

Appreciating Poetry

Poetry is everywhere, not just within the pages of this book. Song lyrics, greeting-card messages, and commercial jingles can all be considered poetry. You might describe some poems as clever, others as inspiring, and still others as sappy. Every so often, though, you might encounter a poem that gets inside your heart and mind. How does a poem do that? Read on to find out.



READING STANDARDS
 B.2.1 Describe figurative language
 B.3.3.1 Identify and/or interpret text organization

Part 1: What Makes Poetry Different?

One difference between poetry and fiction has to do with **form**, or the way a poem looks on the page. While short stories and novels consist of sentences and paragraphs, poems are made up of lines. A line can be a single word, a sentence, or part of a sentence. In many poems, lines are arranged into groups called **stanzas**. The way a poet chooses to arrange lines and stanzas can affect a poem's meaning.

Poetry is different from fiction in another way. While a story or a novel has a narrator who tells the story, every poem has a **speaker**—a voice that “talks” to readers. It's important to remember that the speaker is not necessarily the poet, as you can see from this humorous poem.



A Fine Head of Lettuce

Poem by Jack Prelutsky

I'm a fine head of lettuce,
 a handsome romaine.
 I haven't a cranium
 made for a brain.

I'm simple and shy.
 I remain on my own.
 I'm known in the garden
 as lettuce alone.

STUDY THE POEM

- Who is the speaker? In this poem, the speaker directly tells you about itself. Usually, you have to infer a speaker's identity and personality using details from the poem.
- How many stanzas does the poem have?
- How many lines are in each stanza? Notice that the lines are all about the same length.

MODEL: FORM AND SPEAKER

The poem “Losing Face” is more serious than “A Fine Head of Lettuce.” At a quick glance, you can see that it also looks different from Jack Prelutsky’s poem. That’s because the lines and stanzas in “Losing Face” vary in length. The poem sounds different too—more like conversation. As you read the poem, take a closer look at its form. Also think about what each stanza reveals about the speaker.

Losing Face

Poem by Janet S. Wong

Finally Mother is proud
of something
I have done.
“My girl won
5 the art contest,”
she tells the world,
smiling so big
and laughing so loud
her gold tooth
10 shows.

I’m the only one
who knows
how I drew so well,
erasing the perfect lines
15 I traced,
drawing worse ones
on purpose
in their place.

20 I feel awful.
I want to tell.

But I don’t want to lose
Mother’s glowing
proud face.



Close Read

1. Who is the speaker of this poem? Describe the conflict she is having.
2. All three stanzas work together to help you understand the speaker’s feelings. In your own words, summarize what each stanza is about.
3. Reread the boxed section. It is the only place where each line contains a complete sentence. Why might the poet have chosen to emphasize these lines?
4. Reread the last stanza. Why doesn’t the speaker want to admit what she’s done?

Part 2: What Brings a Poem to Life?

Think about the comforting melody of a lullaby, the contagious beat of a certain song, or those few words in a poem that perfectly capture how you're feeling. The power of a poem comes from more than its form and its speaker. Sound devices, imagery, and figurative language are the elements that can make a poem simply unforgettable.

SOUND DEVICES

Most poems are meant to be heard, not just read. So, a poem's sounds are often as carefully chosen as its words. Poets use these sound devices to make music, to emphasize ideas, or to remind you of the subjects they are describing.

SOUND DEVICES

RHYME

the repetition of sounds at the ends of words, as in *thing* and *sing*, *cry* and *sky*

RHYTHM

the beat you hear as you read a poem aloud. This beat is affected by which syllables are stressed (·) and which are unstressed (-). Stressed words are read with more emphasis.

REPETITION

the use of a word, phrase, sound, or line more than once, such as the repeated use of *The rain* and *pools*

ALLITERATION

the repetition of consonant sounds at the beginning of words, such as the *s* in *sleep-song*

EXAMPLES

The rhyme and rhythm in this poem help to create a singsong sound.

Some people talk and talk
and never say a thing

Some people look at you
and birds begin to sing

Some people laugh and laugh
and yet you want to cry

Some people touch your hand
and music fills the sky

—“People” by Charlotte Zolotow

The repetition in these lines suggests a steady downpour. The alliteration mimics the rain's soothing sounds.

The rain makes still pools on
the sidewalk.

The rain makes running pools
in the gutter.

The rain plays a little sleep-song on our
roof at night—

And I love the rain.

—from “April Rain Song” by
Langston Hughes

MODEL 1: RHYME AND REPETITION

In "Pete at the Zoo," a young speaker considers an important question: Do zoo animals ever get lonely? Read the poem aloud, paying particular attention to the use of rhyme and repetition.

PETE AT THE ZOO

Poem by Gwendolyn Brooks

I wonder if the elephant
 Is lonely in his stall
 When all the boys and girls are gone
 And there's no shout at all,
 And there's no one to stamp before,
 No one to note his might:
 Does he hunch up, as I do,
 Against the dark of night?

Close Read

1. Examine the words at the ends of the lines. Which words rhyme?
2. Notice the repeated words and phrases in the boxed lines. What does the repetition help to emphasize about nighttime at the zoo?

MODEL 2: RHYTHM AND ALLITERATION

What kinds of sounds do you associate with fireworks? In this poem, rhythm and alliteration help you to hear some of these sounds. Read the poem aloud to get the full effect.

Fireworks

Poem by Valerie Worth

First
 A far thud,
 Then the rocket
 Climbs the air,
 A dull red flare,
 To hang, a moment,
 Invisible, before
 Its shut black shell cracks
 And claps against the ears,
 Breaks and billows into bloom,
 Spilling down clear green sparks, gold spears,
 Silent sliding silver waterfalls and stars.

Close Read

1. Stressed and unstressed syllables are marked in lines 8–10. Read these lines aloud, emphasizing the stressed words. What does the rhythm remind you of?
2. The use of alliteration in the boxed line helps you to hear the noise of the fireworks after they've exploded. Find another example of alliteration.

IMAGERY AND FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

Suppose the poet who wrote “Fireworks” had described her subject as “loud and colorful.” Her poem might not have had the same impact on you. Instead, the sound is “a far thud,” and the colors are “clear green sparks” and “gold spears.” These are examples of images, words and phrases that call up pictures in your mind. Images appeal to your senses of sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch. They help you to clearly imagine what a poem describes.

One way that poets create images is through figurative language, the use of creative comparisons to describe familiar things in new ways. Review the three types of figurative language in the graphic. What does each example tell you about the autumn leaves?

SIMILE

a comparison between two unlike things that includes the word *like* or *as*

In a high wind the
leaves don't
fall but fly
straight out of the
tree like birds

—“Poem” by A. R. Ammons

METAPHOR

a comparison between two unlike things that does not include the word *like* or *as*

The fallen leaves are cornflakes
That fill the lawn's wide dish,

—from “December Leaves” by
Kaye Starbird

PERSONIFICATION

a description of an object, an animal, or an idea as if it were human or had human qualities and reactions

New sounds to
walk on
today,
dry
leaves
talking
in hoarse
whispers
under bare trees.

—“New Sounds” by Lilian Moore

Part 3: Analyze the Literature

In this poem, Eve Merriam transports you to a familiar scene—a dinner table. You'll see how Merriam uses many of the techniques you just learned about to help you understand the speaker's relationship with his or her parents.



Poem by **Eve Merriam**

Like bookends
my father at one side
my mother at the other

propping me up
5 but unable to read
what I feel.

Were they born with clothes on?
Born with rules on?

10 When we sit at the dinner table
we smooth our napkins into polite folds.
How was your day dear

Fine

And how was yours dear

Fine

15 And how was school

The same

Only once in a while
when we're not trying so hard
when we're not trying at all
20 our napkins suddenly whirl away
and we float up to the ceiling
where we sing and dance until it hurts from laughing

and then we float down
with our napkin parachutes
25 and once again spoon our soup
and pass the bread please.

Close Read

1. Notice the simile in lines 1–6. How are the mother and father like bookends?
2. The use of repetition in lines 7–8 emphasizes the speaker's frustration with his or her parents. What other examples of repetition can you find?
3. Examine the two boxed images. What contrasting dinner scenes do they bring to mind?
4. Line 22 is the longest one in the poem. Why might Merriam have chosen to make this line stand out? (Hint: Think about the mood at this particular moment.)
5. How would you describe the speaker's relationship with his or her parents? Support your answer.