

# How to Read a Poem

Poems can be read many ways. The following steps describe one approach.

1. **Look at the poem's title**: What *might* this poem be about?
2. **Read the poem straight through** without stopping to analyze it (aloud, if possible).
  - This will help you get a sense of how it sounds, how it works, what it might be about.
3. **Start with what you know**. If the poem is difficult, distinguish between what you do and do not understand.
  - If permissible, underline the parts you do not immediately understand.
4. **Check for understanding**: Write a quick "first-impression" of the poem by answering the following questions:
  - "What do you notice about this poem so far?"
  - "What is this poem about?"
5. **Look for patterns**. Watch for repeats or unfamiliar use of language, imagery, sound, color, or arrangement.
  - Ask, "What is the poet trying to show through this pattern?"
6. **Look for changes** in tone, focus, narrator, structure, voice, patterns.
  - Ask: "What has changed and what does the change mean?"
7. **Identify the narrator**.
  - Ask: Who is speaking in the poem?
  - What do you know about them?
8. **Check for new understanding**. Re-read the poem (aloud, if you can) from start to finish, underlining (again) those portions you do not yet understand. Explain the poem to yourself or someone else.
9. **Find the crucial moments**. The pivotal moment might be as small as the word *but* or *yet*. Such words often act like hinges within a poem to swing the poem in a whole new direction. Also pay attention to breaks between stanzas or between lines.
10. **Consider form and function**. Now is a good time to look at some of the poet's more critical choices.
  - Did the poet use a specific form, such as the sonnet?
  - How did this particular form---e.g., a sonnet---allow them to express their ideas?

- Did the poet use other specific poetic devices which you should learn so you can better understand the poem?
    - Examples might include: alliteration, symbols, metaphors, or allusions. Other examples might include and unusual use of capitalization, punctuation (or lack of any), or typography.
      - Ask. “*How* is the poet using punctuation in the poem?”
11. **Check for improved understanding.** Read the poem through again, aloud if possible. Return to the title and ask yourself what the poem is about and how the poem relates to the title.