of poetry. But a poem that reveals itself
completely in one or two readings will, over time, seem less of a poem than one that constantly reveals subtle recesses and previously unrecognized meanings.

Here’s a useful analogy. A life partner, a husband, a wife—these are people with whom we hope to constantly renew our love. Despite the routine, the drone of familiarity, the daily preparation of meals and doing of dishes, the conversations we’ve had before, we hope to find a sense of discovery, of surprise. The same is true of poems. The most magical and wonderful poems are ever renewing themselves, which is to say they remain ever mysterious.

Too often we resist ambiguity. Perhaps our lives are changing so fast that we long for stability somewhere, and because most of the reading we do is for instruction or information, we prefer it without shades of gray. We want it to be predictable and easy to digest. And so difficult poetry is the ultimate torment.

Some literary critics would link this as well to the power of seeing, to the relationship between subject and object. We wish the poem to be object so we can possess it through our “seeing” its internal workings. When it won’t allow us to “objectify” it, we feel powerless.

Torment, powerlessness—these are the desired ends? Well, no. The issue is our reaction, how we shape our thoughts through words. We have to give up our material attitude, which makes us want to possess the poem. Maybe we’ve bought the book but we don’t own the poem. We have to cultivate a new mindset, a new practice of enjoying the inconclusive.

Embracing ambiguity is a much harder task for some than for others. Nothing scares some people like the idea (even the idea) of improvisation as a writing or analytical tool. Some actors hate being without a script; the same is true of some musicians. Ask even some excellent players to improvise and they start to sweat. Of course, actors and musicians will say that there is mystery in what they do with a script or a score, and it would be pointless to disagree. The point, after all, is that text is mysterious. Playing the same character night after night, an actor discovers something in the lines, some empathy for the character, that he or she had never felt before. Playing or listening to a song for the hundredth time—if it is a great song—will yield new interpretation and discovery. So it is with great poetry.
#1: "I Am Not Yours"
by Sara Teasdale

I am not yours, not lost in you,
Not lost, although I long to be
Lost as a candle lit at noon,
Lost as a snowflake in the sea.

You love me, and I find you still
A spirit beautiful and bright,
Yet I am I, who long to be
Lost as a light is lost in light.

Oh plunge me deep in love -- put out
My senses, leave me deaf and blind,
Swept by the tempest of your love,
A taper in a rushing wind.

#2: If
by Rudyard Kipling

If you can keep your head when all about you
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you;
If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you,
But make allowance for their doubting too:
If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,
Or, being lied about, don't deal in lies,
Or being hated don't give way to hating,
And yet don't look too good, nor talk too wise;

If you can dream---and not make dreams your master;
If you can think---and not make thoughts your aim,
If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster
And treat those two impostors just the same:
If you can bear to hear the truth you've spoken
Twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools,
Or watch the things you gave your life to, broken,
And stoop and build'em up with worn-out tools;

If you can make one heap of all your winnings
And risk it on one turn of pitch-and-toss,
And lose, and start again at your beginnings,
And never breathe a word about your loss:
If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew
To serve your turn long after they are gone,
And so hold on when there is nothing in you
Except the Will which says to them: "Hold on!"

If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,
Or walk with Kings---nor lose the common touch,
If neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you,
If all men count with you, but none too much:
If you can fill the unforgiving minute
With sixty seconds' worth of distance run,
Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,
And---which is more---you'll be a Man, my son!

#3: Road Not Taken, The
by Robert Lee Frost

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that, the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I --
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

#4: Fire and Ice
by Robert Lee Frost

Some say the world will end in fire;
Some say in ice.
From what I've tasted of desire
I hold with those who favor fire.
But if it had to perish twice,
I think I know enough of hate
To know that for destruction ice
Is also great
And would suffice.

#5 A Dream
by William Blake

Once a dream did weave a shade
O'er my angel-guarded bed,
That an emmet lost its way
Where on grass methought I lay.

Troubled, wildered, and forlorn,
Over many a tangle spray,
All heart-broke, I heard her say:

"Oh my children! do they cry,
Do they hear their father sigh?
Now they look abroad to see,
Now return and weep for me."

Pitying, I dropped a tear:
But I saw a glow-worm near,
Who replied, "What wailing wight
Calls the watchman of the night?"
"I am set to light the ground,  
While the beetle goes his round:  
Follow now the beetle's hum;  
Little wanderer, hie thee home!"

#6: Without warning  
by Sappho  
Without warning  
as a whirlwind  
swoops on an oak  
Love shakes my heart

#6: How Do I Love Thee?  
by Elizabeth Barrett Browning  
How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.  
I love thee to the depth and breadth and height  
My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight  
For the ends of Being and ideal Grace.  
I love thee to the level of every day's  
Most quiet need, by sun and candlelight.  
I love thee freely, as men strive for Right;  
I love thee purely, as they turn from Praise.  
I love with a passion put to use  
In my old griefs, and with my childhood's faith.  
I love thee with a love I seemed to lose  
With my lost saints, -- I love thee with the breath,  
Smiles, tears, of all my life! -- and, if God choose,  
I shall but love thee better after death.

#7: Alone  
by Edgar Allan Poe  
From childhood's hour I have not been  
As others were; I have not seen  
As others saw; I could not bring  
My passions from a common spring.  
From the same source I have not taken  
My sorrow; I could not awaken  
My heart to joy at the same tone;  
And all I loved, I loved alone.  
Then- in my childhood, in the dawn  
Of a most stormy life- was drawn  
From every depth of good and ill  
The mystery which binds me still:  
From the torrent, or the fountain,  
From the red cliff of the mountain,  
From the sun that round me rolled  
In its autumn tint of gold,  
From the lightning in the sky  
As it passed me flying by,  
From the thunder and the storm,  
And the cloud that took the form  
(When the rest of Heaven was blue)  
Of a demon in my view.

#8: Because I could not stop for Death,  
by Emily Dickinson  
Because I could not stop for Death,  
He kindly stopped for me;  
The carriage held but just ourselves  
And Immortality.

We slowly drove, he knew no haste,  
And I had put away  
My labor, and my leisure too,  
For his civility.

We passed the school where children played,  
Their lessons scarcely done;  
We passed the fields of gazing grain,  
We passed the setting sun.

We paused before a house that seemed  
A swelling of the ground;  
The roof was scarcely visible,  
The cornice but a mound.

Since then 't is centuries; but each  
Feels shorter than the day  
I first surmised the horses' heads  
Were toward eternity.

#9: Jabberwocky  
by Lewis Carroll  
'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves  
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:  
All mimsy were the borogoves,  
And the mome raths outgrabe.

"Beware the Jabberwock, my son!  
The jaws that bite, the claws that catch!  
Beware the Jubjub bird, and shun  
The frumious Bandersnatch!"

He took his vorpal sword in hand:  
Long time the manxome foe he sought --  
So rested he by the Tumtum tree,  
And stood a while in thought.

And, as in uffish thought he stood,  
The Jabberwock, with eyes of flame,  
Came whiffling through the tulgey wood,  
And burbled as it came!

One two! One two! And through and through  
The vorpal blade went snicker-snack!  
He left it dead, and with its head  
He went galumphing back.

"And hast thou slain the Jabberwock?  
Come to my arms, my beamish boy!  
Oh frabjous day! Callooh! Callay!"

He chortled in his joy.

'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves  
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:  
All mimsy were the borogoves,  
And the mome raths outgrabe.
**#10: Kubla Khan**  
*by Samuel Taylor Coleridge*

In Xanadu did Kubla Khan  
A stately pleasure-dome decree:  
Where Alph, the sacred river, ran  
Through caverns measureless to man  
Down to a sunless sea.  
So twice five miles of fertile ground  
With walls and towers were girdled round:  
And there were gardens bright with sinuous rills,  
Where blossomed many an incense-bearing tree;  
And here were forests ancient as the hills,  
Enfolding sunny spots of greenery.

But oh! that deep romantic chasm which slanted  
Down the green hill athwart a cedarn cover!  
A savage place! as holy and enchanted  
As e'er beneath a waning moon was haunted  
By woman wailing for her demon-lover!  
And from this chasm, with ceaseless turmoil seething,  
As if this earth in fast thick pants were breathing,  
A mighty fountain momently was forced:  
Amid whose swift half-intermitted burst  
Huge fragments vaulted like rebounding hail,  
Or chaffy grain beneath the thresher's flail:  
And 'mid these dancing rocks at once and ever  
It flung up momently the sacred river.  
Five miles meandering with a mazy motion  
Through wood and dale the sacred river ran,  
Then reached the caverns measureless to man,  
And sank in tumult to a lifeless ocean:  
And 'mid this tumult Kubla heard from far  
Ancestral voices prophesying war!

The shadow of the dome of pleasure  
Floated midway on the waves;  
Where was heard the mingled measure  
From the fountain and the caves.

It was a miracle of rare device,  
A sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice!  
A damsel with a dulcimer  
In a vision once I saw:  
It was an Abyssinian maid,  
And on her dulcimer she played,  
Singing of Mount Abora.  
Could I revive within me  
Her symphony and song,  
To such a deep delight 'twould win me,  
That with music loud and long,  
I would build that dome in air,  
That sunny dome! those caves of ice!  
And all who heard should see them there,  
And all should cry, Beware! Beware!  
His flashing eyes, his floating hair!  
Weave a circle round him thrice,  
And close your eyes with holy dread,  
For he on honey-dew hath fed,  
And drank the milk of Paradise.

**#11: The Summer I Was Sixteen**  
*Geraldine Connolly*

The turquoise pool rose up to meet us,  
Its slide a silver afterthought down which  
We plunged, screaming, into a mirage of bubbles.  
We did not exist beyond the gaze of a boy.  
Shaking water off our limbs, we lifted up from ladder rungs across the fern-cool lip of rim.  
Afternoon. Oiled and sated, we sunbathed, rose and paraded the concrete, danced to the low beat of "Duke of Earl".  
Past cherry colas, hot-dogs, Dreamsicles, we came to the counter where bees staggered into root beer cups and drowned.  
We gobbled cotton candy torches, sweet as furtive kisses, shared on benches beneath summer shadows.  
Cherry. Elm. Sycamore. We spread our Chenille blankets across grass, pressed radios to our ears, mouthed the old words, then loosened thin bikini straps and rubbed baby oil with iodine across sunburned shoulders, tossing a glance through the chain link at an improbable world.

**#12: “Do You Have Any Advice For Those of Us Just Starting Out?”**  
*Ron Koertge*

Give up sitting dutifully at your desk. Leave your house or apartment. Go out into the world. It's all right to carry a notebook but a cheap one is best, with pages the color of weak tea and on the front a kitten or a space ship.  
Avoid any enclosed space where more than three people are wearing turtle necks. Beware any snow-covered chalet with deer tracks across the muffled tennis courts.  
Not surprisingly, libraries are a good place to write. And the perfect place in a library is near an aisle where a child a year or two old is playing as his mother browses the ranks of the dead.  
Often he will pull books from the bottom shelf. The title, the author's name, the brooding photo on the flap mean nothing. Red book on black, gray book on brown, he builds a tower. And the higher it gets, the wider he grins.  
You who asked for advice, listen: When the tower falls, be like that child. Laugh so loud everybody in the world frowns and says, "Shhh." Then start again.
#13: Did I Miss Anything?

Tom Wayman

Nothing. When we realized you weren’t here we sat with our hands folded on our desks in silence, for the full two hours
   Everything. I gave an exam worth 40 percent of the grade for this term and assigned some reading due today on which I’m about to hand out a quiz worth 50 percent
Nothing. None of the content of this course has value or meaning
Take as many days off as you like: any activities we undertake as a class I assure you will not matter either to you or me and are without purpose
   Everything. A few minutes after we began last time a shaft of light suddenly descended and an angel or other heavenly being appeared and revealed to us what each woman or man must do to attain divine wisdom in this life and the hereafter
This is the last time the class will meet before we disperse to bring the good news to all people on earth.
Nothing. When you are not present how could something significant occur?
   Everything. Contained in this classroom is a microcosm of human experience assembled for you to query and examine and ponder This is not the only place such an opportunity has been gathered but it was one place And you weren’t here

#14: American Cheese

Jim Daniels

At department parties, I eat cheeses my parents never heard of—goopy pale cheeses speaking garbled tongues. I have acquired a taste, yes, and that’s okay, I tell myself. I grew up in a house shaded by the factory’s clank and clamor. A house built like a square of sixty-four American Singles, the ones my mother made lunches With—for the hungry man who disappeared into that factory, and five hungry kids. American Singles. Yellow mustard. Day-old Wonder Bread. Not even Swiss, with its mysterious holes. We were sparrows and starlings still learning how the blue jay stole our eggs, our nest eggs. Sixty-four Singles wrapped in wax—dig your nails in to separate them.

When I come home, I crave—more than any home cooking—those thin slices in the fridge. I fold one in half, drop it in my mouth. My mother can’t understand. Doesn’t remember me being a cheese eater, plain like that.

#15: Numbers

Mary Cornish

I like the generosity of numbers. The way, for example, they are willing to count anything or anyone: two pickles, one door to the room, eight dancers dressed as swans. I like the domesticity of addition—
   add two cups of milk and stir— the sense of plenty: six plums on the ground, three more falling from the tree. And multiplication’s school of fish times fish, whose silver bodies breed beneath the shadow of a boat. Even subtraction is never loss, just addition somewhere else: five sparrows take away two, the two in someone else’s garden now.
There’s an amplitude to long division, as it opens Chinese take-out box by paper box, inside every folded cookie a new fortune.
And I never fail to be surprised by the gift of an odd remainder, footloose at the end: forty-seven divided by eleven equals four, with three remaining. Three boys beyond their mothers’ call, two Italians off to the sea, one sock that isn’t anywhere you look.

#16: Snow

David Berman

Walking through a field with my little brother Seth I pointed to a place where kids had made angels in the snow. For some reason, I told him that a troop of angels had been shot and dissolved when they hit the ground. He asked who had shot them and I said a farmer.

Then we were on the roof of the lake. The ice looked like a photograph of water. Why he asked. Why did he shoot them. I didn’t know where I was going with this. They were on his property, I said.

When it's snowing, the outdoors seem like a room. Today I traded hellos with my neighbor. Our voices hung close in the new acoustics. A room with the walls blasted to shreds and falling. We returned to our shoveling, working side by side in silence.

But why were they on his property, he asked.
#17: Cartoon Physics, part 1

_Nick Flynn_

Children under, say, ten, shouldn't know that the universe is ever-expanding, inexorably pushing into the vacuum, galaxies swallowed by galaxies, whole solar systems collapsing, all of it acted out in silence. At ten we are still learning the rules of cartoon animation, that if a man draws a door on a rock only he can pass through it. Anyone else who tries will crash into the rock. Ten-year-olds should stick with burning houses, car wrecks, ships going down -- earthbound, tangible disasters, arenas where they can be heroes. You can run back into a burning house, sinking ships have lifeboats, the trucks will come with their ladders, if you jump you will be saved. A child places her hand on the roof of a schoolbus, & drives across a city of sand. She knows the exact spot it will skid, at which point the bridge will give, who will swim to safety & who will be pulled under by sharks. She will learn that if a man runs off the edge of a cliff he will not fall until he notices his mistake.

#18: Grammar

_Tony Hoagland_

Maxine, back from a weekend with her boyfriend, smiles like a big cat and says that she's a conjugated verb. She's been doing the direct object with a second person pronoun named Phil, and when she walks into the room, everybody turns: some kind of light is coming from her head. Even the geraniums look curious, and the bees, if they were here, would buzz suspiciously around her hair, looking for the door in her corona. We're all attracted to the perfume of fermenting joy, we've all tried to start a fire, and one day maybe it will blaze up on its own. In the meantime, she is the one today among us most able to bear the idea of her own beauty, and when we see it, what we do is natural: we take our burned hands out of our pockets, and clap.

#19: Bringing My Son to the Police Station to be Fingerprinted

_Shoshauna Shy_

My lemon-colored whisper-weight blouse with keyhole closure and sweetheart neckline is tucked into a pastel silhouette skirt with side-slit vents and triplicate pleats when I realize in the sunlight through the windshield that the cool yellow of this blouse clashes with the buttermilk heather in my skirt which makes me slightly queasy however the periwinkle in the pattern on the sash is sufficiently echoed by the twill uppers of my buckle-snug sandals while the accents on my purse pick up the pink in the button stitches and then as we pass through Weapons Check it's reassuring to note how the yellows momentarily mesh and make an overall pleasing composite.

#20: Sister Cat

_Frances Mayes_

Cat stands at the fridge, Cries loudly for milk. But I've filled her bowl. Wild cat, I say, Sister, Look, you have milk. I clink my fingernail Against the rim. Milk. With down and liver, A word I know she hears. Her sad miaow. She runs To me. She dips In her whiskers but Doesn't drink. As sometimes I want the light on When it is on. Or when I saw the woman walking toward my house and I thought there's Frances. Then looked in the car mirror To be sure. She stalks The room. She wants. Milk Beyond milk. World beyond This one, she cries.
Poetic Devices Glossary
An introduction to poetic terms and devices.

Basic Terms
- connotation: the implied or suggested meaning connected with a word
- denotation: the dictionary meaning of a word
- literal meaning: limited to the simplest, ordinary, most obvious meaning
- figurative meaning: associative or connotative meaning; representational
- meter: measured pattern of rhythmic accents in a line of verse
- rhyme: correspondence of terminal sounds of words or of lines of verse

Figurative Language
- apostrophe: a direct address of an inanimate object, abstract qualities, or a person not living or present
  Example: “Beware, O Asparagus, you’ve stalked my last meal.”
- hyperbole: exaggeration for emphasis (the opposite of understatement)
  Example: “I’m so hungry I could eat a horse.”
- metaphor: comparison between essentially unlike things, or the application of a name or description to something to which it is not literally applicable
  Example: “[Love] is an ever fixed mark, / that looks on tempests and is never shaken.”
- metonymy: a word or phrase that replaces the name of an object or concept for another to which it is related
  Example: “We have always remained loyal to the crown” instead of “We have always remained loyal to the monarchy.”
- oxymoron: a combination of two words that appear to contradict each other
  Example: bittersweet

Poetic Devices
- paradox: a situation or phrase that appears to be contradictory but which contains a truth worth considering
  Example: “In order to preserve peace, we must prepare for war.”
- personification: the endowment of inanimate objects or abstract concepts with animate or living qualities
  Example: “Time let me play / and be golden in the mercy of his means”
- pun: play on words, or a humorous use of a single word or sound with two or more implied meanings; quibble
  Example: “They’re called lessons . . . because they lessen from day to day.”
- simile: comparison between two essentially unlike things using words such as “like,” “as,” or “as though”
  Example: “My mistress’ eyes are nothing like the sun”
- synecdoche: a part substituted for the whole
  Example: “All hands on deck” instead of “All sailors on deck.”
auditory, olfactory, tactile, and gustatory)  
*Example:* “bells knelling classes to a close” (auditory)

- **irony:** a contradiction of expectation between what is said and what is meant (verbal irony) or what is expected in a particular circumstance or behavior (situational), or when a character speaks in ignorance of a situation known to the audience or other characters (situational)  
  *Example:* “Time held me green and dying / Though I sang in my chains like the sea”

- **onomatopoeia:** the use of words to imitate the sounds they describe  
  *Example:* “crack” or “whir”

- **slant rhyme (off rhyme, half rhyme, imperfect rhyme):** rhyme formed with words with similar but not wholly identical sounds  
  *Example:* barn / yard

- **synesthesia:** an attempt to fuse different senses by describing one in terms of another  
  *Example:* the sound of her voice was sweet

- **symbol:** an object or action that stands for something beyond itself  
  *Example:* white = innocence, purity, hope

**Meter**

- **anapestic (anapest):** a metrical foot containing three syllables—the first two are unstressed, while the last is stressed

- **dactylic (dactyl):** a metrical foot containing three syllables—the first is stressed, while the last two are unstressed

- **falling meter:** meter containing metrical feet that move from stressed to unstressed syllables

- **iambic (iamb):** a metrical foot containing two syllables—the first is unstressed, while the second is stressed

- **iambic pentameter:** a traditional form of rising meter consisting of lines containing five iambic feet (and, thus, ten syllables)

- **pause (caesura):** a pause for a beat in the rhythm of the verse (often indicated by a line break or a mark of punctuation)

- **rising meter:** meter containing metrical feet that move from unstressed to stressed syllables

- **spondee:** a nontraditional metrical foot in which two consecutive syllables are stressed

- **stress:** greater amount of force used to pronounce one syllable over another

- **trochaic (trochee):** a metrical foot containing two syllables—the first is stressed, while the second is unstressed

**Poetic Forms**

- **blank verse:** unrhymed iambic pentameter

- **closed:** poetic form subject to a fixed structure and pattern

- **couplet:** a pair of lines, usually rhymed

- **free verse:** lines with no prescribed pattern or structure

- **heroic couplet:** a pair of rhymed lines in iambic pentameter (tradition of the heroic epic form)

- **open:** poetic form free from regularity and consistency in elements such as rhyme, line length, and metrical form

- **quatrain:** four-line stanza or grouping of four lines of verse

- **stanza:** unit of a poem often repeated in the same form throughout a poem; a unit of poetic lines (“verse paragraph”)

*For more poetic terms and forms, visit “Browse Poems and Poets” from the Poets.org homepage, then click on the “Forms” menu in the Poem Index. You can also browse our texts for more information on poetic terms and forms, as well as essays, interviews, and articles about poets and poetry.*