

A Checklist for Exploring Poems—taken from

Vendler, Helen. Poems, Poets, Poetry. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2002.

1. **Meaning:** Can you paraphrase in prose the general outline of the poem?
2. **Antecedent Scenario:** What has been happening before the poem begins? What has provoked the speaker into utterance? How has a previous equilibrium been unsettled? What is the speaker upset about?
3. **Division into parts:** How many? Where do the breaks come?
4. **Climax:** How do other parts fall into place around it?
5. **Other parts:** What makes you divide the poem into these parts? Are there changes in person? In agency? In tense? In parts of speech?
6. **Skeleton:** What is the emotional curve on which the whole poem is strung? (It even helps to draw a shape—a crescendo, perhaps, or an hourglass-shape, or a sharp ascent followed by a steep decline—so you'll know how the poem looks to you as a whole.)
7. **Games with the skeleton:** How is this emotional curve made new?
8. **Language:** What are the contexts of diction; chains of significant relation; parts of speech emphasized; tenses; and so on?
9. **Tone:** Can you name the pieces of the emotional curve—the changes in tone you can hear in the speaker's voice as the poem goes along?
10. **Agency and its speech acts:** Who is the main agent in the poem, and does the main agent change as the poem progresses? See what the main speech act of the agent is, and whether that changes. Notice oddities about the agent and speech acts.
11. **Roads not taken:** Can you imagine the poem written in a different person, or a different tense, or with parts rearranged, or with an additional stanza, or with one stanza left out, conjecturing why the poet might have wanted these pieces in *this* order?
12. **Genres:** What are they by content, by speech act, by outer form?
13. **Imagination:** What has it invented that is new, striking, memorable—in content, in genre, in analogies, in rhythm, in a speaker?