## **WRITING THE EXPLICATION**

## **Adapted from The Writing Center at UNC-Chapel Hill**

The explication should follow the same format as the preparation: begin with the large issues and basic design of the poem and work through each line to the more specific details and patterns (visual, linguistic, sound, etc.).

Explication is different from general analysis because the explication *analyzes* how the components are organized. An analysis takes a few general elements and explains how they are used throughout the poem. Explication is more mechanical and structural. You’re not trying to look at the poem as a whole until you’ve pulled it apart into its components. This is definitely a process.

### **The First Paragraph**

The first paragraph should present the large issues; it should inform the reader which conflicts are dramatized and should describe the dramatic situation of the speaker. The explication does not require a formal introductory paragraph; the writer should simply start explicating immediately. According to UNC ‘s Professor William Harmon, the foolproof way to begin any explication is with the following sentence: “This poem dramatizes the conflict between …” Such a beginning ensures that you will introduce the major conflict or theme in the poem and organize your explication accordingly. This, however, should not be the same for every student. Adjust what works for you, your writing style, and your purposes.

Here is an example. A student’s explication of William Wordsworth’s “Composed upon Westminster Bridge” *might* begin in the following way:

“Composed upon Westminster Bridge” by William Wordsworth dramatizes the conflict between appearance and reality, particularly as this conflict relates to what the speaker seems to say and what he really says. From Westminster Bridge, the speaker looks at London at sunrise, and he explains that all people should be struck by such a beautiful scene. The speaker notes that the city is silent, and he points to several specific objects, naming them only in general terms: “Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples” (6). After describing the “glittering” aspect of these objects, he asserts that these city places are just as beautiful in the morning as country places like “valley, rock, or hill” (8,10). Finally, after describing his deep feeling of calmness, the speaker notes how the “houses seem asleep” and that “all that mighty heart is lying still” (13, 14). In this way, the speaker seems to say simply that London looks beautiful in the morning.

### **The Next Paragraphs**

The next paragraphs should expand the discussion of the conflict by focusing on details of language/devices, form, rhetoric, syntax, and vocabulary. In these paragraphs, the writer should explain the poem line by line in terms of these details, and he or she should incorporate important elements of rhyme, rhythm, and meter during this discussion.

The student’s explication continues with a topic sentence that directs the discussion of the first five lines:

However, the poem begins with several oddities that suggest the speaker is saying more than what he seems to say initially. The poem is an Italian sonnet and follows the abbaabbacdcdcd rhyme scheme. The fact that the poet chooses to write a sonnet about London in an Italian form suggests that what he says may not be actually praising the city. Also, the rhetoric of the first two lines seems awkward compared to a normal speaking voice: “Earth has not anything to show more fair. / Dull would he be of soul who could pass by” (1-2). The odd syntax continues when the poet personifies the city: “This City now doth, like a garment, wear / The beauty of the morning” (4-5). Here, the city wears the morning’s beauty, so it is not the city but the morning that is beautiful …

### **The Conclusion**

The explication has no formal concluding paragraph; do not simply restate the main points of the introduction! The end of the explication should focus on the greater implications of the devices discussed on the poem as a whole. By doing all these things, what is the author trying to do? My favorite question: so what??

### **Tips to Keep in Mind**

1. Refer to the speaking voice in the poem as the speaker” or “the poet.” For example, do not write, “In this poem, Wordsworth says that London is beautiful in the morning.” However, you can write, “In this poem, Wordsworth presents a speaker who…” We cannot absolutely identify Wordsworth with the speaker of the poem, so it is more accurate to talk about “the speaker” or “the poet” in an explication.
2. Use the present tense when writing the explication. The poem, as a work of literature, continues to exist!
3. To avoid unnecessary uses of the verb “to be” in your compositions, the following list suggests some verbs you can use when writing the explication:

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| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| dramatizespresentsillustratescharacterizesunderlines | assertspositsenactsconnectsportrays | contrastsjuxtaposessuggestsimpliesshows | addressesemphasizesstressesaccentuatesenables |