

How to read a poem

from Oak Meadow's *Write It Right: A Handbook for Student Writers*

Learning how to read and understand a poem takes practice. It helps to approach poetry with an open mind and no prior expectations.

Most readers make three false assumptions when addressing an unfamiliar poem. The first is assuming that they should understand what they encounter on the first reading, and if they don't, that something is wrong with them or with the poem. The second is assuming that the poem is a kind of code, that each detail corresponds to one, and only one, thing, and unless they can crack this code, they've missed the point. The third is assuming that the poem can mean anything readers want it to mean. ("How to Read a Poem," excerpted from *Modern American Poetry*)

There is no one right way to approach a poem, but if you are new to poetry, these guidelines may be helpful.

- First, read the poem aloud, just experiencing the sound and rhythm of the words as a kind of music.
- Read the poem aloud several more times, speaking slowly. This helps you attend to each carefully chosen word. Use a natural tone of voice—no need to give a dramatic reading like an actor on stage. Let the words “speak” for themselves. Pause only when punctuation dictates, not at the end of each line break (which can interrupt the flow of the words).
- Read the poem again, this time paying attention to how the line breaks encourage you to phrase things or pause. You don't have to pause at the end of each line but only when you feel it is necessary. Remember to read slowly. Notice whether this reading gives the poem added meaning or emphasis.
- Number each line for easy reference. Read the poem again, with a pencil in hand, and identify and define any words you do not know.
- Read the poem one more time.

These techniques allow you to gain a strong sense of the poem as a whole before you continue studying, analyzing, or interpreting it.

Interact with the poem

Billy Collins, an American poet who served as the Poet Laureate of the United States from 2001–2003, has this to say about poetry:

The way poetry is taught is with a great emphasis on the interpretation. So we have this thing, the poem, and we want to create this other thing called the interpretation of the poem which then almost begins to compete with the poem, and in the worst cases, replaces the poem. So once we have the interpretation we can discard the poem... The question, what does a poem mean, is a deadening question... A better question I think, than what does a poem mean, is how does a poem get where it's going. So instead of seeing it as something to be reduced to some other text, to see a poem as a journey... to

notice where it turns, and how it expands or contracts, or becomes funny or serious, how it moves around through itself... (“How have your teachers shaped you?” *YouTube*.)

Some people see poems as puzzles that have a secret meaning, often one that they just “don’t get.” But sometimes a poem can be enjoyed by just reading it and listening to the way it sounds. It can also be interesting to examine a poem’s imagery and figurative language. Reading poetry, like writing it, is a very personal experience, and each reader and writer will bring something different to the poem and take away from it something unique. For example, your life experiences color how you perceive imagery. You may associate rocks with a grounding force that can shelter you, or you may perceive them as cold, hard, and potentially dangerous. By exploring a poem’s imagery, you can learn more about yourself.

When reading a poem, have a pencil in your hand. Don’t be afraid to mark up the poem. Get involved with it! Underline phrases you like or copy them in the margin. Draw lines between related passages. Define any words you don’t know. You can’t expect to understand a poem if you don’t first understand the words themselves.

The anatomy of a poem

Three basic elements of a poem are words, stanzas, and story. Consider “Dust of Snow” by Robert Frost:

Dust of Snow

The way a crow

Shook down on me

The dust of snow

From a hemlock tree

Has given my heart

A change of mood

And saved some part

Of a day I had rued.

Looking carefully at each element of this poem can increase your understanding and appreciation of it.

- **Words and rhymes**

Some poems have rhyming words at the end of the lines. Poems written in this form can give a sense of compactness and completeness, as if the rhyming words tie things together. Of course, the poet may be providing a sense of stability only to open up a larger question.

In “Dust of Snow,” the rhymes are found in pairs: crow/show; me/tree; heart/part; mood/rued. The rhyming sequence can be written like this: ABAB. This indicates rhymes are found in pairs at the end of lines 1 and 3, and lines 2 and 4. A poem which uses adjacent rhyming pairs would use the AABB rhyming sequence.

Sometimes a poet will use off rhymes or near rhymes, words that have similar sounds, as do *frantic* and *chicks*. Sometimes words with similar sounds are to be found in the middle of a line, or they sound across stanzas. Sometimes a poet will use alliteration or repetition to emphasize words or create a sense of rhythm.

- **Stanzas**

Some poems are written with continuous lines of text, while others are written in stanzas, where lines are grouped. Robert Frost's "Dust of Snow" is a two-part poem, written in two stanzas. The first stanza is about the crow, and the second is about the poet's experience and what happens to the poet when the snow is shaken down on him.

Often a poem is written in which none of the stanzas are completely distinct or separate, and they do not change subject. Each one connects to the stanza before and the stanza after very actively. There is a continuous flow of impressions and thought throughout the poem.

The way a poet uses line breaks and formatting can relate to the content, the flow, the emotional tone, or a number of other factors. Sometimes the shape of the stanzas as well as their length and density can convey meaning or enhance the expression of a poem. Look at how a poem is presented visually on the page. Consider where the punctuation and line breaks fall, and how this affects the experience of reading the poem.

- **Scene, setting, and story**

A poem can convey a scene (the action), a setting (a stage for the action), and it can also tell a story. In "Dust of Snow," the scene is a man walking beneath a hemlock tree after it has snowed and a crow shaking a branch. The setting is outdoors in the winter. The story has to do with a crow shaking down some snow onto the man, who is in a bad mood, and how this startles him, causing him to have a change of heart. You could say that the meaning of the poem is to be found in the relationship between a person and the natural world.

Sometimes the story is external—something that can be seen or acted out on a stage—and sometimes it is internal. A change of heart is an internal story, for instance, as are sensory or emotional experiences. When reading a poem, consider how the scene, setting, and story combine to give the poem meaning.

Layer by layer

Questions can help a reader tease apart the ethereal threads of a poem. Consider how you might answer the following questions. Trying to answer questions like these will help you understand—and ultimately appreciate—poetry more fully.

- What does the title reveal about the poem? Does it hint at the tone as well as the content?
- Who is speaking in the poem? What attitude is conveyed about the subject? What might be the life circumstances that brought forth these thoughts?
- Is there a story being told or something more intangible being described? How would you answer if someone asked you, "What is this poem about?"
- Can you paraphrase the poem, line by line? Sometimes this can help you uncover the meaning, especially if each line packs a great deal of meaning into a very short sentence. Try to deconstruct each sentence to determine the subject, verb, and object. What do the

modifiers (adjectives, adverbs) refer to? This can help you understand the sentence, even if the poetic phrasing is convoluted.

- Does the poem use analogy? Metaphor? Make note of any figurative language. Think about how these literary techniques add to the poem.
- Is there a strong rhythm (or *meter*) to the poem? Are certain words emphasized by the *cadence*, or by alliteration or repetition? Why might the author want to emphasize these words?
- What is the poet's message or intention? What is the feeling the poem conveys? Can you identify an overall theme? Is there some type of lesson or moral?

Take your time and be patient when exploring a poem. New discoveries may be revealed with each reading. You might find that if you read poetry outdoors, at night, in the morning, with friends, and alone, you will have a very different experience in each situation. Experiment with poetry. See where it takes you.

The poem as a journey

It is important to read poetry with an open mind, letting the words sift through your consciousness slowly. Reading a poem several times allows it to filter through your perceptions, rearranging and shaping itself in your mind as new connections are made with each reading. Allow poetry the time to sink past your analytical mind into your emotions.

Consider how easily the words of the first stanza of William Wordsworth's poem "Daffodils" (composed in 1804) take the reader on an emotional journey:

I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host, of golden daffodils;
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.

You can feel movement, too, in "Dust of Snow" by Robert Frost. You are traveling with the poet through a new experience, or perhaps, through an experience that feels familiar.

The reader of a poem is integral to the experience of poetry. Always strive to be an "active reader" when you read poetry. How you read a poem is just as important as how it was written. Consider these words by poet Edward Hirsch:

"To read a poem is to depart from the familiar, to leave all expectations behind... The poem is a muscular and composed thing. It moves like a wave, dissolving the literal. We participate in its flow as it moves from the eye to the ear, to the inner ear, the inner eye....Reading poetry calls for an active reader. The reader must imaginatively collaborate with a poem to give voice to it." (Hirsch, "How to Read a Poem")

One great thing about poetry is how accessible it is—you can easily find poems in print or online. You'll find wonderful anthologies and collections of poetry available in your local library, such as *Poems to Read: A New Favorite Poem Project Anthology*, by Maggie Dietz and

Robert Pinsky. If you search online, one website you might try is *Poetry 180* from the Library of Congress.

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