

SOME SUGGESTIONS ON HOW TO EXPLICATE A POEM

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--Begin by taking a lot of notes. Annotate your book or handout. Try to notice everything that seems important and interesting but don't demand that you know yet where it will all lead.

--Try retyping the poems double or triple spaced (but make sure you don't make any errors in copying the poem), and write into the spaces. Look up words in a good dictionary if you suspect clarification a meaning might be helpful, Challenge your own language; look for the best and most appropriate words to describe what is going on at a particular moment.

--Annotate every line of the poem. Choose later what is most important.

--Look for patterns in the language. Remember that you are dealing with a poem, and therefore be suspicious of any generalization that moves you away from the poem itself.

--Watch out for words like "probably" and "perhaps" that may indicate that you are speculating about matters that aren't really concerns of the poem.

--Do all of this early, so you can return to your notes and add to them, or question them. Give yourself time to change your mind. Give yourself time to see what you might not have noticed at first. A complicated work of art may not reveal itself quickly.

--After you've lived with the poem for a while and thoroughly annotated it, begin a first draft of your essay. Use the way the poem unfolds as the structure of your paper. Begin at the beginning, end at the end. Move through it; stay close to it. Work from the particular to the general.

--Frost writes, "To learn to write is to learn to have ideas." Consider the practical implications of this sentence: writing your paper is a way of discovering those ideas that should become the substance of the paper. You need not know everything in advance. A first draft should be a way of a) finding an appropriate language for your essay and b) locating that pattern of ideas that will become your general argument.

--Divide the text into sections, with each section containing something important you want to observe and comment on. Move from section to section.

--Don't make an observation like, Here the author uses alliteration, unless you are prepared to say what effect that alliteration creates and why it is important to notice that effect.

--Revise your first draft. Compress, eliminating repetitious moments. Expand your best ideas. Work your way toward an appropriate conclusion.

--Proof-read your final paper. Try to imagine how irritating it is to read an essay in which there are numerous spelling and grammatical errors, in which the poem is misquoted, or the author's name misspelled, or the pages of the essay assembled in the wrong order.

--Consider this process as existing in four stages.

- 1) Annotation of the text—the accumulation of numerous local observations.
- 2) A first draft—in which you write your way from one particular observation to the next, showing how the poem unfolds and develops, and moving towards your larger concerns.
- 3) A second draft—in which you revise, compress, correct, and expand.
- 4) Proof-reading of the final paper—in which all errors are corrected.

--As I cannot say often enough, this process cannot occur all at once. Leaving the paper until the last minute is the easiest way to produce a poor essay. You have to give yourself time to think, time to change your mind, time to discover what it is you have to say. But I am not arguing that you spend more time writing your essays; I am trying to suggest ways in which you might spend the time you have more efficiently.