Some Textual Analysis Strategies

First, a reminder of the basics:
Questions cover three areas: Understanding, Analysis and Evaluation.
You should be able to recognise which type of question you are being asked.

'Understanding' questions will test how well you have understood the main concerns of the text. You will be asked to identity and explore the key ideas or underlying themes in the text and to examine and comment on characterisation.
Your first reading of the text should lead you to discover:
• what the text is about, at least superficially;
• the writer's viewpoint - is he speaking as himself or through a persona?
• the writer's attitude to his subject.

You will find questions like these:
"How do the ideas in the text relate to the title?"
"How does the writer's attitude change in line...?"
"What aspects of the main character are brought out in lines ...?"

'Analysis' questions ask you to consider **how** the writer puts his ideas across: how structure and style are deployed to achieve literary effects.
You will be asked to:
• identify tone and mood in the text and how they are created;
• discuss the techniques and devices used by the writer, including imagery, word choice, contrast, sound;
• examine and comment on the syntax, grammatical structure and techniques.

You will find questions like these:
"What does the extravagant language used add to the humour of the text?"
"How does the unusual combination of words in line ... prepare us for what follows?
"By what devices does the writer modify our attitude to ...?"

'Evaluation' questions ask you to consider how effectively and the extent to which the writer the poet has conveyed his ideas and achieved his purpose. In this section, you will reveal more explicitly your personal engagement with the text, implicit in your earlier answers.
You will be asked to consider the text as a whole and comment on such aspects as:
• the extent to which you agree with the writer's ideas;
• whether the ideas in the text have universal significance;
• which particular aspects of the text you find especially effective;
• whether the conclusion is satisfactory and appropriate.

You will find questions like these:
"What light have the writer's reactions to the situation thrown on the way you might have reacted in similar circumstances?"
"How satisfying do you find the final lines / paragraph in form and content as a resolution to the dilemma expressed throughout the text?"
"Discuss the ways in which the writer engaged your interest in the concerns expressed in the text."

Mood / Atmosphere
Mood refers to the feelings expressed by the writer and those invoked in the reader.

In Norman MacCaig's poem. Visiting Hour, the hospital atmosphere and the poet's feelings of anxiety / unhappiness are set from the very beginning of the poem.

In verse 1, the poet describes his entry into the hospital **by reference to his senses**, particularly smell:
"The hospital smell", line 1; "green and yellow corridors", line 4. His feelings of discomfort / unease are intensified in the details: the choice of colours
- green and yellow, the colours of vomit and pus; and in the devices used: metaphor -
in "combs my nostrils" - and synecdoche - "nostrils... bobbing along".
(**Synecdoche** is a figure of speech in which a part is used to refer to the whole. The effect is to focus on the part — in this case, the nostrils, intensifying his reaction to the hospital smell.)

In verse 2, the poet's feelings of anxiety are revealed through word choice in his **interpretation of the scene:** a patient on a trolley being pushed into a lift, which goes up. In his preoccupation with death, he

sees "a corpse", "trundled" into the lift, whereupon it "vanishes" - the finality of death- "heavenward" — he thinks of its final destination. **Enjambment** adds to tension here.

In verse 3, his struggle to control his feelings is intensified by **Repetition**; the tension is heightened by the **staccato rhythm** (monosyllabic words) and **enjambment**.

In verse 4, mood is created by **recording details** of the nurses. Unusual **word order** in line 12 highlights their ubiquitous nature; the "and... and" emphasises the distances they cover and their calm speed. He marvels at the way these young girls cope with death, implying a contrast with the struggle he, a mature, experienced man has to cope. His anguish comes out in word choice - "burdens" and "farewells".

In verse 5, the tension reaches a climax with his arrival at the door of the ward. The **caesura**, signals a long pause - he stops, takes a deep breath, steeling himself for the ordeal ahead. The use of the numeral 7 helps us to see what he sees and feel his dread. The **images** in this verse show his love for his wife, his anxiety and sorrow for her condition and his frustration at their inability to communicate with each other.

In verse 6, the **images** and **word choice** show his emotions, now allowed free rein. His feelings of hopelessness and futility are shown in the **oxymoron** in the last line. The change to **third person** to describe himself here emphasises his loss of control.

The overall **structure** of the poem contributes to the atmosphere, following the narrative form with introduction / setting / character in setting in verses 1-3; followed by further development / detail in verse 4; building up to a climax in verse 5; and ending with a kind of epilogue in verse 6. As we accompany the poet along the corridors, into the ward and back out, we follow the build-up and gradual release of his feelings.

The **stream of consciousness style** lends immediacy and gains our sympathy, helping us to put ourselves in the poet's position / identify with his feelings, thus increasing the poem's emotional impact.

Tone
"**Tone**" is a word usually associated with speech.
A cheeky child might be told by a parent: "Don't speak to me in that tone of voice!"
The parent is offended, not by the words spoken, but by the way it was said.
Tone of voice will sometimes indicate that the speaker means quite the opposite of the words he is saying. Having done something stupid, you might be told, "That was very clever!"

In writing, we can also determine the tone by thinking of the tone of voice we would use if saying the words aloud. Taking tone into account will help us to determine whether the writer really means what he has written and to understand his attitude.

In Norman MacCaig's poem. *Assisi*, he expresses his compassion and concern for a beggar outside the church of St Francis. He is angry at the way people neglect the needy members of our society who require our help. In the poem, he wants to draw our attention to such people, to engage our sympathy and to inspire us to change the way we look at such unfortunates.

In lines 1 - 4, he uses brutal language to describe the beggar: "dwarf, '"with his hands on backwards", "like a half-filled sack", "tiny, twisted legs", "from which / sawdust might run out".
The tone is blunt, casual, with no hint of compassion for the plight of the man and the pain which almost certainly accompanies his disability.
Effect: dehumanises the beggar
Purpose: to shock the reader into a reaction. He verbally thrusts the disabled beggar in our faces, defying us to withhold our pity.

In lines 7-9, however, it becomes clear that he does not mean to be brutal. He clearly thinks the beggar would be better off dead. The **sarcastic** tone reveals his pity for the beggar and his anger at the way the latter is treated.

In lines 15 - 17, the **dry**, **sarcastic** tone suggests the poet's scepticism and his criticism of the priest, who, in the poet's opinion, should be trying to alleviate the suffering of the poor and teaching people to do their Christian duty to such people instead of telling them about paintings.

In lines 21 - 23, he again uses **brutal language** to describe the beggar: "whose eyes / wept pus", "whose back was higher / than his head". These words expand the phrase "ruined temple", reminding us that the beggar is God's creation and, as such, deserves respect.

The poet's use of **irony** helps us to determine the tone:
irony of situation in which one seems to mock or be mocked by Fate or the facts;
Lines 5-7: the beggar is ignored outside the church dedicated to St Francis "brother of the poor".
Lines 10 - 15: the priest spends his time acting like a tourist guide, explaining the paintings inside the church instead of tending to needy of his parish. and verbal irony, in which the meaning is contrary to the words, as in lines 7—9, where he clearly does not think the beggar has the "advantage" being alive, given his circumstances and the suffering humiliation he endures.

Syntax and Structure
Syntax is the grammatical arrangement of words within their sentences, used by writers to create a particular effect.

Juxtaposition is bringing two ideas close together for literary effect, usually contrast.

In Norman MacCaig's poem, *Assisi*, the first verse is one long sentence.
Within that sentence, the first four lines describe the grotesquely disabled beggar, followed in line 5: "outside the three tiers of churches" - the description of the church sounds very ornate, like a wedding cake, emphasising the hideousness of the divinely- created beggar in contrast with the architectural grandeur of the man-made church. The contrast is intensified by the syntax (both ideas in a single sentence)

In verse 2, the poet describes how the priest explains to the tourists how clever it was of the artist to use art to communicate God's goodness to the illiterate. In line 15, there is a mil stop after "Son". (This is called a caesura.) The effect is to create a pause for a particular effect. In this case, the effect is to convey the poet's scepticism - in the silence of the pause you can almost hear the poet's unspoken "Yeah, right!"
In line 17, "the cleverness" is emphasised by being placed at the end of the verse, suggesting a double meaning - the poet has understood the cleverness of Giotto but he has also "twigged" what the priest is up to, courting the wealthy tourists. As in the earlier example, bringing the priest's activities and the writer's comment together within one sentence intensifies the poet's disapproval.

In verse 3, the poet introduces the tourists, mocking the way they follow the priest to view the frescoes which depict the suffering of Christ. The poet's scorn for them is shown by the syntax of "It was they who..." - rather than simply saying, "they had passed" - as if he is verbally pointing bis finger at them- The juxtaposition of the beggar outside the church and the tourists walking past emphasises the apathy of the tourists and of society in general.

Throughout the poem, he uses **contrast** to emphasise the difference between the beggar and more fortunate members of society, highlighting the themes of the poem: rich tourists who can afford to take holidays v. the poor beggar who does not even have the means to live;
the mobility of the tourists - "a rush of tourists" - is contrasted with his immobility - "he sat, slumped";
the tourists move around in a group whereas the beggar is isolated, shunned by society because of his grotesque appearance.

The **structure** of the poem is also worth studying. Notice the way it is balanced.
• Each verse begins with the introduction of one character / character group which seems to emphasise the lack of real contact between them and particularly the isolation of the beggar.
• The poem begins and ends with the beggar, his grotesque appearance emphasised at the start, his sweetness at the end.
• The poet comes back to St Francis in the last line to remind us of the ironic position of the beggar.