Poetry Analysis: step by step guide

(Much is stolen from Dr. Margaret Sims)

1. **First Impressions**
   1. Title. Consider your initial impressions of the title. How does it set the tone for the poem? What does it suggest about the subject of the poem?
   2. Paraphrase. Translate the poem into your own words; be able to drain the descriptive and figurative language from the poem to reduce it to its core meaning
      1. Identify a speaker in the poem and speculate as to the speaker’s purpose/ aim.
      2. Focus on one syntactical unit (sentence/clause) at a time. Sometimes just rewriting the poem as a passage of prose aids in understanding.
      3. Locate the verbs-these will show the central action of the poem. Analyzing verb choice should also be key to your attention to diction (see below)
      4. Locate the tension. All poetry presents or implies some kind of conflict, problem, question, unsettled feeling, twinge of regret, etc. If you can identify this tension, your analysis will become much easier.
   3. Diction.
      1. Denotations: Look up and define any words you do not recognize or fully understand.
      2. Allusion: Research any historical/literary/mythological references you do not know.
      3. Connotations: Explore the implied meanings and associations of key words. Note any patterns of diction (what the French call *champs lexical*): What are the suggestions, implications, or hints in these word choices? What do these patterns indicate?
   4. Tone/Mood. Based on diction, images and sound devices, identify the speaker’s attitude toward her subject (tone) and the impression the poem communicates to the reader (mood).
2. **Close Reading (Literary devices & Techniques)**
   1. Devices. Locate as many poetic devices as you can. Consider the following:
      1. Sound devices (alliteration, assonance, consonance, onomatopoeia, rhyme, euphony [intentional use of words that sound good together], cacophony[intentionally using harsh/bad sounding words together that may trip the reader up], etc.)
      2. Figurative language (metaphor, metonymy[a figure of speech used in rhetoric in which a thing or concept is not called by its own name, but by the name of something intimately associated with that thing or concept.], Hyperbole, personification, pun, etc.)
      3. Imagery, synaesthesia [using one sense for another-it tasted red], motifs, juxtaposition, etc.
      4. Symbolism, allegory, apostrophe [a figure of speech in which someone absent or dead or something nonhuman is addressed as if it were alive and present and was able to reply], allusion[referencing something else-usually another poem or the bible], etc.
   2. Technique. Note aspects of style and structure. Consider the following:
      1. Aspects of pacing: enjambment[The continuation of a sentence or phrase across a line break - as opposed to an end-stopped line], end stop, caesura[the linguistic unit that ends mid-line], line breaks, stanza breaks, etc.
      2. Syntax, sentence style, sentence types, etc.
      3. Repetition, parallel structure, anaphora[a repeated word or phrase at the start of a line or sentence], etc.
      4. Rhythm/meter
      5. Closed form vs. open form [
   3. Shifts.
      1. Transitional words/phrases: but, yet, now, however, still, although, etc.
      2. Punctuation: dashes, periods, colons, question marks ellipses, etc.
      3. Stanza breaks/line breaks
      4. Changes in point of view, diction, focus, direction, pacing, etc.
3. **Making Connections (Literary Features & Effects)**
   1. Effects & Significance of your close reading. Look through the annotations and observations from your close reading. Do you see any patterns? Connect your initial observations about what the poem was saying (the content of the paraphrase, the title, the diction) to how it was said (the formal elements). What are the effects of the metaphors, the repetition, the pacing, etc? Find relationships between literary devices and their effects. To make meaning out of the poem, you have to put all of these things together. Consider the following effects (many will overlap):
      1. Irony
      2. Ambiguity
      3. Character development (epiphany)
      4. Tension
      5. Paradox
      6. Tone/mood
      7. Theme
   2. Resist Absolute Closure. Explore the many motifs (issues, ideas, etc.) and the many themes (statements, lessons, questions) that the poem provokes. **Consider making “If-then” statements**. (e.g. If we are to assume that the rabbits are associated with fear, then perhaps the speaker is trying to destroy his fears.)
   3. Make connections. The more you read of a certain poet, start linking and comparing to his/her other works. Or make connections to historical events, political/social observations, literary counterparts. Put the poem in context.
4. **Organize your thoughts into a brilliant Commentary!**

**Break Glass In Case Of Emergency**

**Reading**

-**Look at the verbs**. Even though poems are usually quite abstract and nonlinear, they often have *something* going on and/or are trying to say *something*. Often this *gist* of the poem can be found in the verbs.

-**Find the tension**. No literature is without tension: whether it’s a conflict of desires, opposing forces, miscommunication, balanced dichotomies, or awkward feelings. If you can locate a tension, you are on your way to having something to say.

-**Look for patterns**. When you are annotating the poem, it might help to connect words with similar connotations or to draw attention to a recurring image (or color, type of word etc.). Once you start finding patterns, it will help you determine more easily the speaker’s attitude toward her subject.

-**Look for shifts**. If you can find moments-words, phrases, line breaks, stanza breaks, change in point of view- in which the direction or feel or thrust of the poem shifts- that might help you find the tension. (look for words like “but,” “yet,” “now,” “however,” “and,” though,” and “so”.)

**-Be able to subdivide your literary devices and literary features.**

**Formal Elements**

-Sound Devices include alliteration, assonance, consonance, onomatopoeia, rhyme, meter, etc.

-Stylistic Devices include repetition, parallelism, pacing, syntax, phrasing, diction, etc.

-Structural elements include stanzas, line breaks, meter, end-stop, enjambment, caesura, etc.

**Elements of Meaning**

-Figurative Language: metaphor, simile, personification, hyperbole, metonymy, synecdoche.

-Descriptive Language: imagery, diction (connotation & denotation)

-“Meaning”: often discussed through tone, motif, symbolism, and theme.

Aim your annotations and note-takings toward a specific thesis statement. Before you even begin writing, make sure you have identified as many relevant literary devices and features (remember: that’s one of the criteria on the rubric) and you can say something intelligent about the effect(s) of these.