HOW TO READ A POEM
A model based on John Donne’s Holy Sonnet # 9 (If poisonous minerals”)

If poisonous minerals, and is that tree
Whose fruit threw death on else immortal us,
If lecherous goats, if serpents envious
Cannot be damned, alas, why should I be?
Why should intent or reason, born in me,
Make sins; else equal, in me more heinous?
And mercy being easy and glorious
To God, in His stern wrath why threatens He?
But who am I, that dare dispute with Thee,
O God? Oh, of Thine only worthy blood
And my tears, make it a heavenly Lethean flood,
And drown in it sins’ black memory.
That Thou remember them, some claim as debt;
I think it mercy, if Thou wilt forget.

(John Donne 1572-1631)

1. Who is the speaker in this poem? What kind of person is he? (I'm fairly sure it's “hell”)
2. To whom is he speaking? In other words, describe the speaker's audience.
3. What is the situation and setting in time (era) and place?
4. What is the purpose of this poem?
5. State the poem's central idea or theme in a single sentence?
6. Indicate and explain (if you can) any allusions. Do the allusions share a common idea?
7. Describe the structure of the poem. What is its meter and form? (Scan it.)
8. How do the structure of the poem and its content relate?
9. What is the tone of the poem? How is it achieved?
10. Notice the poem's diction. Discuss any words which seem especially well-chosen?
11. Are there any predominant images in the poem?
12. Note metaphors, similes and personification, and discuss their effect.
13. Recognize and discuss examples of paradox, overstatement and understatement.
14. Explain any symbols. Is the poem allegorical?
15. Explain the significance of any sound repetition (alliteration, etc.).
16. Discuss whether or not you think the poem is successful.

Note: The words in *italics* are the terms that you should use when you discuss poetry from any era. You will find that they are useful in discussing prose as well.