

Tips For Reading a Poem:

1. Don't panic. The poem will not swallow you whole, only slightly.
2. Try not to come at the poem like it's a riddle you have to decode. It isn't. (Unless you're into that Indiana Jones/ Harriet The Spy code breaking stuff- then yes, think of it like this. Whatever works, Detective.)
3. Read it outloud. No joke. Poems are moments and stories. They are meant to be heard.
4. Go back and read the title. I know that you skipped it.
5. When you've read the whole thing, ask yourself when you entered the poem. What was the first image, line, phrase that woke you up and caught your attention? Mark it. Circle it. Draw a box around it.
6. What was it about that part that caught your attention? Was it unusual? Unexpected? Scary? Gross? Funny? Think about why you noticed it and write it in the margins.
7. Pay attention to how the poem is making you feel. If that feeling is bored, write it in bold at the top of the page. If it is sad, mark that too. If it makes you angry, say that. How is the poem making you feel this? What is boring or sad or angry about it? Circle the parts that do this. Label them.
8. What else have you noticed?
9. Write this stuff down. You'll forget it if you don't. Oh, your memory is impeccable? Humor me, write it anyway. It doesn't have to be formal, doesn't have to be full sentences. If you want, you can draw a smiley face next to the line you thought was funny. (BUT DO NOT JUST UNDERLINE.) Why not, you ask? Well I'll tell ya. It's because when you go back to collect your ideas about this, you are not going to remember why you underlined that. So, you'll spend more time trying to analyze and remember the reason you marked it, than you will analyzing and looking at the poem. Do Future-You a favor and throw some words in the margins.
10. Look at the punctuation. Is there anything weird about it?
11. Who is speaking? How can you be so sure? Prove it. What do we know about them? Make a list of characteristics like a suspect's profile on a murder case.
12. Look for patterns. What happens more than once? What ideas, or words, or images or structures repeat?
13. Does the pattern you've noticed change? If so, why? If not, why not?
14. What do you think the pattern means? What is it saying or doing in the poem? What does it tell you about the speaker, the ideas, the world, and yourself?
15. Make lists. Make lots of lists. All the things the poem reminds you of. The feelings it gave you. The patterns. The unusual things. Your reactions.
16. Breathe, you did it! And it wasn't too bloody (only slightly, remember?) You've probably got some cool stuff to say about the poem now. Now you're ready to write about it.

“Introduction to Poetry”

Billy Collins

I ask them to take a poem
and hold it up to the light
like a color slide

or press an ear against its hive.

I say drop a mouse into a poem
and watch him probe his way out,

or walk inside the poem’s room
and feel the walls for a light switch.

I want them to waterski
across the surface of a poem
waving at the author’s name on the shore.

But all they want to do
is tie the poem to a chair with rope
and torture a confession out of it.

They begin beating it with a hose
to find out what it really means.