

Poetry

Choosing your question

It's always a good idea to start with the question that you like best. If fiction is your favourite, you may wish to start with that section.

Approaching the question



For each and every question in your exam, you should go through the following checklist:

- ✓ Read the question carefully. Read it again. Paraphrase it (put it into your own words).
- ✓ Underline any key words in the question.
- ✓ Check how many parts there are to the question. For example, are you asked to point out a feature of style AND comment on the impact it had on you.
- ✓ Jot down a quick plan for your answer. This may be as simple as one or two words for each point you intend to make. If you do this, you will be less likely to repeat yourself, write a disorganised answer or forget what you wanted to say.
- ✓ Look through each of the points you plan to make. Can each one be directly linked back to the question you have been asked? It is very easy to wander off the point; if you check this at the planning stage, it won't take you long to correct it.
- ✓ When you are happy with your plan and have decided on the order in which you are going to write your points, begin your answer.
- ✓ Make a point, develop it and support it with a suitable quotation or reference. Don't leave your quotations or references hanging in the middle of the answer, explain them by linking them to the point you are making. 'From this quote, we can see that.....' or, 'we can see that Demetrius does not love Helena, "I love thee not" '.
- ✓ Avoid simply giving a summary of the text. It doesn't matter how long your answer is, or how beautifully phrased it is, if you don't give your own analysis and make valid points which answer the question asked, you will not get a passing grade.
- ✓ Do give your own opinion, provided you can justify it and back it up with relevant quotations or references. Remember that the pieces chosen for the Junior Cert

exam are generally thought to be good examples of their genre, so think carefully before saying you dislike them. You may, of course, say you don't like a poem or an extract from a play or novel but it is often much more difficult to explain why something doesn't appeal to you than to say why it does.

Marking your answer

- ✓ **Content:** Obviously, this is the most important aspect of your answer in Paper 2. In order to get high marks here, you need to make strong, relevant points. A very general rule would be one point/well-supported paragraph per 5 marks. In other words, if it is a 15 mark question, you should make at least 3 points. It is a good idea to include a brief introduction and/or conclusion also, if you have time. Show that you are able to evaluate the text and produce a personal response to it. All the points you make must be supported by relevant quotations or references to the text. As I said earlier, these must be linked back to the point you are making. Avoid long quotations: it is far better to use short, meaningful ones.
- ✓ **Structure:** Organise your answer properly. This is where planning is invaluable. At the planning stage, make sure that your points are in a logical order, that one leads to the next and that each paragraph develops the answer.
- ✓ **Expression:** The examiner will be looking for an answer in which the language is varied and interesting. When writing, try to make your paragraphs flow into one another rather than making a series of disjointed, separate points. Again, planning will help here. Avoid repetition and clichés. Try to think of a variety of descriptive words rather than saying 'nice' and 'good' over and over. Keep your sentences short.
- ✓ **Mechanics:** The examiner will mark you down for poor spelling and punctuation. Use your common sense here, many of the words you need to use will be written on the paper for you. Refer back to the unseen texts in particular when you are writing your answer. It will look sloppy and careless if you spell a person's name incorrectly when it is repeated many times in the extract.

Introduction to Unseen Poetry

About the unseen poetry section

In this section, you will be asked questions on a poem you have probably never seen before. Remember, the poem has been carefully chosen to be accessible to Junior Cert students so the chances are that you will understand it fairly easily if you approach it calmly and sensibly.

Read the poem two or three times before attempting to answer the questions. You may wish to read the questions after the first reading, just to set you on the right track. Re-read the poem again once or twice before putting pen to paper. Think of the poem as a comprehension piece; the answers are there in front of you, all you have to do is pick them out.

It is essential to read the questions very, very carefully. There may be two or three questions and there may be choices within the question.

When you are reading the poem, ask yourself a series of questions:

- ✓ Does the title tell us anything? Is there an introduction to the poem? As in the drama section, this can be a great help.
- ✓ Who is speaking in this poem? (It is worth noting the title and the poet's name, these may give you a hint. Remember, however, that a poet may be speaking from the point of view of a person of a different age or sex, or even as themselves when they were a child.)
- ✓ Does the poet address the subject of the poem directly? Look out for use of the word "You". If the poet does this, then it creates a sense of intimacy.
- ✓ What is the poem about? In other words, what is the main message (theme) the poet is trying to get across to the reader?
- ✓ What is the tone of the poem? Is it happy or sad, nostalgic or bitter for example?

Try to imagine the poet reading the poem aloud. What tone of voice do you think he or she would use? This can help you work out the mood of the poem. Watch out for irony: the poet saying one thing but meaning another.

- ✓ Does the tone of the poem change at all? Sometimes a poet may be angry at the start of a poem but calm and reflective by the end.
- ✓ Rhythm - Is the pace of the poem fast or slow? Does this tell us anything about the theme or the tone? (A slow rhythm is often associated with sadness.) What effect does the rhythm have? Does the rhythm vary? If so, why? Poems can have exciting moments in between calm, reflective ones.
- ✓ Look at the images in the poem. Are they effective? Do you like them?
- ✓ Look at the tense or tenses used in the poem. The present tense can suggest immediacy or an unresolved issue. The past tense can indicate that the poet has come to terms with the issue. Does the tense change at all? (Think of the tense change in "The Lake Isle of Innisfree".) What does the tense change tell you?
- ✓ Think about the literary terms you learnt when studying poetry in school. Start with sound, is there any alliteration, assonance, onomatopoeia etc.? Underline these as you notice them.
- ✓ What other poetic techniques does the poet use? Are there metaphors, similes or symbols used? Are they effective? Do they help to create a picture in your mind?
- ✓ What kind of language is used in the poem? Is it modern? Is it easy to understand? Is there slang? If so, why do you think it is used?
- ✓ Do you like the poem?

This may seem like a lot to think about, and it certainly is, if you wait until the day of the exam to do it for the first time. Get into the habit of doing it well before June. You may not be able to answer all the questions when reading a poem for the first time, but they will steer you along the path to better understanding.

Studied Poetry

While it is not possible to predict exactly what sort of questions will come up on the day of the exam, there are several aspects of each poem which you should think about carefully.

- ✓ **Theme** – the main message of the poem. You may be asked, "What does the poet think about...? Or, "Choose a different title for this poem." Both of these questions are asking you the same thing. What is the poet's main message? If you had to sum it up in a few words, what would those words be?
- ✓ **Tone** – the attitude of the poet towards the subject of the poem. You may be asked if you think the poem is happy or sad, or you may be asked how the poet feels about the topic dealt with in the poem. Watch out for the words "feeling", "attitude" and "mood" here. They can be a sign that the question is about tone.

As I said earlier, think of the tone of voice the poet would use if reading this poem aloud. Would the tone change as the poem progresses? Would some parts be read in a loud, excited voice and some in a quieter manner? The tone can change several times throughout the poem. If you notice changes as you are reading through it, jot them down on the page beside the relevant lines in the poem.

- ✓ **Style** – This is a very common question in exams. Watch out for phrases such as, "How does the poet give the impression that...? or, "Do you think the poet captures the scene well?" You must refer to the language of the poem in your answer. By that I mean that you must discuss the imagery, sounds etc. This is your opportunity to use those key literary terms. It is important that you do so. (See below.) Start with sound: is there any alliteration, assonance, onomatopoeia etc.? Remember, like the drama, poetry is really meant to be read aloud and the sound is very important.

When you comment on a feature of style, be sure to use a verb to say what that feature does. This is vital. You may be asked if the poet describes something effectively. Don't forget to say why the description is effective. Look at my sample answer on the poem "Cinders" to see how this can be done.

- ✓ **Characters or relationships:** You may be asked what sort of person you think the poet or the subject of the poem is/was, based on what you have read. If you are asked "What impression do we get of this person?" then you must use words to describe character. Try to use at least one "character" word per paragraph. Look at my sample answer on the poem "Poem for Lara, 10" to see how this can be done.
- ✓ **Understanding-** You may be asked to explain certain lines from the poem. Make sure you give a detailed answer here. Don't just simply paraphrase the lines: say why you came to that decision about them. Look at my sample answer on the poem "Van Gogh's Yellow Chair" to see how this can be done.
- ✓ **Your response to the poem** – Did you like it? Why? Why not? You must explain yourself fully here. As I mentioned in the drama section, you are quite free to dislike the piece but you must be prepared to back up your viewpoint with plenty of examples and quotations. It is generally far easier to say that you liked the poem and go through your list of literary terms, picking out those that appear in the poem and saying that you found them particularly striking or effective or evocative.

Bear in mind that this is a question on poetry. Although the examiners want to see a personal response, they also want to see that it is based on a reasonably detailed analysis and evaluation of the poem. Look at my sample answer on the 2002 poem "Poem for Lara, 10" to see how this can be done.

- ✓ **Favourite image or images-** You may be asked to select one or two images from the poem and explain your choice. Be sure to write out the images in full before explaining why you chose them.

Useful Words and Phrases

Remember, you will never be asked to comment on the poet's style without explaining what effect it had on you. Below is a list of words you may find helpful when planning your answer.

Effective
Gripping
Interesting
Striking
Absorbing (occupies all your attention)
Attention-grabbing
Compelling (demands your attention)
Engrossing (absorbing)
Enjoyable
Exciting
Fascinating
Intriguing (really engages your interest)
Moving
Poignant (deeply and painfully affecting)
Remarkable
Riveting (holds your attention)
Stimulating
Thought-provoking

Think about the following verbs when you are explaining why you find an image effective:

Amuses
Captures
Creates
Emphasises
Engages
Evokes (calls to mind or suggests)
Fascinates
Moves

Personalises
Persuades
Proves
Provokes
Stirs
Suggests

Link words and phrases:

Likewise	Conversely
Similarly	On the contrary
Also	Whereas
In the same way	Differs from
In the same manner	However
Just as	In contrast
Both poems/poets	This is different to
Each poem	While

Comparing the poems

Listed below are some sentence structures you could use when linking poems. In these sentences, P1 and P2 refer to the two poems while Poet X and Poet Y refer to the two poets.

- ✓ We can see in both P1 and P2 that.....
- ✓ I feel that there are many similarities between P1 and P2.
- ✓ Unlike poet X, poet Y.....
- ✓ The same theme is handled completely differently in P2....
- ✓ Poet X uses humour while Poet Y treats the theme more seriously....
- ✓ Both poets deal with....but Poet X handles it very differently to Poet Y....

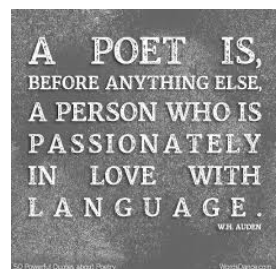
Key Literary Terms

Listed below are some key poetic terms that you should know. This is a basic list but you can add to them as you study the individual poems. Remember, the examiner will be looking to see if you know what these terms mean, if you can identify them and if you can give examples from the poem.

- ✓ Alliteration – The repetition of initial consonant sounds. Alliteration can help to create a mood, repeated 's' sounds, for example, can make a line sound calm and soothing.
- ✓ Allusion – A reference to another writer or to something else which is not really part of the main body of the poem. For example, in 'Dulce et Decorum est' Wilfred Owen alludes to the work of the poet Horace when he quotes the Latin words in the title and at the end of the poem.
- ✓ Couplet – Two successive lines of poetry which have the same rhythm and rhyme. These two lines often contain a complete thought. All of Shakespeare's sonnets end with a couplet. Here is an example from Shakespeare's 'Shall I Compare Thee':

*So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.*

- ✓ Assonance – The repetition of vowel sounds.
- ✓ Enjambment - When a sentence continues into the next line of the poem without any punctuation marks. Enjambment is often used to suggest fast action or movement. It speeds the poem along by eliminating pauses.
- ✓ Imagery – Words used which create a vivid picture in your mind.
- ✓ Metaphor – A comparison in which the words 'like' or 'as' are not used. 'My love is a red, red rose.' Metaphors are stronger than similes.



- ✓ Onomatopoeia – Words which sound like their meaning: slap, squelch, thud, coo. If you find this word difficult to spell, break it up:
Ono - mat – o – poeia (POE as in "poem").
- ✓ Personification – Assigning human qualities to things which are not human, or are not even alive. 'The wind howled and danced.'
- ✓ Repetition – Repeated words or phrases can emphasise the idea which is the poet is exploring. Repetition often occurs near the end of the poem and can help to bring it to a pleasing close as well as adding to the rhythm. An example of repetition used in this way can be seen in Shakespeare's 'Shall I Compare Thee':
*So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.*
- ✓ Rhyme – Rhyme creates a musical sound and also helps to make poems easier to remember. Poets can also use rhyme to link certain words in a poem to show that their meanings are linked.
- ✓ Sibilance – a type of alliteration in which soft consonant sounds are repeated to create a soft, hissing sound. This can make a piece seem more peaceful. Read this example from Edgar Allen Poe's 'The Raven' in which 's', 'ch' and soft 'c' sounds are used together. : And the silken sad uncertain rustling of each purple curtain. (use of the "s," soft "c," and "ch" all together)
- ✓ Simile – A comparison in which the words 'like' or 'as' are used. 'My love is like a red, red rose.'
- ✓ Theme – The main message of the poem – what the poem is about. It is not the story of the poem. For example, the theme of Wilfred Owen's 'Dulce et Decorum Est' is that there is neither honour nor nobility in dying for your country.
- ✓ Tone – The poet's attitude towards the subject of the poem. The tone might be bitter, affectionate, nostalgic, loving etc.

