

READER'S RESPONSE

English for Degree Entrance (EDE) compiled by Carrie Molinski & Sue Slessor.

Except where otherwise noted, this OER is licensed under [CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 \(https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/)

Please visit the web version of *English for Degree Entrance (EDE)* (<https://ecampusontario.pressbooks.pub/englishdegreeentrance/>) to access the complete book, interactive activities and videos.

Introduction

In discussing literature, poetry cannot be ignored. Poetry is a form of communication that uses language to create images, feeling, impressions, and themes for the audience. While poets are affected by personal experience and era, most audiences can relate to the feelings evoke by this form. This unit will discuss how poems and songs create effects and focus on the reader's response lens.

Learning Objectives

- Examine and apply a reader's response lens to poetry and song to build an understanding of society.
- Explore how elements, features, and form communicate meaning in poems and songs.
- Use speaking skills and strategies to present a poem or song.

To Do List

- Review the content on the Introduction to Poetry.
- Read the biographies and poems of Walt Whitman and [Maya Angelou](#).
- Listen to the song "Indigenize."
- Complete the learning activities associated with the poems and song.
- Read "Reading Poems to an Audience."
- Complete the reader's response lens assignment in Blackboard.

Attribution & References

Except where otherwise noted, “Reader’s Response” by Academic and Career Prep, Georgian College, is licensed under [CC BY-NC-SA 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

INTRODUCTION TO POETRY

Why Write About Poetry?

There are many reasons an instructor might ask you to write about literature. For one, learning to write about literature is an engaging way to learn to make a text-based argument. Secondly, writing about literature can help you better understand what you are reading. Learning to read literature critically requires the same steps as learning to read academic texts, like looking up words you don't understand, researching context, asking questions, and taking notes. Last, but certainly not least, writing about literature can help you to enjoy it more!

Generally, English teachers begin introducing this process to students with the genre of poetry. Poetry tends to be shorter than other genres, like short fiction and drama. Because of this, it can be easier to digest and analyze.

Steps to Writing About Poetry

Step 1: Choose a Poem

The first step to writing about poetry might seem fairly obvious—you must choose a poem to write about. It's important to choose a poem that interests you. If you must spend a few weeks writing about a poem, at least choose one that you enjoy. It could be that you personally relate to the poem, or you might just like the rhythm of it.

For the purposes of illustration, I am going to share an example that I used for a class demonstration. Here is William Shakespeare's "Sonnet 66":

*Tired with all these, for restful death I cry,
As to behold desert a beggar born,
And needy nothing trimm'd in jollity,
And purest faith unhappily forsworn,
And gilded honour shamefully misplaced,
And maiden virtue rudely strumpeted,
And strength by limping sway disabled
And art made tongue-tied by authority,*

*And folly, doctor-like, controlling skill,
 And simple truth miscalled simplicity,
 And captive good attending captain ill:
 Tired with all these, from these would I be gone,
 Save that, to die, I leave my love alone* (Shakespeare, as cited in Poetry Foundation, n.d.).

Step 2: Read and Respond

The second step in writing about poetry is reading and responding to the poem. While many students might be apprehensive about reading poetry, reading poetry should be an enjoyable experience.

Poetry is written from the heart, and it speaks to the heart. Poetry allows us to hear another person’s voice in a beautiful way that can illuminate our own experiences, as well as create empathy for the different experiences of others.

Muriel Rukeyser says in *The Life of Poetry* that in order to successfully read a poem, we must give a poem “a total response.” This means giving it all of our attention, taking it in slowly, reading it several times. It means listening to the poem openly, without judgment, and without projecting our own assumed meanings onto it.

To come to emotional meanings at every moment means to adjust and react to the way a poem takes shape with every word, every line, every sentence, every stanza. Each poem creates its own universe as it moves from line to line.

Reading is one of the most intimate forms of connection we can have with someone. We take their words—their breath—into ourselves. We shape the words with our own bodies and, too, give them life with our own breath. Reading poetry, we breathe in what a poet breathes out. We share breath. The words and their meanings become part of our body as they move through our mind, triggering sensations in our bodies that lead to thoughts. And through this process, we have experiences that are new and that change us as much as any other experience can.

Poetry is a condensed art form that produces an experience in a reader through words. And though words may appear visually as symbols on the page, the experience that poems produce in us is much more physical and direct. This is why we must read poems with full concentration and focus more than once. It is why we must read them out loud. It is why we must be attentive to every aspect of the poem on both ends: as a writer, and as a reader.

Readers come to the page with different backgrounds and a range of different experiences with poetry, but it is how we read a poem that determines our experience of it. By “read” I do not mean understand or analyze, but rather, the actual process of coming to the poem, ingesting its lines, and responding emotionally.

How to Read Poetry

Many a well-meaning English teacher has ruined poetry for students by making reading poetry a drawn out and difficult search for a hidden meaning. While some poetry does have some interesting hidden meaning, poets usually write a poem to express a feeling to an audience.

Be a Good Listener

The first step in reading poetry is simply to listen. Being a **good listener** requires many of the same traits as being a good reader. When we listen to someone speak, we listen to their emotions and ideas through meaning and tone, body gestures, and emphasized words. We do not judge. We do not interrupt. We may touch the speaker's arm to express care. We certainly use facial expressions and gestures to let the speaker know we are listening and understanding, that we are advancing emotionally alongside them with each turn of the story. Before offering advice, condolences, or other reactions, we as listeners try to see their perspective and its complexities from their side. We take our identities out of the equation and place their concerns in the middle of our attention.

Every poem has a speaker that seeks connection with a listener. A poet seeks to create an emotional experience in the reader through the poem's process, just as if a friend—or stranger—were telling an intense story. Unlike a person speaking, who can use the entire body to gesture, poetry has only a voice to rely on to speak. Yet the poem seeks to speak to a reader as if it had a body. The poem uses rhythm, pauses, stresses, inflections, and different speeds to engage the listener's body. As readers, it is our role to listen to the speaker of the poem and to *embody* the words the speaker speaks with our own self as if we are the ones who've spoken. We as readers identify with the speaker, with the voice of the poem.

Note the Title

Reading a poem, we start at the beginning—the title, which we allow to set up an expectation for the poem in us. A title can set a mood or tone, or ground us in a setting, persona or time. It is the doorway into the poem. It prepares us for what follows.

The First Reading

Read the poem out loud. *Listen* for the general, larger qualities of the poem like tone, mood and style. *Look up* any words you cannot define. *Circle* any phrases that you don't understand and *mark* any that stand out to you. Some questions we may ask ourselves include:

1. What is my first emotional reaction to the poem?

2. Is this poem telling a story? Sharing thoughts? Playing with language experimentally? Is it exploring one's feelings or perceptions? Is it describing something?
3. Is the tone serious? Funny? Meditative? Inquisitive? Confessional?

These initial questions will emotionally prepare you to be a good listener. Remember, when you read a poem the first time, don't try to dissect it. Instead, enjoy it first. Think about how you enjoy music, for example. Listen to the song, the music of poetry first, and then take some time to figure out the meaning. You can use the elements of poetry to help you with this in your second read of the poem.

The Second Read: Elements of Poetry

The **elements of poetry** permit a poet to control many aspects of language—tone, pace, rhythm, sound—as well as language's effects: images, ideas, sensations. These elements give power to the poet to shape a reader's physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual experience of the poem. Because form and function are so closely intertwined, it is impossible to paraphrase a poem.

When reading poetry, it's important to keep in mind that every word counts. More so than in any other type of writing, it's important to pay attention to the author's use of words. Here are some general things to pay attention to when reading poetry.

Speaker vs. Poet

Like individuals, each poem's speaker speaks from a place of perspective, a place which can be physical and/or psychological. As we as readers move word to word, line to line, we must allow the universe of the poem to take root in our imaginations as if it is the only universe that exists. When we are open to the words' music and meaning, the poem has the potential to envelop our entire being and body.

Remember that the speaker in the poem is not necessarily the author. The speaker is the voice of the poem. For example, a poet might write a poem about a historical figure speaking—the speaker in the poem is not the author, but the historical figure. Pay attention to clues in the text that tell you who is speaking in the poem.

Diction and Tone

Tone is created by the word choices the author makes, which is called the author's diction. One example of how an author uses diction to create tone is denotative and connotative language. For example, the words "belly button," "navel" and "umbilicus" all refer to the same thing, but they all have different connotations that reflect the speaker's attitude toward it. You might also look for unusual words/phrases. Think about how the meaning of a word may have changed over time—especially important when reading poetry from before

your lifetime. Finally, consider how the words are meant to sound. Do they sound playful? Angry? Confidential? Ironic?

Figurative Language

Figurative language is an author's creative use of language, often to create a memorable image for the reader. Here are four common types of figurative language:

- **Simile**—uses *like*, *as*, *than*, *appears* or *seems* to compare two different things (She sings *like* a bird.)
- **Metaphor**—compares two unrelated things without the use of *like* or *as* (She's a train wreck!)
- **Personification**—gives human characteristics to an inanimate object (Umbrellas clothe the beach.)
- **Allusion**—references to other works, historical events and figures, etc. (You're such a Scrooge!)

Symbolism

Symbolism can be an important aspect of poetry. Symbols are images that are loaded with significance. In order for something to be symbolic in a piece, it must mean something else in addition to its literal meaning. For example, an author might place a sad scene in the midst of a gloomy day. In this case, the day is actually gloomy, but it also represents the overall tone of gloom in the story/poem.

Some images are almost universal symbols. For example, a rose can symbolize love. A skeleton symbolizes death. Darkness and light and colors often have symbolic meaning, as well.

While symbolism is often present in poetry, it's important to remember that just because something could be symbolic of something else, that doesn't mean it actually is! Remember, poets aren't typically trying to hide their meaning from their readers. They are simply using language in creative ways to share their feelings.

Music of Poetry

Finally, it's important to pay attention to the structure and the patterns of sound in a poem. Note that each line of a poem is not necessarily a complete thought. The ways in which an author breaks the lines of a poem likely have a purpose. Likewise, stanzas, the "paragraphs" of a poem, often have strategic arrangements that can give the reader clues about the meaning of a poem. The way an author puts together each word, line and stanza creates the rhythm of a poem.

In addition to the structure of the poem, look at the patterns of sound. Reading a poem aloud is a good way to highlight for yourself the music of poetry. Keep an eye (or ear!) out for the following:

- **Rhyme**—when the ends of words sound the same (sand, band, hand)
- **Alliteration**—when words begin with the same sounds ("Bring me my bow of burning gold")

- **Assonance**—when words have the same internal vowel sounds, but they don't actually rhyme (tide and mine)
- **consonance**—when words begin and end with the same consonant sounds (fail & feel, rough & roof)
- **Onomatopoeia**—when a word sounds like what it is (hiss, buzz)

Making Connections with the Poem

After moving through the poem and noting images, their effects and the tone or places where tone changes, the next question that is helpful to ask is: What does *x* remind me of? Or, what associations am I making? Usually, the connections I would suggest making would be within the poem itself and the patterns it creates—between lines, images, repetitive words or themes, and diction.

Making connections and asking questions about those connections can lead to insight into the poem's experience, as well as insight into the experience of being human. The idea is to come to an understanding of what the message of the poem is and how the author creates that message by using the elements of poetry.

I think you'll enjoy this fun video by Isabella Wallace. Aside from the crazy strand of hair in her eyes, she makes some great points about the correlation between songs and poetry that I think will help take some of the scariness out of analyzing poetry. Plus, her accent is pretty fun to listen to.

Watch It: How to Analyze a Poem

Watch How to analyse a poem you have never seen before (9:30 minutes) on YouTube
 (<https://youtu.be/Ebd-ObjUjZk>)

Attribution & References

Except where otherwise noted, this section is adapted from “[42 Introduction to Poetry](https://oer.pressbooks.pub/theworryfreewriter/chapter/introduction-to-poetry/) (<https://oer.pressbooks.pub/theworryfreewriter/chapter/introduction-to-poetry/>)” In *The Worry Free Writer* by Dr. Karen Palmer, licensed under [CC BY-NC-SA 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/). /Adaptations include removing the assignment section.

Original Attributions

- Content written by Dr. Karen Palmer and licensed under [CC BY NC SA](#).
- Content adapted from “[Reading Poetry](#)” licensed under [CC BY NC SA](#).
- Assignment questions from “Experiencing the Power of Poetry” by Tanya Long Bennet in [Writing and Literature](#), licensed [CC BY SA](#).
- Shakespeare’s “Sonnet 66” in the Public Domain.

Reference

Poetry Foundation (n.d.). *Sonnet 66: Tir'd with all these, for restful death I cry* by William Shakespeare.
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45097/sonnet-66-tird-with-all-these-for-restful-death-i-cry>

"BIRCHES" BY ROBERT FROST (BLANK VERSE)

Consider the poem "Birches" by Robert Frost. Read the poet's biography, read the poem and then listen to it read by the author. Reflect on your personal response to the poem in the activity below.

Biography

Robert Frost was born on March 26, 1874, in San Francisco. His father, a teacher and a journalist, died in 1885 and his mother, also a teacher, moved the family to Lawrence, Massachusetts, where the extended Frost family had settled generations ago. Frost graduated from Lawrence High School in 1892 and attended Dartmouth College briefly before returning to Lawrence to teach at his mother's school and to answer his calling to become a poet. He married his high school sweetheart, Elinor White, in December of 1895.

Frost returned to university, this time to Harvard, where he was a student from 1897 to 1899. He left to work the farm his grandfather purchased for him in Derry, New Hampshire. From 1906 to 1911, he also taught high school and college English, mainly in Plymouth, New Hampshire. Throughout all of these years, he was writing poetry, but he was not having much success getting his work published.

In 1912, he took his family to England, hoping he would find more success there as a poet. His instincts proved to be exceptional. His first collection of poetry, *A Boy's Will*, was published in England in 1913; his second, *North of Boston*, in 1914. Including such iconic Frost poems as "Mending Wall" and "After Apple-Picking" and his famous narrative "The Death of the Hired Man," *North of Boston* established firmly Frost's reputation.

The Frosts returned to America in 1915, to Franconia, New Hampshire, where the growing family bought another farm. His reputation was now established, and over the years, he would become a public figure, America's best-known and most popular poet. He supplemented his income, in the manner typical of successful modern poets, by teaching and serving as poet-in-residence at a number of universities, including the University of Michigan and Amherst and Middlebury Colleges.

Frost's professional success is unmatched by any other American poet. He won four Pulitzer Prizes for outstanding poetry: for *New Hampshire*, in 1924; *Collected Poems*, in 1931; *A Further Range*, in 1937; and *A Witness Tree*, in 1943. The world's great universities—Harvard, Princeton, Oxford, Cambridge and Dartmouth—gave him honorary degrees. In 1960, he was awarded the Congressional Gold Medal for his contribution to American culture.

This professional success was tempered by tragedy in his personal life. His wife died of cancer in 1938. Four

of his six children died before he did, his son Carol as a result of suicide. The contemplative and sorrowful voice of much of his poetry is the result, in part, of these events.

Frost was invited to read a poem at the inauguration of President Kennedy, on January 20, 1961. He was 87. He had written a poem especially for this occasion, but the glare from the sun on his paper obscured his vision. Instead, he recited from memory "The Gift Outright," his iconic poem about America's progress from a colony of Great Britain to an independent nation.

Frost died from complications of prostate surgery on January 29, 1963.

Birches

Published 1915

Read "Birches" by Robert Frost [New Tab]

(<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44260/birches>) online, available through the Poetry Foundation.

Watch the video "Birches" by Robert Frost (3 minutes) on Films on Demand [New Tab] (<https://ra.ocls.ca/ra/login.aspx?url=https://fod.infobase.com/PortalPlaylists.aspx?wID=103261&xtid=128291&loid=448880>)

Note: this resource is only available to Georgian College students via single sign-on. If you are a student from another institution please reach out to your library for resources.

Analysis

Theme

The poem by Frost (1969, as cited in Poetry Foundation, n.d.,) is set in the wake of an ice storm that has bent the branches of the birch trees in the woods near the poet's farm. The poet notices the bent branches, knows they are the victims of the ice storms, but wishes they were bowed down because a young boy has been swinging on them. The poem suggests that, through the exercise of our imagination, we can turn an unpleasant experience into a pleasant one. He knows he is deceiving himself. He can't escape the "Truth," capitalized, in line 20. But he is grateful for the temporary escape from the harsh realities of life his play provides.

There is a religious dimension to the theme of the poem. In line 13, the poet imagines "the inner dome of heaven had fallen," as the ice crystals fall from the branches. In line 56, he climbs the birches "*Toward heaven.*" But Earth is better, "the right place for love" (line 52). Ultimately, the theme of the poem is that it is great to imagine, but it is better to be grounded. It is restorative to escape from harsh reality, but ultimately, we must confront reality.

Form

"Birches" is written in blank verse. Blank verse is a genre of poetry consisting of a regular rhythm pattern—iambic pentameter—but no recurring rhyme scheme.

~ / / ~ / ~ / ~ /

When I see birches bend to left and right

~ / ~ / ~ / ~ / ~ /

Across the lines of straighter darker trees,

~ / ~ / ~ / ~ / ~ /

I like to think some boy's been swinging them (Frost, 1969, as cited in Poetry Foundation, n.d., Lines 1-4).

It is a common and widely used verse form, revered because it is the form Shakespeare chose for his thirty-seven plays, though he does break the form on occasion in the interest of certain dramatic effects. It was also the form John Milton chose to use for the great epic poem in the English language, *Paradise Lost*.

Blank verse poems are usually quite long; at 59 lines, "Birches" is about average. They are often narrative poems in that they tell a story. Blank verse is the poetry genre that most closely resembles human speech, and so it lends itself to the narrative form. Blank verse poems often have a serious, philosophical tone or voice.

Figurative Language

"Birches" is an example of an extended metaphor, in that tree climbing is associated with a temporary, restorative escape from harsh reality throughout the poem.

In lines 10 and 11, Frost uses a series of words that begin with "s" and "sh": "Soon the sun's warmth makes them shed crystal shells / Shattering and avalanching on the snow-crust—." This repetition of a consonant sound to achieve a particular effect is called alliteration. The repetition, especially of the "sh" sound, mimics the sound of the ice crumbling from the branches and falling to the ground. The effect is aided by the repetition of the vowel sound "e" in "shed" and "shells" and the "a" sound in "shattering" and "avalanching." This repetition of vowel sounds, a cousin to alliteration, is called assonance.

In line 19, Frost uses a simile, comparing the bowed branches to girls who dry their hair in the sun. The relationship between the human and the natural worlds is central to the theme of this poem, and this simile helps to augment this theme.

In line 21, Frost personifies Truth, breaking into his fantasy about the branches of the birch trees bowed down because boys have been swinging on them. Truth will triumph over fantasy by the end of the poem, and the personification highlights Truth's strength.

The simile in line 44 draws an interesting comparison between life and "a pathless wood." This is actually an example of an extended simile, since the comparison does not end until line 47. Those cobwebs that burn

and tickle the face and those twigs that slash across the eyes are symbols that represent all of the physical and emotional challenges life sends our way.

Context

“Birches” was written while Frost was living in England, in 1913–14. It was first published in the August 1915 edition of *Atlantic Monthly*, and it was included in his collection of poetry, *Mountain Interval*, published in 1916. Frost biographies note that the action in the poem is based upon Frost’s own adventures, climbing birch trees when he was a boy.

Learning Activities

1. In this poem, Frost suggests that it is good to use our imagination to escape from harsh realities, but only if we are prepared to face reality after the vacation our imagination can provide. In his poetry, Frost often recommends communing with nature as a way of coping with stress. Can you relate to his recommendation? Explain your answer.
2. Watch the video [Birches \[New Tab\]](https://ra.ocls.ca/ra/login.aspx?url=https://fod.infobase.com/PortalPlaylists.aspx?wID=103261&xtid=128291&luid=448880) (<https://ra.ocls.ca/ra/login.aspx?url=https://fod.infobase.com/PortalPlaylists.aspx?wID=103261&xtid=128291&luid=448880>) (3 minutes) by Robert Frost. *Note:* this resource is only available to Georgian College students via single sign-on. If you are a student from another institution please reach out to your library for resources.

Attribution & References

Except where otherwise noted, this section is adapted from “16 “Birches” by Robert Frost (Blank Verse) (<https://opentextbc.ca/provinciale/english/chapter/birches-by-robert-frost-blank-verse/#chapter-71-section-1>)” In *Composition and Literature* by James Sexton and Derek Soles, licensed under [CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/). Adaptations include link to Georgian College resource video reading Birches.

Reference

Creative Arts Television DBA Aviva Films Ltd. (2017, February 17). *The poetry of Frost and Whitman performed* [Video]. Films on Demand [Georgian College Library access].

Poetry Foundation. (n.d.). *Birches by Robert Frost*. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44260/birches>

MAYA ANGELOU: BIOGRAPHY AND POEM "STILL I RISE"

Read the biography of Maya Angelou. Listen to the recital of the poem and reflect on how the poem and its structure affects you as a reader in the activity below.

Maya Angelou was an American poet, memoirist, actress and an important figure in the American Civil Rights Movement. Angelou is known for her series of six autobiographies, starting with *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), which was nominated for a National Book Award and called her *magnum opus*.



Maya Angelou visits YCP! 2/4/13 by York College
ISLGP, licensed under CC BY 2.0.

Her volume of poetry, *Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water 'Fore I Diiie* (1971) was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize.

Angelou recited her poem, “On the Pulse of Morning” at President Bill Clinton’s inauguration in 1993, the first poet to make an inaugural recitation since Robert Frost at John F. Kennedy’s inauguration in 1961. She was highly honored for her body of work, including being awarded over 30

honorary degrees.

Angelou’s first book, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sing*, describes her early life and her experience of confronting racism, a central feature of her work. She used the caged bird as a metaphor for the imprisoning nature of racial bigotry on her life.

At the time of her death, tributes to Angelou and condolences were paid by artists, entertainers and world leaders, including President Barack Obama, whose sister had been named after Angelou, and former President Bill Clinton. Harold Augenbraum, from the National Book Foundation, said that Angelou’s “legacy is one that all writers and readers across the world can admire and aspire to.”

Watch It: Still I Rise

Watch Still I rise (official lyric video) – Caged bird songs (4 minutes) on YouTube

(https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=_UFMB4i1AJo)

Learning Activity

1. What emotions are evoked when reading this poem? What is the effect of the repetition of the phrase “still I rise”? How did Angelou’s experiences shape her writing? Can you personally relate to the theme/message of the poem?

Attribution & References

Except where otherwise noted, this section is adapted from “[43 Poetry Anthology](https://oer.pressbooks.pub/theworryfreewriter/chapter/poetry-anthology/#Browning) (<https://oer.pressbooks.pub/theworryfreewriter/chapter/poetry-anthology/#Browning>)” In *The Worry Free Writer* by Dr. Karen Palmer, licensed under [CC BY-SA 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/). /Adaptations include changing the YouTube Still I Rise video and the removal of information on the following authors : Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Robert Browning, Stephen Crane, Emily Dickinson, T. S. Eliot, Robert Frost, Joy Harjo, Langston Hughes, Marge Piercy, Sylvia Plath, Alberto Rios, Edna St. Vincent Millay, May Swenson, Dylan Thomas, and Walt Whitman.

Original Attributions

- "*Maya Angelou*" from *New World Encyclopedia* licensed CC BY SA.

LISTENING TO MUSIC AND ANALYZING LYRICS

Please watch this music video from artist Jah'kota. As you watch, listen to the lyrics, then complete the following learning activity.

Watch It: Indigenize

Watch Indigenize (3 minutes) on YouTube (https://youtu.be/gCQ4_SGFlqU)

Learning Activity

1. What message is Jah'kota trying to convey, and what does this say about his identity? Does this message influence your worldview? Can you relate personally to the message?

Attribution & References

Except where otherwise noted, “Listening to Music and Analyzing Lyrics” by Academic and Career Prep, Georgian College, is licensed under [CC BY-NC-SA 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

READING POEMS TO AN AUDIENCE

Reading Your Poems to an Audience

In addition to publishing poems online or in print, another way to share your poems with the public is by reading them at an open mic event or at a more formal reading. Since poetry is an oral art, presenting your work this way is more natural to poetry's auditory nuances; as anyone who has listened to poetry read aloud knows, the impact can be more powerful than when poems are read silently in one's head. Some poets are very good at delivering their poems out loud to an audience. Other poets are not. I have attended readings where I was brought to tears by the power of beautiful language. And I have attended readings where I was nearly brought to tears for another reason. One reading by very well-published and respected poets was so intensely slow and monotonous that I thought I might never attend a reading ever again.

If you are writing poetry seriously, there is a good chance that you will be called upon or given the chance to read to an audience. At the very least you will be reading your poems in class to your workshop peers, a captive audience who, too, deserve to hear the poem delivered in an effective way. This chapter will provide you with tips and approaches to make sure your poems inspire listeners and to make the process enjoyable and rewarding for you, too.

Want to Read

How many of you have attended a poetry reading or listened to poets read online? If you have attended readings before, think to what made the reading enjoyable or made you wish you were somewhere else—anywhere else.

Watch it: Poets Reading their Poems

Use the interactive slide show to listen to the following poets read their poems and identify the approaches they use to pull you into their worlds:

Poets Reading their Poems (Text Version)

Watch Poetry everywhere: “Tornado child” by Kwame Dawes (2:30 minutes) on YouTube

(<https://youtu.be/r-guTTBeivg>)

Watch Poetry everywhere: “Slow dance” by Matthew Dickman (3:30 minutes) on

YouTube (<https://youtu.be/TG0F2a3sw14>)

Watch Poetry everywhere: “Calling him back after layoff” by Bob Hicok (2:40 minutes) on YouTube (https://youtu.be/jd_GaJFTo3c)

Watch Poetry everywhere: “One boy told me” by Naomi Shihab Nye (2:37 minutes) on YouTube (<https://youtu.be/bij3FP8aDjY>)

Watch Li-Young Lee reads ‘the gift’(3:25 minutes) on Vimeo (<https://vimeo.com/36988030>)

Activity source: “Poets Reading their Poems” H5P created by oeratgc, licensed under [CC BY-NC-SA 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/), except where otherwise noted.

If we look at the characteristics that mark good readers, we frequently find these traits:

1. Confidence
2. A voice loud enough to hear
3. A slow to moderate pace
4. Heightened inflection, cadence and intonation
5. Eyes lifted from the page

In contrast, readers who bore the audience show the following traits:

1. A clear state of not wanting to be there
2. Speaking too quietly
3. Rushing!
4. Monotone delivery
5. Not looking up from the page

The poets on the “Poetry Everywhere” [New Tab] (<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/poetryeverywhere>) site all read differently. Some, like Kwame Dawes and Shara McCullum, are very animated and willing to perform—they sing, they create voices for dialogue. Others, like Bob Hicok, rarely lift their eyes from the page. Whereas Naomi Shihab Nye in a crowded room is intimate with the audience and even interrupts the poem to better explain herself, Sharon Olds alone in a room reads from the book intensely but with distance. All of these poets portray ways to read that can help you deliver your own poems effectively. You do not need to sing. A poetry audience is generally very forgiving, supportive, and possibly one of the most attentive

audiences anyone could stand in front of. We simply need to *want* to read.

Even if you are uncomfortable in front of an audience, the good news is that strong reading skills can be learned, practiced, and perfected. And the number one thing you need to do to be a successful reader is to *want* to be there. If you feel good about your poems, if you want to read your poems to an audience, you will take the time to read them in a way so the audience will understand. Listeners will most likely not have the poems in front of them, so it will be up to you to hand them the words at a pace that permits them to follow along.

Tips for Reading

Generally speaking, poets tend to be shy and often introverted. Writers work in solitude, and being in a room of poets is nothing like being in a room of actors or theater people who spend most of their time around people. Yet, when poets read, they often channel some of the skills used by performers, even if it's just speaking up and slowing down. It helps to lend the reading a little bit of drama, breathing life into the poem's speaker, so that the poem read aloud has a beating heart, breathing lungs, and a glowing soul.

General Rules for Readings

Being asked to read poetry somewhere is an honor, and an opportunity to which you should always agree. The more you practice, the better and more relaxed you will become in front of an audience; besides, the skill of public speaking is one that is beneficial to you not only as a poet, but also as a future professional in your field of study. I encourage you to participate in open mic nights on campus or in your communities, and to take pleasure in being part of the poetry community.

The following rules of etiquette will help you when reading:

1. Once you know you are going to read, know what it is you are going to read (or at least have it narrowed down) and **practice reading it out loud** before delivering it to the audience. You may even practice reading it in front of someone and asking for feedback. While you practice, it might even be helpful to make notes in the margins for cues as to when to slow down, pause, look up, etc.
2. When asked to read or signing up to read, be sure to **stick to your time limit** or read a little under. What's that rule? Always keep them wanting more? A reading that drags on becomes boring and the audience loses interest in the work.
3. **Be gracious.** Thank your audience for their attention and attendance. Thank the hosts for the opportunity to read.
4. **Smile.** Smiling will relax your body, focus your mind, and gather the audience's attention.
5. **Stay.** If reading at an open mic or with several other poets, don't walk out after your reading. Stay and support the other readers.

Summary

In this module, you read different poems in order to learn about and experience the reader's response lens. Learning how literature or other forms of writing can affect an audience is an important skill in communication. Realizing that words, images, and content choices in our creations can be perceived differently and personally. You should always strive to consider the audience when communicating a message to be effective.

Attribution & References

Except where otherwise noted, this chapter is adapted from “[10: Reading Your Poems to an Audience](#)” In *Naming the Unnameable – An Approach to Poetry for New Generations (Evory)* by Michelle Bonczek Evory (OpenSUNY), licensed under [CC BY-NC-SA 4.0](#). /Adaptations include the removal of accompanying activity.