Poetry and AP Language

**Introduction to Poetry**

Poetry—the very word inspires fear and trembling, and well it should because it deals with the intensity of human emotion and the experiences of life itself. But there is no reason to fear that which elevates, elucidates, edifies, and inspires. Poetry is a gift of language, like speech and song, and with familiarity comes pleasure and knowledge and comfort.

However, it may still be intimidating to read poetry. After all, we have been speaking and reading prose our entire lives. This review assumes that by the time you reach an AP level literature course, you have some experience and facility with poetry. I provide you with definitions, examples, and practice with interpretation. Hopefully, you will provide the interest, diligence, and critical thinking necessary for a joyful and meaningful experience.

A good start: First you should read as much poetry as possible. Early in the year, pick up an anthology of poetry and read, read, read. Open to any page and read for pleasure and interest. Don't try to "study" the poems; just respond to them on an emotional level. Consider the following:

* Identify subjects that move you or engage you.
* Are there certain themes you respond to? Are there certain poets you like? List them and read more poetry by them.
* Are there certain types or styles of poems you enjoy? What do they seem to have in common?
* Are there images or lines you love? Keep a record of some of your favorites.

Make this a time to develop a personal taste for poetry. Use this random approach to experience a broad range of form and content. You should find that you are more comfortable with poetry simply because you have been discovering it at your own pace.

When you are comfortable and have honestly tried reading it for pleasure, it is time to approach it on a more analytical level.

**The Structure of Poetry**

**What makes poetry different from prose?**

How do you know when you're working with poetry and not prose? Simple. Just look at it. It is shorter; it is condensed; it's written in a different physical form. The following might help you to visualize the basic differences:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Prose** | **Poetry** |
| Words | Syllables |
| Phrases | Feet |
| Sentences | Lines |
| Paragraphs | Stanzas |
| Chapters | Cantos |

Clearly, poetry sounds different from prose. It is more musical, and it often relies on sound to convey meaning. In addition, it can employ meter which provides rhythm. Did you know that poetry is from the ancient oral tradition of storytelling and song? Rhyme and meter made it easier for the bards to remember the story line. Try to imagine Homer in a dimly lit hall chanting the story of Odysseus.

As with prose, poetry also has its own jargon. Some of this lingo is specifically related to form and meter. The analysis of a poem's form and meter is termed ***scansion***.

**The Foot**

The ***foot*** is the basic building block of poetry. It is composed of a pattern of syllables. These patterns create the meter of a poem. ***Meter*** is a pattern of beats or accents. We figure this pattern out by counting the stressed and unstressed syllables in a line. Unstressed syllables are indicated with a  and stressed syllables are indicated with a .

There are five common patterns that are used repeatedly in English poetry. They are:



**The Line**

Unlike the prose sentence that is determined by subject, verb, and punctuation, the poetic line is measured by the number of feet it contains.

* 1 foot    monometer
* 2 feet     dimeter
* 3 feet     trimeter
* 4 feet     tetrameter
* 5 feet     pentameter
* 6 feet     hexameter
* 7 feet     heptameter
* 8 feet     octameter
* 9 feet     nonometer

**Your Turn**

Now answer the following. How many stressed syllables are in a line of:

Iambic pentameter      \_\_\_\_\_

Dactylic trimeter          \_\_\_\_\_

Anapestic dimeter        \_\_\_\_\_

Spondaic monometer   \_\_\_\_\_

Trochaic tetrameter      \_\_\_\_\_

**The Stanza**

You should now understand that syllables form feet, feet form lines, and lines form stanzas. Stanzas also have names:

* 1 line       line
* 2 lines     couplet
* 3 lines     tercet
* 4 lines     quatrain
* 5 lines     cinquain
* 6 lines     sestet
* 7 lines     septet
* 8 lines     octave

**Your Turn**

What is the total number that results from adding up all of the metric references in the following, make-believe poem?

* The poem is composed of 3 quatrains, 2 couplets and 1 sestet.
* ach quatrain is written in iambic tetrameter.
* he couplets are dactylic dimeter.
* The sestet is trochaic trimeter.

The total number is \_\_\_\_\_

You will never have to be this technical on the AP exam. However, you will probably find a question on meter, and technical terms may be included in the answer choices to the multiple-choice questions. In addition, sometimes in the poetry essay you may find opportunity to use your knowledge of scansion, or your analysis of the rhyme and meter of the poem, to develop your essay. This can be very effective if it is linked to interpretation.

**Rhyme**

One of the first processes you should become familiar with concerns the identification of a poem's rhyme scheme. This is easily accomplished by assigning consecutive letters of the alphabet to each new sound at the end of a line of poetry. Traditionally, rhyme scheme is indicated with italicized, lowercase letters placed to the right of each line of the poem.

* *a* for the first
* *b* for the second
* *c* for the third
* *d*, *e*, and so forth

Try this with the opening stanza from "Peace" by George Herbert.

*Sweet Peace, where dost thou dwell? I humbly crave,*

*Let me once know.*

*I sought thee in a secret cave,*

*And asked if Peace were there.*

*A hollow wind did seem to answer, "No,*

*Go seek elsewhere."*

You may restart the scheme with each new stanza or continue throughout the poem. Remember, the purpose is to identify and establish a pattern and to consider if the pattern helps to develop sound and/or meaning. Here's what the rhyme scheme looks like for the above selection: *a b a c b c*.

When you analyze the pattern of the complete poem, you can conclude that there is a very regular structure to this poem which is consistent throughout. Perhaps the content will also reflect a regular development. Certainly the rhyme enhances the sound of the poem and helps it flow. From now on we will refer to rhyme scheme when we encounter a new poem.

The rhymes we have illustrated are called ***end rhymes*** and are the most common. ***Masculine rhyme*** is the most frequently used end rhyme. It occurs when the last stressed syllable of the rhyming words match exactly. ("The play's the thing/Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king.") However, there are ***internal rhymes*** as well. These rhymes occur within the line and add to the music of the poem. An example of this is *dreary*, in Poe's "The Raven" ("Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered, weak and weary"). ***Feminine rhyme*** involves two consecutive syllables of the rhyming words, with the first syllable stressed. ("The horses were prancing / as the clowns were dancing.")