

Poetry Explication Guide

Now that you have analyzed a poem in detail (Task #3), it is time to organize those thoughts into a cohesive unit. Task #4 requires you to write a **poetry explication**.

“To explicate” means to make the meaning of something clear. Thus, a poetry explication is a paper that seeks to analyze and to clarify the meaning of a poem. A poetry explication is NOT a summary or a paraphrase of the poem.

The explication paper shares many features of the standard academic essay, yet it is slightly different. Follow the guidelines below to create this paper. This guide provides examples using the poem “Nothing Gold Can Stay” on page 60 in *Literature for Life*.

Step #1: Begin with a sentence that introduces the topic of the paper. This sentence should include **the poem’s title**, **the author**, and **the subject of the poem**.

Example: In “**Nothing Gold Can Stay**,” poet **Robert Frost** describes **how nature changes from one season to another**.

Step #2: Follow the first sentence with a brief summary of what the poet uses to give the poem meaning. Note that this summary should not be about the poem; instead, it should summarize the **literary devices** that the poet uses. Use your work in Task #3 to help you.

Example: Frost’s use of **imagery**, **personification**, and **allusion** allow the reader to grasp the inevitable change that the passage of time brings. The speaker’s contrasting **diction** further emphasizes this message throughout the poem.

Steps #1 and #2 will constitute your opening paragraph. This paragraph will likely be much shorter than a standard introduction for an academic essay.

Step #3: Begin with a **line by line** analysis of the poem. Your task is to explain the literary devices used in **each** line and the effect that the devices have on the meaning of the poem. You should show how each part of the poem contributes to the overall meaning. While slight paraphrasing and quoting will be required, make sure that you do NOT simply paraphrase the poem.

Example: The poem begins with the image of leaves as they first appear in the spring. In line 1, the speaker uses the word “gold” in an effort to call to mind the typical colors of these leaves. Readers can easily envision a tree with leaves sprouting in a variety of yellow hues. The word “gold” also has a deeper, implied effect on the reader. Things of gold are typically highly valued; for example, Olympic winners are given gold medals, spouses exchange gold rings, and art museums house golden engravings. Thus, with this diction, the speaker is subtly implying that leaves in their initial state are something of value. The reader is yet to understand why, but as the poem progresses, the fact that these leaves are pure and unchanged becomes clear.

Notice how specific this example is. The image and the diction of line 1 are both analyzed in detail, and the author’s choices are given meaning.

This line by line analysis will constitute the bulk of your paper. You will need to decide when to end a paragraph and begin another. Poems that are divided into stanzas provide logical divisions. Devote one paragraph to each stanza. However, if the poem does not have stanzas (like Frost's "Nothing Gold Can Stay"), you will need to decide when to begin a new paragraph. If I were to continue writing about Frost's poem, I would probably begin a new paragraph after my analysis of line 1. Remember that paragraph breaks give your reader an opportunity to breathe, so you don't want any one paragraph to be too long.

Step #4: You will not have a conclusion paragraph like a standard academic essay; however, you do need a conclusion sentence. After you have analyzed the last line of the poem, you should conclude the explication with a sentence that states the overall message of the poem. In other words, what message does the poet achieve through the various literary devices? This sentence identifies the theme of the poem.

Example: At first glance, Frost's poem appears to be nothing more than a description of nature; however, upon closer examination, one can see that the speaker is actually lamenting the inevitable loss of innocence that occurs as times passes and individuals age.

While this assignment does not have a length requirement, a detailed explication will be around two full pages.

Things to Remember:

- Follow basic literary conventions when writing this paper.
- When quoting from the poem, follow the guidelines given on page 186 in *Literature for Life*.
- Format your paper according to the Formatting Guidelines handout.
- **DO NOT CONSULT OUTSIDE SOURCES.** Everything in this paper should come from your brain. I am not interested in what others have to say. I am only interested in your thoughts.
- Use transitions to move from one paragraph to another. Make sure your paper flows smoothly! Consult pages 85-87 in *The Little, Brown Handbook* for more information.