Reading Poetry
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Careful reading involves asking questions about texts. Here are some questions we can ask of poems.

**Speaker**
– Who is it? What do we know about the speaker, and how do we know it?
– What is the speaker’s situation or state of mind? What specific words in the poem convey this information?
– Does the poem encourage us to see a gap between speaker and poet? If so, how?

**Addressee**
– Is the speaker talking to anyone or anything, explicitly or implicitly, other than the reader?
– If so, what do we know of the addressee, and how do we know it?

**Situation**
– What is the situation of the poem? Is a story being told? Does it portray a psychological inquiry or struggle? Does it describe a relationship? Does it employ a setting?
– Do the events, relationships and/or psychological states depicted in the poem change over its course? If so, where? How do you know?
– Does the poem have a main message, idea, hook, gimmick, etc?

**Structure**
– In general, how is the poem structured? Examine the kinds of lines it uses (end-stopped? run-on?), its stanzas, rhyme scheme, meter: how do they contribute to the way the poem works?

**Stanzas**
– How many stanzas does it have? How do stanza divisions relate to meaning? Does anything change from stanza to stanza (metaphors used, tone, verb tense, subject, addressee)? Do the stanzas perform rhetorical jobs (as parts of an argument, etc.)?

**Rhyme**
– Does the rhyme scheme integrate the parts of the poem (stanzas) or keep them separate? Does the rhyming of certain words highlight certain issues?

**Meter**
– Does the poem use regular rhythm? E.g., iambic, as in “The wanton troopers riding by / Have shot my fawn, and it will die”; or trochaic, as in “Once upon a midnight dreary / As I pondered weak and weary.” If so, what is the effect of this regularity?
– Almost all poems depart from their rhythmic foundation, sometimes occasionally, sometimes frequently. What effect do these breaks, or rhythmic substitutions, create? Do strong stresses, for example, call attention to certain words? With what effect?
– Does the poem use sound effects (alliteration, assonance) to advance the theme, tension, or tone?
Form
– What kind of poem is it? Does it follow an established poetic form or genre (such as an ode, sonnet, elegy, epitaph)? Does it follow a certain poetic tradition (e.g., the seduction poem)?
– Does the form the poem employs have certain rules, codes, values? Does this poem follow these rules, or subvert them? That is, what questions does the poem’s form raise in terms of its dialogue with literary convention? Is it doing something different or unusual with the expectations that accompany that kind of poem?

Language
– Poetic language tends to be much more precise than that of prose: words have been carefully chosen for their nuance, resonance, and sound in addition to their primary meaning. Look at some of the key words the poem uses: what gets lost if you substitute other words in their place? That is, why might the poet have chosen these specific words?
– How would you describe the language in this poem? Is it colloquial, conversational, formal, high, middle, low, Latinate, simple, technical? Does it call attention to itself?
– Are words repeated? How does repetition contribute to structure, theme, meaning?

Figurative language
– What images/symbols does the poet use? What associations do these images or symbols have? So what?
– Does the poem employ metaphors? What exactly is being compared to what? What is the effect of the comparison? Do any particular metaphors, etc., contribute to a larger figurative pattern within the poem (such as an extended “conceit”)?

Allusions
– Does the poem contain any allusions (to the bible, mythology, historical or contemporary events, etc.)? If so, what do the allusions suggest, and what is their effect?

Literary effects
– Does the poem employ other literary effects, such as personification, apostrophe, hyperbole? If so, so what? How do they contribute to the effects the poem creates?

Tone
– In conversation, inflection can give us clues about the speaker’s tone. But we need to look for other kinds of clues to describe the tone of a written text, and we need to be specific in how we use the text’s details as evidence.
– What is the speaker’s mood and/or attitude toward the subject(s)? Does the speaker ever say one thing but mean another? Is he or she ironic or sarcastic? How can you tell?
– Do you think the poem encourages us to have a different opinion of the speaker than the speaker has of him or herself? If so, how?

Other
– What other contexts can help you to interpret the poem? You may want to consider biography, the history of ideas, cultural and historical background, other poems by the same poet, or poems written by other poets in the same form or tradition of your poem.
Prosody: the study of the metrical structure of verse

The poetic “foot”

**Duple** (two syllables):
1) iamb: stress on the second syllable (“The wanton troopers riding by / Have shot my fawn, and it will die” is two iambic lines of four feet each). This is the normal rhythm of English verse.
2) trochee: stress on the first syllable (“smoky,” “instant,” “reaper” are trochaic feet; “Once upon a midnight dreary / As I pondered weak and weary” is two trochaic lines of four feet each).
3) spondee: two successive stressed syllables (Milton’s “Rocks, caves, lakes, fens, bogs, dens and shades of death” begins with three spondaic feet).
4) pyrrhic: two short or unstressed syllables.

**Triple** (three syllables):
1) anapest: two unstressed syllables followed by a stressed third syllable (“on a bet” is an anapestic foot; “And the peak of the mountain was apples, the hugest that ever were seen” is an anapestic line of six feet)
2) dactyl: a stressed syllable followed by two unstressed syllables (“family” is a dactyl; “Photolithography” and “dark and with spots on it” both consist of two dactyls).

Note: English poets tend to use triple rhythms only for comic or satiric effects.

The poetic line:
- **trimeter**: a line of three feet (6 syllables in duple rhythm)
- **tetrameter**: a line of four feet (8 syllables in duple rhythm)
- **pentamerer**: a line of five feet (10 syllables; the most commonly used line in English poetry)
- **hexameter**: a line of six feet (12 syllables; also called an Alexandrine)
- **heptameter**: a line of seven feet (14 syllables).

The 7-syllable/4-stress line (trochaic tetrameter) is frequently used by 17th-century poets: “Why should we defer our joys? / Fame and rumour are but toys” (from Ben Jonson, “Song: To Celia”)

**Some resources:**

The following books are all quite different in structure and aim: the list includes anthologies, a dictionary, and guides to both studying and writing poetry. But all contain useful information about poetry, not only in its technical aspects but also about how poems work.