

## Developing a Thesis for a Critical Analysis of a Poem

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Formulating a clearly developed thesis statement is crucial to the development of your essay. The steps below are designed to help you develop a stronger thesis and introductory paragraph for your term paper. The steps will also be useful in the development of your essay's body paragraphs.

First, you need to decide which poem you will write your essay on.

Follow the steps below to develop a thesis for your essay on your chosen poem.

The work involves brainstorming and writing answers to questions, so get pencil and paper or boot up your computer. Note that some questions apply more directly to one or the other of the two poems:

1. Read the poem several times. Read it out loud at least once.
2. Underline the words in the poem that you do not understand, or words that you think you know the meanings of but cannot define. Using your dictionary, write down the definitions next to those words. Highlight words that seem to have a double meaning. Write down both the **denotation** and the **connotation** of these words. Note whether words have a positive or negative connotation.
3. What meaning does the title have for you? Freewrite for 5 minutes on the possible significance of the title. What associations does it have for you? Does it sound like anything you've heard before?
4. Write down all the words and phrases that give you a clue about the speaker's tone (attitude or emotional state) and character. Now freewrite for 5 minutes, describing the speaker of the poem.
5. Who is being addressed by the speaker? Are there any words or phrases that give a clue about the character of the addressee? What situation is being described? Is there any perceptible conflict or tension? Freewrite for 5 minutes about who is being spoken to in the dramatic situation we are presented with.
6. Note any details that reveal the setting (social situation, physical place, time). Are these details important? How so? Freewrite for 5 minutes about the "where" and "when" of the poem.
7. What is the dominant imagery of the poem? Are there any contrasts in the imagery? What sorts of images are presented? Freewrite for 5 minutes about three of the images that stick in your mind after you put the page aside.
8. Take note of any use of sound effects in the poem. For example, look for alliteration, assonance, cacophony (harsh, disharmonious sounds), rhyme, off-rhyme, and rhythm. Freewrite for 5 minutes about the "soundscape" in the poem.
9. Take note of any use of symbolism in the poem. Note other devices that the poet employs (any figurative language such as metaphor?). Freewrite for 5 minutes trying to unpack one metaphor or plumb the depths of one symbol.
10. Freewrite for 5 minutes about the form of the poem. How many stanzas are there? How many lines per stanza? What observations can you make about the structure as it relates to the "story" of the poem?
11. Make an extensive list of topics considered in the poem. These can be expressed as single words, such as "regret."
12. When you have a list of several topics, circle one or two that seem most relevant to the poem. Now for 5 minutes, freewrite a response to the question, "What is the poet "saying" about that topic or those topics?" When you have answered that question you have stated what you understand as the theme. Now it is time to consider whether you have really tapped in to what the poet is saying, or whether you have imposed your own view on the evidence. Are you surprised by any of your findings? The theme must be supported and developed by the details you have noticed in points 1-10. Remember, a theme is more than a concept (like "death" or "evil" or "regret"); it is what the author is "saying" about that concept.
13. The thesis of your essay will then be a statement that tells the reader what the theme is and which of the literary devices the author uses to develop that theme. Write that sentence or sentences down.

Your essay's introductory paragraph should contain 4-5 sentences. Your first sentence will introduce the subject of your essay. It should not be too broad in scope, so avoid references to "the history of literature," "the beginning of time" and so forth. Instead, hone in on *this* poem, mentioning the poem's title in quotation marks and the poet's name, and something basic about the poem, for instance whether it is in a fixed form or may be read as a dramatic monologue. Your essay's opening paragraph should introduce your main points (arguments) and—most important—it should present your thesis statement.