

## Discovering your voice through poetry – Guide: How to Read a Poem from the [Great Books Foundation](#)

### Getting Started: Prior Assumptions

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.

### Reading a Poem Aloud

Before you get very far with a poem, you have to read it. In fact, you can learn quite a few things just by looking at it. The title may give you some image or association to start with. Looking at the poem's shape, you can see whether the lines are continuous or broken into groups (called *stanzas*), or how long the lines are, and so how dense, on a physical level, the poem is. You can also see whether it looks like the last poem you read by the same poet or even a poem by another poet. All of these are good qualities to notice, and they may lead you to a better understanding of the poem in the end.

But sooner or later, you're going to have to read the poem, word by word. To begin, read the poem aloud. Read it more than once. Listen to your voice, to the sounds the words make. Do you notice any special effects? Do any of the words rhyme? Is there a cluster of sounds that seem the same or similar? Is there a section of the poem that seems to have a rhythm that's distinct from the rest of the poem? Don't worry about why the poem might use these effects. The first step is to hear what's going on. If you find your own voice distracting, have a friend read the poem to you.

## Talking Back to a Poem

It would be convenient if there were a short list of universal questions, ones that could be used anytime with any poem. In the absence of such a list, here are a few general questions that you might ask when approaching a poem for the first time:

- Who is the speaker?
- What circumstances gave rise to the poem?
- What situation is presented?
- Who or what is the audience?
- What is the tone?
- What form, if any, does the poem take?
- How is form related to content?
- Is sound an important, active element of the poem?
- Does the poem spring from an identifiable historical moment?
- Does the poem speak from a specific culture?
- Does the poem have its own vernacular?
- Does the poem use imagery to achieve a particular effect?
- What kind of figurative language, if any, does the poem use?
- If the poem is a question, what is the answer?
- If the poem is an answer, what is the question?
- What does the title suggest?
- Does the poem use unusual words or use words in an unusual way?

## Embrace Ambiguity

Here's a tricky issue: the task is to grasp, to connect, to understand. But such a task is to some degree impossible, and most people want clarity. At the end of class, at the end of the day, we want revelation, a glimpse of the skyline through the lifting fog. Aesthetically, this is understandable. Some magic, some satisfaction, some "Ahhh!" is one of the rewards of any reading, and particularly the reading of poetry. But a poem that reveals itself completely in one or two readings will, over time, seem less of a poem than one that constantly reveals subtle recesses and previously unrecognized meanings.