A Literary Criticism means to "critically" analyze and interpret a written piece, not to insult it. To do something "critically" means to approach it with careful, exact evaluation and judgment.

To write about a piece of poetry, there are three things you need to do:

1. Understand what is being said.
2. Analyse how it is said and how that helps the poet to make the poem's message stronger
3. Evaluate how well it is said, or what it adds to the effect of the piece

Once you have analysed a poem, you are obviously in a much better position to evaluate it.

1. Understand what is being said.

The first thing to do when you are confronted with a poem is to try and get the general drift. Poems pack a lot of "message" into an extremely compact space, using what is called "an economy of words." What this means is that, unlike other types of prose, poems use far fewer words to get across complex and deeply provoking concepts, themes and ideas.

Because of this compressed format, poems are sometimes hard to read quickly and understand on the first pass. In fact, you will not understand everything (or even very much) at first reading. You will need to read a poem more than once to let it sink in and you must then ask yourself certain questions:

- Is the poem about a person or a place or an incident, or a combination, or none of these?
- What can you understand of what is being said?
- Who is the narrator? (first/third person)
- Read the poem aloud to yourself: how does it sound?
- What is the mood (tone) of the poem - serious, humorous, tragic? does it change? how can you tell?

2. Look at the poem more closely, to figure out how the poet is using language

a) Imagery - is any attempt to create a mental picture in words. In poetry, imagery is usually an attempt to compare the thing being described with something else to make the description more vivid.
   - If the comparison is straightforward (explicit), using like or as, it is known as a simile.
   - Often, though, the comparison is more implicit - you have to look harder for it. An implicit comparison is known as a metaphor: Any expression which should not be taken literally is metaphorical.

b) Mood and Tone - These two terms are now just about interchangeable. They mean the emotional state of a piece of poetry, what the poet was feeling, what we are meant to feel when we read the poem.
Poetic Criticism: How to critique a poem

c) **Word choice** - When you read a line of poetry, you should keep in mind the notion of "paradigmatic choice": Simply, this means that every time a poet uses a word, he has chosen it from the whole supply of words which would have done in that place. Your job is to say “Why that word?” Was it just so that he could make a rhyme, or was there another reason?

For example, from *Dolce et Decorum Est*: Owen uses “trudge” when walk, shamble, stagger or several other words would have done.

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**The Importance of Word Choice:**

Since poems are all about the poet creating meaning with words, let’s look at word choice more closely.

Poets can have a number of possible reasons for choosing particular words. Each word choice is meant to accomplish a particular job in order to create the message and the emotional response the poet wants the reader to have.

Specific word choices are meant to achieve one of the following effects:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Denotation and Connotation</th>
<th>As poets are trying to say a lot in a small space, they often choose words or expressions which carry ideas or associations along with them. The denotation of a word is the “dictionary” definition it has, its meaning. The connotations of a word are its associated ideas, the things that come to mind when you hear the word.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ambiguity</td>
<td>If a word is ambiguous it has more than one meaning or its meaning is unclear. Normally, we try to avoid this and say what we mean. However, poets often use it on purpose because they mean to say more than one thing at once.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Suggestion and Inference</td>
<td>To take things a step further, often the message or theme or gist of a poem is not stated at all, but merely suggested or implied. It is up to the reader to work out what the poem is saying above and beyond what is explicitly stated. We call this process of working out inference, or inferring. Inference is what we do whenever we read - we bring our own skill, judgement and experience to the text and combine it with that of the writer.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sound Effects</td>
<td>Poems are meant to be read aloud. Not only the intellectual meaning, but also the sound of the work is important, therefore poets make use of several techniques to do with the sounds of words. Devices that create “sound effects” in poems are:</td>
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<tr>
<th>Repetition</th>
<th>You will often find repeated words or phrases in a poem. Sometimes this is just for emphasis.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Onomatopoeia</td>
<td>A big word for a simple concept. Some words in English sound like their meaning-thud, bang, crash, tinkle, splash. Poets can take this a step further by deliberately using groups of sounds to imitate the sound of what they are describing.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Poetic Criticism: How to critique a poem

| **Rhyme** | - As you know, rhyme is when words at the end of a line of poetry finish with similar or identical sounds. In previous centuries, nearly all poetry rhymed according to certain patterns. In the twentieth century, rhyme is less, but still, common. |
| **Rhythm and Metre** | - Rhythm is present in all spoken language: if we did not speak with rhythm, we would sound like “interactive” computers. Rhythm in poetry refers to the sound of the lines: quick or slow, smooth or jerky. The rhythm can be achieved by various means: |
| **Punctuation** | - A lot of punctuation, especially in the middle of lines, slows things down, makes the lines sound jerky. Less or no punctuation speeds up the sound of lines |
| **Syllables** | - Short vowelled words sound quick; long vowelled words sound slow. Two syllable words, for some reason, sound much sharper than three syllable words |
| **Enjambment** | - This is defined as “the running on of a sentence from one line of verse to another” but it’s actually more than that. Sentences run from one line to another all the time. Enjambment is more when a closely related segment of a sentence runs into another line. |
| **Metre** | - Metre is a poetic term meaning that rhythm has been used in a regular way, according to some pattern. |
Poetic Criticism: How to critique a poem

Critique to following poems:

1. ‘DULCE ET DECORUM EST’ by Wilfred Owen, 1918

| Bent double, like old beggars under sacks, | Your Critique of ‘Dulce et Decorum Est’ |
| Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge, | 1. Understand what is being said. |
| Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs | • Is the poem about a person or a place or an incident, or a combination, or none of these? |
| And towards our distant rest began to trudge. | • What can you understand of what is being said? |
| Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots | • Who is the narrator? (first/third person) |
| But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind; | • Read the poem aloud to yourself: how does it sound? |
| Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots | • What is the mood (tone) of the poem- serious, humorous, tragic? does it change? how can you tell? |
| Of tired, outstripped Five-Nines that dropped behind. | |

Gas! Gas! Quick, boys! – An ecstasy of fumbling, Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time; But someone still was yelling out and stumbling, And flound’ring like a man in fire or lime . . . Dim, through the misty panes and thick green light, As under a green sea, I saw him drowning. In all my dreams, before my helpless sight, He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

If in some smothering dreams you too could pace Behind the wagon that we flung him in, And watch the white eyes writhing in his face, His hanging face, like a devil’s sick of sin; If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood Come gurgling from the froth-corrupted lungs, Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues, My friend, you would not tell with such high zest To children ardent for some desperate glory, The old Lie; Dulce et Decorum est Pro patria mori.

2. Analyse how it is said and how that helps the poet to make the poem’s message stronger

a) Imagery - What is the vivid mental picture the poem creates for you?

Find an example of a simile

Find an example of a metaphor?

b) Mood and Tone - What are you meant to feel when you read the poem?
Poetic Criticism: How to critique a poem

What is the emotional state of the poem?

c) Word choice - Why that word?

Find an example of word choice that combines both Denotation and Connotation

Find an example of word choice that employs Ambiguity

What is the poem saying above and beyond what is explicitly stated. What meaning does the poem suggest? What do you infer is the poet’s message?

How does the poet use Sound Effects to create and reinforce the poem’s meaning and message?

Give examples that show how the poet used each of the following sound effect devices:

- Repetition
- Onomatopoeia
- Rhyme - How does the rhyme scheme draw your attention to the poet’s purpose?
- Rhythm and Metre
- Punctuation
- Syllables
- Enjambment
- Metre

3. Evaluate how well it is said, or what it adds to the effect of the piece

Bring your own skill, judgement and experience to the text and explain how well you think the poet’s use of imagery, mood and tone, and word choice worked to convey a powerful message and elicit and emotional response in you.
Poetic Criticism: How to critique a poem

2. ‘SUICIDE IN THE TRENCHES’ by Siegfried Sassoon

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I knew a simple soldier boy</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Who grinned at life in empty joy,</td>
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<tr>
<td>Slept soundly through the lonesome dark,</td>
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<tr>
<td>And whistled early with the lark.</td>
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<tr>
<td>In winter trenches, cowed and glum,</td>
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<tr>
<td>With crumps and lice and lack of rum,</td>
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<tr>
<td>He put a bullet through his brain.</td>
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<tr>
<td>No one spoke of him again.</td>
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<tr>
<td>You smug-faced crowds with kindling eye</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who cheer when soldier lads march by,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sneak home and pray you'll never know</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The hell where youth and laughter go.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Your Critique of ‘SUICIDE IN THE TRENCHES’

1. **Understand what is being said.**
   - Is the poem about a person or a place or an incident, or a combination, or none of these?
   - What can you understand of what is being said?
   - Who is the narrator? (first/third person)
   - Read the poem aloud to yourself: how does it sound?
   - What is the mood (tone) of the poem—serious, humorous, tragic? does it change? how can you tell?

2. Analyse how it is said and how that helps the poet to make the poem's message stronger

   a) **Imagery** - What is the vivid mental picture the poem creates for you?
      
      Find an example of a simile
      
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3. ‘Joining the Colours’ by Katharine Tynan Hinkson (1914)

There they go marching all in step so gay!
   Smooth-cheeked and golden, food for shells and guns.
Blithely they go as to a wedding day,
   The mothers’ sons.

The drab street stares to see them row on row
   On the high tram-tops, singing like the lark.
Too careless-gay for courage, singing they go
   Into the dark.

With tin whistles, mouth-organs, any noise,
   They pipe the way to glory and the grave;
Foolish and young, the gay and golden boys
   Love cannot save.

High heart! High courage! The poor girls they kissed
   Run with them: they shall kiss no more, alas!
Out of the mist they stepped—into the mist
   Singing they pass.

Your Critique of ‘Joining the Colours’

1. Understand what is being said.
   • Is the poem about a person or a place or an incident, or a combination, or none of these?

   • What can you understand of what is being said?

   • Who is the narrator? (first/third person)

   • Read the poem aloud to yourself: how does it sound?

   • What is the mood (tone) of the poem- serious, humorous, tragic? does it change? how can you tell?

2. Analyse how it is said and how that helps the poet to make the poem’s message stronger

   a) Imagery - What is the vivid mental picture the poem creates for you?

      Find an example of a simile

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Poetic Criticism: How to critique a poem

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