**Step One: What’s in a Name?**  
Titles of literary works can say a lot about what those works mean. Before you read the entire poem, take a look at the title and see if it might hint at what the poem is trying to say. Then make some assumptions or form a kind of hypothesis about the poem’s meaning.

* Is the title simply the first line of the poem and therefore not actually assigned by the author? If so, the title may not aid you in your analysis.
* Is the title a question? If so, the poem may intend to answer it.
* Does the title announce itself as a sonnet, a ballad, or an ode? This is helpful! You can mentally review those forms of poetry and know what to expect.

**Step Two: Become Acquainted**  
It might be easier to understand the deeper significance of a poem if you get a grasp of the poem’s surface first. Read through it once just to see how much you’re able to understand at a glance.

* Take note of any material the publisher (or College Board) has provided:
  + If there are definitions, footnotes, or any other types of information about the poem, DO NOT ignore them! These tools are there to help you understand what you’re reading.
* Notice the visual arrangement and organization of the poem:
  + What does the poem look like? The way a poem actually looks may give away its subject. For example, E.E. Cummings has a poem arranged to resemble a falling leaf.
* Pay attention to the structure of the poem, including rhyme scheme, rhythm, and number of lines:
  + A Shakespearean sonnet is instantly recognizable on the page, with its 14 lines and structured rhyme. Other types of poems might also give themselves away by their formulaic structure.
* If possible, try reading the poem aloud:
  + Physically speaking and hearing the words of the poem can help you to understand it better while making sound devices such as alliteration, assonance, and cacophony more obvious.
  + While reading aloud, make note of the poet’s use of enjambment and caesura. If there is no punctuation at the end of a line, try reading through to the next line as if there was no line break. When there is a period, comma, semicolon, or other punctuation in the middle of a line, go ahead and pause. Reading a poem the way the author intended might clear up confusion and increase understanding.
* Watch out for repetition:
  + Pay attention to repeated words and phrases: they’re usually repeated for a reason! These words are probably an important part of the poem’s theme.
* Don’t miss grammatical marks such as exclamation points and question marks:
  + Phrases that are given emphasis as questions or exclamations may be more than they appear. If the author wants you to pay attention to these phrases, it’s probably because they have something to do with the poem’s meaning.

**Step Three: Dig Deep**  
Most poems will require multiple readings to be truly understood. This time, read and annotate the text, writing down anything that may help you to figure out the poem’s meaning. Annotation is a skill that will help you to understand not only poetry but all types of literature, and it will be beneficial in college and beyond.

* Circle names and dates:
  + If these appear in a poem, they are most certainly important.
* Recall and expand on your list of literary devices:
  + In your first reading, you noticed structural and musical elements of the poem. Keeping those in mind, you can now broaden your view to include the poem’s metaphors, symbols, and figurative language. Notice how the author uses all of these elements to communicate the meaning; write your observations in the margins.
* Mark any words that signal a shift in tone or message:
  + Whether you decide to use a circle, a box, an underline, or a star, choose a way to mark transition words and be consistent. Words such as *yet*, *however*, *therefore*, etc., often precede important ideas, and being able to recognize them will help you to analyze and understand those ideas.
* Mark any words you don’t understand:
  + Choose a different marking symbol than the one you used to mark transitions and note any words that you don’t know the meaning of. Then, look those words up in the dictionary. This strategy can both clarify the meaning of the poem and expand your vocabulary significantly.
* Pay attention to what the poem makes you think and how it makes you feel:
  + In the margins, make note of whatever you think as you read. What does the poem remind you of? How does it make you feel? What details do you notice? What questions does the poem raise?

**Step Four: Get to the Core**  
Once you have a basic understanding of a poem, you can delve into a more comprehensive analysis of the poem’s meaning.

* Don’t stop at just two readings:
  + Feel free to read the poem again and again as needed. Like a great piece of music, you’ll notice something new each time.
* Refer to your notes:
  + Don’t let all your hard work go to waste: use your annotations to help you analyze the text!
* Learn new skills:
  + There are many methods that can help you to really analyze a poem, including the SPOTTTSS analysis method that will be presented in the next eResource. Learn these methods and use them!