

New York City College of Technology  
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ENG2003: Introduction to Poetry  
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Reading a Poem

Getting the hang of reading poetry takes patience, practice, and a willingness to grapple with ambiguity. For one thing, a poem doesn't have sentences or paragraphs. Who is speaking to us? What is the speaker trying to say? What mood does the speaker create, does it change, and how do we know? These are only some of the questions with which readers of a poem may struggle.

How can you get the most out of a poem you read? Here are some strategies for approaching a poem for the first time:

- Always **read a poem several times**; a poem is designed to be complex; understanding is a gradual process.
- **Read the poem out loud** to yourself; a poem is meant to be an experience of sights and sounds.
- Ask yourself these questions: **who is the speaker** and is there a situation (event) happening in the poem? Or, are we instead getting the speaker's thoughts about an abstract idea or problem? Look for clues.
- Look up all **vocabulary words** that are new to you. A poem is more compact than any other kind of literary text, and its meaning can hinge on only a few words. Without knowing what every word in a poem means, you may be making the act of reading poetry even more arduous.
- Don't be afraid to **annotate the poem**. Annotating means writing in the margins of the poem, adding line numbers, underlining words, asking questions, making connections.
- Think about the **speaker's attitude towards him or herself**, the poem's subject, and the audience.
- What do we know about the speaker and what remains a mystery?

When re-reading:

- Be alert for **uses of figurative language** (similes, metaphors, personification) and *symbolism*. The literal meaning of a word (denotation) may not be what is important; its figurative meaning (connotation) may be more valuable.
- Consider what **themes (abstract ideas) the speaker is exploring** in his or her poem? Try to pick out specific language that supports your claims.
- If possible, consider the **poem's structure** (number of lines, stanzas, its rhythm, the rhyme or lack of rhyme). How does the structure work along with the content to enhance the poem's meaning?