

Step One: Read

Have your students read the poem once to themselves and then aloud, all the way through, at LEAST twice. Feel free to play a recording of the poem or show a video of someone reading the poem, too. Afterward, talk to your class about their first impression and immediate responses, both positive and negative. Also, discuss the poem's structure and rhythm. For example, are the lines short and meant to be read slow? Or, does the poem move fast, and if so, why?

Step Two: Title

Think about the title and how it relates to the poem. Titles often provide important clues about what is at the heart of a piece. Likewise, a title may work ironically or in opposition to a poem. Questions to talk about and consider are:

Does the title immediately change how you think about it?

Does the poem's title paint a picture that gives a specific time frame, setting or action?

Does it imply multiple possibilities?

Step Three: Speaker

Understanding the speaker is at the center of a poem may help the piece appear more tangible to students because they're able to imagine a person behind the language. Questions to consider are:

Who "tells" the poem?

Does the poem give any clues about the speaker's personality, the point of view, age, or gender?

Who is the speaker addressing?

Does the speaker seem attached or detached from what is said?

Step Four: Mood and Tone

After talking about the speaker, it's important to address the attitude or mood the poem is attempting to convey. Some can be brooding or grieving; others may have a song-like cadence and rhyme. Discuss the attitude each speaker or characters give off. Moreover, talk about if there places where the poem's tone may switch and why. This is also a good time to talk syntax and the effect certain words have on us.

Step Five: Paraphrase

Since you discussed figurative language, mood, setting, and speaker—there's no better time than to apply what you've learned line-by-line. Paraphrasing may seem pretty self-explanatory. However, keep in mind this is not about skipping lines or condensing. Instead you should lead students line-by-line and translate figurative language or unclear phrases into simpler terms that will not get in the way of analyzing the poem later on.

Step Six: Theme

Last but not least, it's time to get to the core of what the poem is about by identifying its theme. The theme of a poem relates to a universal truth, issue, or conflict. To determine the theme, look over all of your analysis and connect the dots:

What is the subject?

Who is the speaker?

What situation are they in?

How do they feel about the subject?

What is the mood?