

READING POEMS ALOUD: 1

Why read poems aloud? When read aloud well, poems come to life through the rhythm, rhyme, musicality and meaning that the human voice conveys. With your own voice and poems of your choice, you have the power to entertain, educate, captivate, comfort, challenge, transport and tantalise your listeners. Live poetry can make people see, feel, laugh and cry. You may be reading to a handful or a classroom of children, to your sweetheart, to guests at a family party, to the congregation at a wedding or a funeral, or to a world-weary collection of (you suspect) cynical conference delegates. Whatever the context, you can increase your impact with some simple preparation.

What Are You Trying To Say?

When the choice is yours, select poems that you like, that are of a suitable length and that you feel will suit the situation. It is important that you have a good enough understanding of the poem to be confident that it is worth sharing with others. This confidence is your key ingredient for a convincing and compelling reading, whether you are reading your own poetry or someone else's.

Your voice is an amazing instrument, able to convey a great deal.

How Are You Going To Say It?

Be quite sure that you can pronounce and get your tongue round all the words and sounds in the poem. It may help to mark on your copy for pauses, breaths, and special emphasis. Does the poem have a public or private feel? What voice or character is the poet using? How much of the rhythm or rhyme do you want to emphasise? Consider using changes in volume, pitch, tone, pace and accent. A higher pitch and faster pace for example, can convey excitement but can also suggest height and lightness, air and angels, stars and sputniks and wonder.

Somewhere on the scale between a barely audible monotone
and a cringe-worthy melodramatic performance is
your own unique rendition where **your voice and your character**
are at the service of **a poem you believe in.**

Free Yourself from the Page

The more familiar you are with the poem the better you will be able to use your face and your body in communicating its message. **Eye contact** with your audience is the most important aspect of non-verbal communication and the more familiar you are with the poem, the less your eyes will be glued to the page. Other gestures or facial expressions will work best when they follow naturally from your feeling for the poem rather than by consciously deciding that, for example, at line 12, a shrug is required. Although there is nothing wrong with reading from a book or a photocopy, memorising a poem is probably the best way to improve how you present it to others.

Investing time in committing a poem to memory means reciting it not just once, tentatively and with your book in hand, but being able to rattle it off many times in a row without mistakes and without hesitation.

With the sense, rhythm, flow and feeling of the poem inside you, you will be in a much stronger position to be able to bring it alive to your audience, watching their reactions and adapting your delivery to suit the moment.

However, if you do wish to read from text, make sure it is easily legible – you might like to copy, enlarge or darken. Hold it so that it doesn't block your face, just below eye-level, so that you need only flick your eyes down to read.

Memorising is a challenge but it is a very worthwhile skill that you can practise while walking, swimming, bathing – and even when you're trying to get to sleep. *How* you memorise will be a personal choice. One tried-and-tested method is to read the poem into a **digital voice recorder** and then listen over and over again, playing it at different speeds to get your mouth around the sounds. Making **bizarre mental links** between parts of the poem that are harder to remember, or creating a **string of vivid images**, can also help, and you can reinforce your learning by reciting while walking or during repetitive routine domestic tasks.

Listening and Helpful Feedback

Why not ask someone else to help in your preparation by listening to you read the poem? They can check your accuracy, prompt, point out (good or bad) aspects of your delivery that you weren't aware of, and offer suggestions for improving. Using a mirror can also help highlight the extent and nature of your non-verbal performance.



Getting Ready and Handling Nerves

It is natural to feel nervous when addressing an audience but excessive tension is not only distressing to you, it's distracting for the audience. Unwanted 'performance nerves' and the physical tension that derives from them can also play havoc with your breathing and vocal quality, so undermining your best-rehearsed reading.

Remember that **your audience are behind you**
(as it were) and very much **want to enjoy listening to you**

Some simple **physical and vocal warm-ups** can help you to be relaxed yet alert, breathing easily and speaking clearly without straining your voice. In a quiet moment – and preferably a private space – try the warm-ups in the ***Reading Poems Aloud: 2 tipsheet***.

Nerves also make for shaky hands and a dry mouth; keep loose sheets of paper numbered and firm in a folder, and have some water to hand. Make a note of anything you'd like to say *about* the poem and decide if that should come before or after you've read it. And when you are 'up there' take your time, 'own the space', stand comfortably, look at your audience and remember to savour the words as you say them. Remain calm and keep going even if you make a mistake. Reading poetry aloud is not an exact science, but a creative endeavour and a pleasure for readers and listeners.

Be creative, trust your decisions, and enjoy yourself.

If you would like to attend a practical group 'Poems Aloud' workshop, please contact Lillas Fraser, Reader Development Officer at the Scottish Poetry Library, for availability and further information.

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