**How to Read a Poem**

**Step1**

Skim the poem for its length and form. You can usually (though not always) expect a poem of several pages to tell a story, whereas a short poem of several lines will generally express an idea or a very short argument.

**Step2**

Look for divisions in the text. Approach each stanza as you would approach a paragraph in prose - as the detailed development of a single idea.

**Step3**

Locate all sentence endings so you can concentrate on one sentence at a time. This is very useful in poems with difficult syntax.

**Step4**

Familiarize yourself with terms such as "image," "simile," "metaphor," "symbol" and "allegory," in that order. Consider how each is used.

**Step5**

Mark similar or related words, phrases and ideas with the same colour of pen. Words such as "death," "ashes," "dust" and "decay" could be marked in brown while "green," "spring," "bud," "life" and "new" could be marked in green. This way, you'll be able to follow the development of ideas and changes in emphasis visually. Use as many colours as you think necessary.

**Step6**

Look up all words you don't know.

**Step7**

Read the poem aloud as if it were prose. Don't pause at the end of each line unless punctuation requires it.

**Step8**

Reread the poem for new insights.

**How To Analyse A Poem**

1. **First reactions**. The first time you read through a poem, record any “gut reactions” you have to the poem: any emotional connections you have with what the author is saying, reminders of personal experiences, things you like or dislike, etc. Think in terms of, “How do I feel about this? Why?” These reactions can help you focus on the type of response the poet is looking for in a reader.
2. **Literal meaning**. Translate the poem into conversational English. How would you tell the poem’s story to a friend? Think in terms of, “What’s the most common dictionary definition of this word or phrase?” This can be a difficult step, but remember that all good poetry, even when it seems incredibly inaccessible, is still based on words that carry literal meaning.
3. **Connotative meaning**. Take several key words or phrases from the poem and consider the kinds of connotations they carry. Think in terms of, “Why this word and not another?” Refer to your first reactions: often connotative meanings, rather than denotative, are what engage our emotions.

\* Take the word “mother,” for example. The dictionary would define mother as “a female parent.” OK, but the word “mother” probably creates emotions and feelings in you: it paints a picture in your mind. You may think of love and security or you may think of your own mother. The emotions and feelings that a word creates are called its connotative meaning.

1. **Symbolic meaning**. Record any allusions you recognise, references to symbols, etc. Think in terms of, “What could this stand for? Why?”

\* For example, consider the word "light." This may not refer to the literal condition that means the opposite of darkness; often "light" is used to symbolize knowledge, truth, peace, joy, or spirituality.

1. At this point, stop and ask yourself, **“What is the author trying to say?”** What is his goal for this poem? What kind of a reaction is he trying to get out of readers? Why? Try to identify the author’s purpose for writing.
2. Analysis from here on out will probably help you examine **how the author accomplishes that affect or meets that goal**, rather than what that affect or goal is.
3. Analyse the poem in terms of **poetic devices**. Look for tools of form and format (shape, rhyme, meter, etc.), sound (alliteration, assonance, etc.), imagery (sensory detail, word pictures, etc.) and so forth. Think in terms of, "What kind of language tools is this author using? How do those tools help him accomplish his goal?"
4. **Narrative Arc**. Read through the poem like a story: All poems have a beginning, middle, and an end. Try to identify a crisis, or a problem presented by the poem and how the author fixes it. Think in terms of, "Why is the poem set up like this? Is the crisis truly resolved at the end? Why or why not?"