

In “On the Subway,” Sharon Olds brings two worlds into close proximity. Identify the contrasts that develop both portraits in the poem and discuss the insights the narrator comes to as a result of the experience. Refer to such literary techniques as tone, poetic devices, imagery, and organization.

In this prompt, anything else you may have highlighted is extraneous.

## KEY IDEA

When the question uses the expression “such as,” you are not required to use only those ideas presented; you are free to use your own selection of techniques and devices. Notice that the prompt requires more than one technique. One will not be enough. You must use more than one. If you fail to use more than one technique, no matter how well you present your answer, your essay will be incomplete.

## Reading and Notating the Poetry Selection

Finally, read the poem. Depending on your style and comfort level, choose one of these approaches to your reading:

## STRATEGY

1. A. Read quickly to get the gist of the poem.  
B. Reread, using the highlighting and marginal notes approach.
2. A. Read slowly, as if speaking aloud. Let the structure of the poem help you with meaning. (See the terms *enjambment* and *caesura* in the Glossary at the back of this book.)  
B. Reread to confirm that you understand the full impact of the poem. Do your highlighting and make marginal notes.

*Note:* In both approaches, you *must* highlight and make marginal notes. There is no way to avoid this. Ignore what you don’t immediately understand. It may become clear to you after reading the poem. Practice. Practice. Concentrate on those parts of the poem that apply to what you highlighted in the prompt.

There are many ways to read and interpret any poetry. You have to choose your own approach and which specifics to include for support. *Don’t be rattled if there is leftover material.*

We’ve reproduced the poem for you below so that you can practice both the reading and the process of deconstructing the text. Use highlighting, arrows, circles, underlining, notes, numbers, and whatever you need to make the connections clear to you.

*Do this now.* Spend 8–10 minutes working the material. *Do not skip this step.* It is time well spent and is a key to the high-score essay.

### On the Subway by Sharon Olds

The boy and I face each other  
His feet are huge, in black sneakers  
laced with white in a complex pattern like a  
set of intentional scars. We are stuck on

"When I read poetry out loud, it's easier for me to understand it."

—Jennifer L.  
AP student

opposite sides of the car, a couple of molecules stuck in a rod of light rapidly moving through darkness. He has the casual cold look of a mugger, alert under hooded lids. He is wearing red, like the inside of the body exposed. I am wearing dark fur, the whole skin of an animal taken and used. I look at his raw face, he looks at my fur coat, and I don't know if I am in his power— he could take my coat so easily, my briefcase, my life— or if he is in my power, the way I am living off his life, eating the steak he does not eat, as if I am taking the food from his mouth. And he is black and I am white, and without meaning or trying to I must profit from his darkness, the way he absorbs the murderous beams of the nation's heart, as black cotton absorbs the heat of the sun and holds it. There is no way to know how easy this white skin makes my life, this life he could take so easily and break across his knee like a stick the way his own back is being broken, the rod of his soul that at birth was dark and fluid and rich as the heart of a seedling ready to thrust up into any available light

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20  
25  
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Now compare your reading notes with what we've done below. Yours may vary from ours, but the results of your note-taking should be similar in scope.

### On the Subway by Sharon Olds

first part = narrator as  
observer

first person

oppositions

The boy and I face each other

His feet are huge, in black sneakers

laced with white in a complex pattern like a — dark

light — set of intentional scars. We are stuck on — no control

violence? — opposite sides of the car, a couple of 5

opposite sides of  
the "tracks"

molecules stuck in a rod of light

rapidly moving through darkness. — light and dark metaphor

*Note:* Look at the last sentence of Sample B on imagery: “Empathizing with the black youth, the narrator moves beyond her prejudices and finds promise in the last three lines which see the dark being born into the light.”

This final sentence would be fine as the conclusion to the essay. A conclusion does not have to be a paragraph. It can be the writer’s final remark, observation, or reference and may be only a sentence or two.

*Do this now.* Write the body of your essay. Time yourself. Allow 15–20 minutes to complete this task.

## Sample Student Essays

Following are two actual student essays followed by a rubric and comments on each.

### Student Essay A

The three sections of “On the Subway” by Sharon Olds express the complicated relationship between Caucasians and African-Americans. In the first section the author presents an exposition that contrasts a white person with a black (lines 1–13). In the second, the speaker begins to develop the apparent disparities so that inter-relationships emerge (lines 13–20). In the third, the narrator gains insight into how this scene is representative of American culture at large (lines 20–34).

The imagery Olds uses in the first section emphasizes the difference between the white woman who is the narrator and the observer and the black boy, who is the observed, as they ride the subway. The shoes he is wearing are black “laced with white” (line 3). The speaker describes the white zigzags as “intentional scars” (line 4). The scars allude to the discrimination against the black man by white society. The adjective “intentional” denotes that whites purposely harm blacks. The image contrasts whites with blacks: whites are powerful; blacks are subservient. Similarly, the two characters are described as being “stuck on opposite sides” of the subway car; they are separated permanently from each other (lines 4–5). The description of the clothing is a third contrasting element. Here, the black man is “exposed,” while the speaker is covered in fur (line 11). This image reinforces the opposition between the white woman and the black boy.

The second section sees a shift in tone. Where the first section is composed of finite physical descriptions, the second is more philosophical and indicates the speaker’s apprehension. She is uncertain and writes that “I don’t/know if I am in his power . . . or if he is in my power” (lines 14–15, 18). Such a statement is important because it illustrates that the boundaries between whites and blacks are not as clearcut as they may seem. Perhaps the speaker begins to realize that the image of the subservient black and the powerful white presented in the first section of the poem is incorrect. The repetition of the word “Life” is another way the interconnection between the two characters is developed. The narrator cannot decide whether her wealth usurps the power of the black man or whether his potential aggression usurps her power (lines 17, 19).

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The tone, again, shifts in the third segment. Here, it is clear that the speaker is trying to gain an understanding of the relationship between the white world and that of the black boy. At first, she realizes that they are different because “he is black and I am white” (lines 21–22). The image of the “black cotton” alludes to slavery, once again referring to the scars, or distinctions, imposed by the white society. Yet, at the end of this section, the differences between the two people are strangely reconciled. This is accomplished using the technique of repetition. Instead of repeating a word as in the second section, an image is repeated. Lines 29–31 state that the black man could hurt the white woman; he could “break [her] across his knee . . . the way his own back is being broken.” In other words, both whites and blacks can hurt; both races can be injured by either repression or aggression, and so they are connected through their pain and unrealized dreams.

### Student Essay B

In the poem “On the Subway” by Sharon Olds, she contrasts the worlds of an affluent white person and a poor black person. The two people have many opposing characteristics, and the author uses literary techniques such as tone, poetic devices, and imagery to portray these differences. The narrator is the white woman, and she realizes how people get “stuck” in places of society based on their skin color. The word “stuck” is repeated twice to stress this idea.

The major difference between the two people is obviously their skin color. This one difference causes many aspects of each person’s life to be unlike the other’s. The white woman is above the black man in the eyes of much of society. The narrator states that “without meaning or trying to I must profit from his darkness.” This is basically saying that the black man is living in a white man’s world, where his skin color alone has given him a predisposition in the eyes of many. This idea is further supported when the speaker thinks “There is no way to know how easy this white skin makes my life.” Olds uses the following simile to show the black man’s situation: “. . . he absorbs the murderous beams of the nation’s heart, as black cotton absorbs the heat of the sun and holds it.”

Another contrast that is in the poem is the rawness of the black man versus the sheltered and refined look of the white woman. Olds uses a simile to describe the red that the black youth is wearing: “Like the inside of the body exposed.” The white woman is the outside of the animal wearing a fur coat. The black man is the inside of the body, the true animal, while the white woman is not; she is simply wearing the outer covering of an animal.

As a result of this experience, the narrator realizes that there is a balance of power and control between her and the young man. She realizes that at times, and in certain situations, she rules, while in others the black man does. Her life, her “easier” life, can be taken away by the black youth. Who has the power on the train? The big, strong, raw black man or the weaker, but richer, white woman? Society has given the white woman a false sense of superiority and security. She is protected by wealth, her job, and her possessions, but when alone on the subway with this black man, she feels fear. She is confronted by her own vulnerability. The black youth who is being broken by society can break the white woman who is society.

Overall, this poem effectively contrasts the two people and exposes a fallacy of society. The black man must live in eternal darkness because he is never allowed to “thrust up into any available light.”

## Rating the Student Essays



Let's take a look at a set of rubrics for the poetry essay.

- 1 point for thesis/claim/introduction that is appropriate to the prompt
  - The thesis clearly presents a possible interpretation and indicates how the support will be developed.
- 4 points for evidence/support of the thesis/claim
  - Clear and appropriate references to the text
  - Clear presentation of how the references relate to the thesis
- 1 point for complexity of the commentary and syntax

*Note:* The essay is really a first draft. The readers know this and approach each essay with this in mind.

### Student Essay A

This is a high-range essay (5, 6) for the following reasons:

- A sophisticated, indirect indication of the task of the prompt and organization.
- Tightly constructed and thorough discussion of the contrasts and opposition in the poem.
- Effective analysis of imagery (lines 1–13, 15–17).
- Effective and coherent discussion of tone.
- Understanding of the subtleties of tone (lines 19–21).
- Strong support for assertions and interpretations (lines 22–29).
- Effective analysis of literary techniques (lines 11, 33–34, 36–38).

This high-ranking essay is subtle, concise, and on target. There is nothing that takes away from the writer's focus. Each paragraph grows out of the previous one, and the reader always knows where the author is taking him or her. The syntax, diction, and organization are mature and confident.

### Student Essay B

This is a middle-range essay (3, 4) for the following reasons:

- Clearly identifies the task, the poem, and the poet.
- States the techniques that will be discussed in the essay.
- Lacks a transition to the body of the essay (lines 6–7).
- Provides an adequate discussion of the insights of the speaker (lines 23–25).
- Cites appropriate specifics to support the thesis of the essay (lines 14–16).
- Uses standard style, diction, and structure, but does not reflect a sophisticated or mature writer.
- Attempts a universal statement within a rather repetitive and summary-like conclusion (lines 32–34).

While adhering to the prompt, this midrange essay is an adequate first draft. It shows promise but comes dangerously close to paraphrasing lines. The analysis is basic and obvious, depending on only one device, that of simile. The writer hints at the subtleties but misses the opportunity to respond to further complexities inherent in the poem.

*Note:* Both essays have concluding paragraphs which are repetitive and mostly unnecessary. It is best to avoid this type of ending.

*"Even though I hate doing it, my writing really improves when I spend the time revising what I've written."*

—Mike T.  
AP student

*How about sharing these samples with members of your class or study group and discussing possible responses?*