**How to Read a Poem**

Step 1

NOTICE WHAT YOU NOTICE

1. Read the poem through three times.
2. silently, for first impression
3. ALOUD—noting shifts in pattern, thought, voice, flow, pace.
4. Again, to adjust first impression

* What is the single most dominant impression?
* Note the title. (At this point pay no particular attention to the writer’s name, gender, or the date of the poem.)

Step 2

Ask yourself the following questions, and locate specific EVIDENCE for your answers.

1. WHAT is going on here? What is the “dramatic situation”?
2. (Look on it as if it were a brief glimpse into a play scene, an overheard conversation, a flash of telepathy into someone’s thoughts and feelings of the moment).
3. WHO is speaking? voice/PERSONA/speaker/narrator (NOT the poet).
4. Describe the narrator. What is his/her attitude to the situation (TONE)
5. Who, if anyone, is s/he speaking to? attitude? relationship?

Step 3

How does the poem achieve its EFFECT? (dominant impression you noted above)?

Look at:

* Patterns: what does the whole structure do? Why is it the shape it is?
* Why are stanzas, lines, so constructed?
* Listen for repetitions.
* Listen to rhythm, meter, rhyme, and sound patterns
* Images: Appeals to any of the senses.
* Images may be literal; or figurative (METAPHOR) How do they work?
* Words: Why the choice and position of words? What extra implications, connotations, echoes, allusions?

Step 4

* How do all of these contribute to what the poem AS A WHOLE is doing?

**Quick Write Poems**

**Assignment: Choose four (4)** of the following types of poetry and compose your own masterpiece following the parameters of each type. Yes, you may attempt to write one of each one but it is not required.

**Clerihew:** Four – line form consisting of two couplets (a-a, b-b) that offer a humorous view of a well-known person. The name must be a part of one of the end rhymes.

John Wayne

When rugged John Wayne

Leads the wagon train,

The badmen scatter

To his bullets’ patter.

Albert Einstein

Albert Einstein

Genius at nine

Did what none dared:

Invented E=mc 2

**Conceit poem:** A conceit is a fanciful poetic image, especially an elaborate or exaggerated comparison. This is really an experience in working with metaphor, but one that extends through the poem. You will be writing about one thing entirely in terms of another, eg. the moon as a soccer ball - kicked around the sky, 'off-side!' Answer these questions about your chosen object comparison:

1. What is it? What does it look like?
2. Where is it?
3. What is it doing?
4. Expand this to use senses, eg. touch, feeling
5. A final action to round off the conceit

Notice how this poem describes a mosquito in terms of a burglar.

The Flying Burglar

He's out at dead of night, dodging  
between this shadow and that.  
His nerves quiver.  
He looks for a chink of light,  
the smallest crack.  
He's found it. He's in  
How careless  
to leave the goodies  
heaped on the bed.  
He zones in, strikes,  
and stashes away  
his first sackful  
of warm blood.

**Elegy poem:** A poem or song composed especially as a lament for a deceased person, or is melancholic and pensive in tone. This poetic form is Greek from *elegeia,* which means “song of mourning.” Formal elegies are structured in four-line stanzas written in iambic pentameter and rhymed *abab*. Classical elegies start out with a statement of the subject (usually a specific death), followed by the lamentations or mourning of this death, and finally consolation, as the poet come to accept the loss. Here are the first two sections of Walt Whitman’s poem mourning the death of Abraham Lincoln and the soldiers of the Civil War, “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed”:

When lilacs last in the dooryard bloomed,

And the great star early drooped in the western sky in the night,

I mourned, and yet shall mourn with ever-returning spring.

Ever returning spring, trinity sure to me you bring,

Lilac blooming perennial and drooping star in the west,

And thought of him I love.

powerful western fallen star!

shads of night – O moody, tearful night!

great star disappeared – O black murk that hides the star!

cruel hands that hold me powerless – O helpless soul of me!

harsh surrounding cloud that will not free my soul.

**Epigram poem:** The epigram is the most condensed and concentrated form of poetry. Webster defines it as "A short poem treating concisely, pointedly, often satirically, a single thought or event, usually ending with a witticism." The poet of "[The Rime of the Ancient Mariner](http://library.utoronto.ca/www/utel/rp/poems/coleridg1.html)," Samuel Taylor Coleridge, defined it even more concisely:

What is an epigram? A dwarfish whole;  
Its body brevity, and wit its soul.

The epigram may be said to be a miniature lyric, a sharpened arrow of verse. It may be grave or gay or clever, but its real point is - its point. Besides its incisiveness, it must be perfect in form and finish. One can no more imagine a clumsy epigram than a long one. Every word counts, every syllable must be carefully balanced, every rhyme sharply matched. Since the epigram consists of only a few phrases, there can be no fumbling, no uncertainty of aim, no superfluous ideas. The epigram is all essence.

Preston, was a master of the epigram. Here are two of his favorites:

No humorist laughs at his own wheeze:  
A snuff-box has no right to sneeze.

The alienist is not a joke;  
He finds you cracked and leaves you broke.

**Formal Cinquain:** Five lines, each line adding two syllables and further meaning to the subject. Syllable pattern is 2-4-6-8-2.

Flowers   
Are bursts of warmth,   
Bringing sunshine to me,   
Brightening my day. I love   
Flowers.

Hope

Gently,

Gasping for breath,

Caring for human life,

Hope renders the world resounding

Pleasures.

**Mother Goose Parody:**

Familiar patterns, phrases, and/or characters from nursery rhymes, used to comment humorously on contemporary situations or to recreate a nonsensical or ridiculous event.

Women’s Lib

Little Ms. Fonda,

Sat on a Honda

Eating her yogurt and cheese;

When an Easy Rider

Sat down beside her

She gave him a healthy squeeze.

Scientist’s Song

Higgledy, piggledy, my space lab

Is better than a Yellow Cab;

Astronauts use its unique facilities

More easily than the public utilities;

Of course, there’s a costly national tab

For higgledy, piggledy, my space lab.

**Poetry – Journey Poem Instructions & Assignment**

Here is the same poem, broken down to illustrate how it follows a formula with 20 requirements.

Assignment: Write a similar poem of your own, about a journey of your own, using the same formula, in exactly the same order.

1. Begin the poem with a metaphor or simile.

Beer bottles line the ditches all the way to town

**like beach drift after a storm**.

2. Say something specific but utterly preposterous.

In each bottle there is a message which has evaporated.

3. Use at least one image, in succession, for each of the five senses: sight, touch, sound, taste, smell.

With my gunny sack pack, I look

like a humped, arthritic old tramp. **[sight]**. The clink

of glass **[sound]** is a music that changes

with the miles, changes

as the weight of the pack ropes

cuts into my thumbs **[touch].** The air is summer

on the tongue, **[taste]** but the soaked cloth stinks

of stale hops, of spit, old rainwater, **[smell]** . . .

4. Use an example of *synesthesia* (mixing the senses).

**smells like the weight** of a ticket

5. Use the proper name of a person, & a place.

**to *Flash Gordon in the Caverns of Mongo*.**

6. Contradict something you said earlier in the poem.

**There are still messages** in these bottles,

and every storekeeper, any small kid,

can read them. . .

7. Change direction, or digress from the last thing you said (digression: stopping what you're talking about to talk about something else).

At Heart Lake, a single heron kites

from the cattails, and floats in a June wind

8. Use a word (slang? not obscene, please) you've never seen in a poem.

that doesn't know what **a *dweeb*** is.

9. Use an example of false cause-effect logic.

A heavy rain begins, because it’s Saturday,

and there’s a serial between the double features.

10. Use a piece of "talk" you've actually heard (preferably in dialect and/or which you don't understand).

I'm readier than Freddier, and jammier than Jim.

11. Create a metaphor using the following construction: "The (**adjective**) (**concrete noun**) of (**abstract noun**)"

At Fergie’s Market the clerk sniffs at the bottles

spilling from my bag. His eyes are hard as he counts

out the **shiny quarters of respectability**.

12. Use an image in such a way as to reverse its usual associative qualities.

His grin is the grill of a hearse.

13. Make the speaker of the poem do something he/she could not do in "real life."

I dig through the grave he puts me in

and surface in line for the matinee.

14. Refer to yourself by nickname & in third person.

**Little Sammy** tells the clerk **he** is eleven.

15. Write in the future tense, such that part of the poem seems to be a prediction.

He **will tell** her this for so many years

that always the simple act of eating popcorn

will make him feel younger.

16. Modify a noun with an unlikely adjective.

I take a seat in the **licorice dark.**

17. Make a declarative assertion that sounds convincing, but that makes no "real" sense.

I am cloaked in the stench of old beer,

wrapped in a silence so profound the noise

vibrates inside my head like a shout.

18. Use a phrase from a language other than English, then translate it.

*En la oscuridad, todos los ojos tienen lenguas.*

In the darkness, all of the eyes have tongues.

19. Make a non-human object say or do something human (personification).

The **walls gossip**, the **sticky floor points me out**.

20. Close the poem with a vivid image that echoes the image you began the poem with.

All around me people leave their seats, until I am

the single bottle left in its fragile case, this memory

a wind blowing across the glass rim of time.

**Poems of Childhood**

**1. Those Winter Sundays** *Robert Hayden (1913-1980)*Sundays too my father got up early  
And put his clothes on in the blueback cold,  
then with cracked hands that ached  
from labor in the weekday weather made  
banked fires blaze. No one ever thanked him.  
  
I'd wake and hear the cold splintering, breaking.  
When the rooms were warm, he'd call,  
and slowly I would rise and dress,  
fearing the chronic angers of that house,  
  
Speaking indifferently to him,  
who had driven out the cold  
and polished my good shoes as well.  
What did I know, what did I know  
of love's austere and lonely offices?   
  
**2. The Whipping** *by Robert Hayden*The old woman across the way  
     is whipping the boy again  
and shouting to the neighborhood  
     her goodness and his wrongs.  
  
Wildly he crashes through elephant ears,  
     pleads in dusty zinnias,  
while she in spite of crippling fat  
     pursues and corners him.  
  
She strikes and strikes the shrilly circling  
     boy till the stick breaks  
in her hand. His tears are rainy weather  
     to woundlike memories:  
  
My head gripped in bony vise  
     of knees, the writhing struggle  
to wrench free, the blows, the fear  
     worse than blows that hateful  
Words could bring, the face that I  
     no longer knew or loved . . .  
Well, it is over now, it is over,  
     and the boy sobs in his room,  
  
And the woman leans muttering against  
     a tree, exhausted, purged--  
avenged in part for lifelong hidings  
     she has had to bear.

**3. Digging** *Seamus Heaney (Ireland, born 1939)*Between my finger and my thumb  
The squat pen rests; as snug as a gun.  
  
Under my window a clean rasping sound  
When the spade sinks into gravelly ground:  
My father, digging. I look down  
  
Till his straining rump among the flowerbeds  
Bends low, comes up twenty years away  
Stooping in rhythm through potato drills  
Where he was digging.  
  
The coarse boot nestled on the lug, the shaft  
Against the inside knee was levered firmly.  
He rooted out tall tops, buried the bright edge deep  
To scatter new potatoes that we picked  
Loving their cool hardness in our hands.  
  
By God, the old man could handle a spade,  
Just like his old man.  
  
My grandfather could cut more turf in a day  
Than any other man on Toner's bog.  
Once I carried him milk in a bottle  
Corked sloppily with paper. He straightened up  
To drink it, then fell to right away  
Nicking and slicing neatly, heaving sods  
Over his shoulder, digging down and down  
For the good turf. Digging.

The cold smell of potato mold, the squelch and slap  
Of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edge  
Through living roots awaken in my head.  
But I've no spade to follow men like them.  
  
Between my finger and my thumb  
The squat pen rests.  
I'll dig with it.

**4. Hanging Fire** *Audre Lorde (1934-1992)*I am fourteen

and my skin has betrayed me

the boy I cannot live without

still sucks his thumb

in secret

how come my knees are

always so ashy

what if I die

before the morning comes

and momma's in the bedroom

with the door closed.

I have to learn how to dance

in time for the next party

my room is too small for me

suppose I die before graduation

they will sing sad melodies

but finally

tell the truth about me

There is nothing I want to do

and too much

that has to be done

and momma's in the bedroom

with the door closed.

Nobody even stops to think

about my side of it

I should have been on Math Team

my marks were better than his

why do I have to be

the one

wearing braces

I have nothing to wear tomorrow

will I live long enough

to grow up

and momma's in the bedroom

with the door closed.

**5. My Papa's Waltz** *Theodore Roethke (1908-1963)*

The whiskey on your breath   
Could make a small boy dizzy;   
But I hung on like death:   
Such waltzing was not easy.   
  
We romped until the pans   
Slid from the kitchen shelf;   
My [mother's](http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/my-papa-s-waltz/) countenance   
Could not unfrown itself.   
  
The hand that held my wrist   
Was battered on one knuckle;   
At every step you missed   
My right ear scraped a buckle.   
  
You beat time on my head   
With a palm caked hard by dirt,   
Then waltzed me off to bed   
Still clinging to your shirt.

For three of the five poems:

1. Summarize in a short sentence the main idea of ***each of these poems***.
2. Characterize the speaker in ***each of these poems***. How old is the speaker? Can you distinguish different time periods in the poem or different ages in the speaker?
3. Explain how ***each poet*** conveys the perceptions of a child. How does this control the setting of the poem?
4. What childhood emotions are portrayed in ***each poem***?
5. How does ***each poet*** convey adult reflections? How does this affect the form of the poem?
6. List what adult thoughts about childhood are communicated in the poems you read.

Only do this once***: Compare yourself to the child in one or two of the poems. Explain what do you have in common? What not? How would you feel if you were him or her?***

“Words make you think. Music makes you feel. A song makes you feel a thought.” -E. Y. Harburg

Lyrical Poetry Analysis

For this project, you will choose three songs to analyze the lyrics. The songs must be **significantly different** either in musical genre or in lyrical approach. You need to find the lyrics and have the song ready to listen to in order to do the analysis.

For each song you need the following:

A) Full Lyrics

B) Theme and meaning of the song

C) How the songwriter used language to convey the theme (direct, indirect, metaphorical)

D) Poetic devices used in the song (similes, metaphors, imagery)

E) How the music supports the lyrical component