



Poetry Tips & Tricks 1

Reading and Discussing Poems (i)

If you are not confident reading poems aloud or talking about them, you'll find helpful tip sheets in our 'New to Poetry?' section on the web site: <http://www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/learn/new-to-poetry>. These are also included on the pages below; they are not aimed specifically at teachers, so you might want to modify some of the suggestions for your class.

Be surprised

Try to find poems that might surprise your class, whether it's because of the subject matter or the approach taken to it. And reflect that in your reading of it. Things we know young people have been surprised by include: poems that don't rhyme; poems that contain strong points of view (and not all of them nice); poems that take themes and lines from other famous poems, then apply them to surprising subjects; poems about normality and mundanity; poems containing sarcasm, irony and satire; concrete poems and found poems; poems with made-up words in them; poems from the 18th Century that are not grandiose or wistful - actually, any poems that are not grandiose or wistful (where does this assumption come from?); poems that engage in political or topical debate... We could go on.

Be prepared

Read the poem yourself beforehand, with a mind to what impact it has, and get comfortable with how you want to read it.

Think about what you're trying to do, who your audience is, and how accessible the poem is to them.

What do your pupils respond to? Music or song lyrics? Dance? Films? Games? Sport? These will give you elements you can use for choosing and discussing poems: rhythm, imagery, interaction...

Setting the scene might be useful. Poets often do this at their own readings. Paint a picture for the class of where the action takes place, what time of day or year it is, who is involved and what situation they are in.

Be curious

It might be helpful to ask questions beforehand, either about their expectations of the poem, or in order to get them to focus and detect things in the text.

You might want to stop at various points during your first reading and ask questions.

Be bold

Or you might not want to do any of these things - you don't even have to tell them it's a poem! You could just start reading and see what the class thinks of this collection of words afterwards.





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Reading and Discussing Poems (ii)

Be brief

When time is short, if all you can manage is sometimes to read a poem before the bell goes, or put one up on the board, then do it - seize the moment, however brief. It might put a different perspective on a topic you're doing or highlight an aspect of something that is happening in the news, or confront an issue the school is facing. It will certainly keep exposing your pupils to creative use of language, particularly if you experiment widely with your choices of poems.

How do I find a poem to use with my class?

We don't have time to find poems for you, but we do have ways we can help:

Visit our Library pages to browse and borrow: <http://www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/library> (teachers qualify for free postal borrowing!) and explore our Poetry pages to discover a whole world of poems and poets: <http://www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/poetry>. Use our search facility to track down that elusive poem whose title you just can't recall, or browse by tag to discover poems suitable for children, or about Scotland, identity, love, birds, ageing - almost anything, really! <http://www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/poetry/tags>

When you're looking for poems on different topics don't just look for a literal application of the subject, but also consider the elements you might want children to explore within that.

For example, if you're studying the Jacobites, look for poems that deal with patriotism, loyalty, fear, protection, secrecy, being on the run, conflict, royalty, identity, treachery, etc. Or for the Vikings: travel (by sea), new lands, forging a living, living styles and methods of agriculture, culture clash, archaeology, etc.

This will also help to make a topic more relevant and accessible to your class and enable them to explore it from different perspectives.

It also gives you room to choose a form, style and approach your pupils might respond to more readily - particularly useful if you want to get them writing poems as well as reading them and need examples to fire them up.

Or you might want to focus on works in Scots or Gaelic, or use the poem as a means to open the subject out to other areas, moving a topic on from local to global, for example.



Scottish Poetry Library reading guides

1: POETRY ANTHOLOGIES

Reading a poetry anthology – some questions you might ask:

How did you read it?

Did you enjoy the reading experience?

Did you start at the beginning and work through to the end, or did you dip in at random?

Why did you read it the way that you did? How accessible was it?

How have the poems been laid out on the page? How does this impact on the reading experience?

Which poems stand out for you? Why?

What did you discover?

Who has edited the anthology?

Is there an introduction? Does the editor explain their approach to selection?

Is there a stated motivation behind the anthology? Why was it published?

What did the editor discover while editing the anthology?

How has the anthology been structured?

What sort of chapter headings have been chosen? Why?

How have the poems been ordered? How coherent or pleasing is the arrangement?

What is the coverage of the anthology?

What time periods does it span?

Do poems from previous centuries sit comfortably alongside contemporary poems?

What is the geographical spread?

What forms of poetry have been included?

Which poets or poems are included? Why? Which poets or poems are not included?

Does it attempt to be a comprehensive or impartial survey of its subject matter?

Can you detect the editor's own taste?

Do you feel that the anthology is successful in representing its theme?

What types of poem have been included? Are there any surprises?

Does the anthology provide fresh insight into its topic?

What interesting points arise from the chosen juxtaposition of the poems?

What are its weaknesses? How would you improve it?

What is the purpose of a poetry anthology?

Why are they published? Why do we read them?

What problems are there with anthologies?

What makes a good anthology?



2: SINGLE POET COLLECTIONS

Reading a collection by a single poet – some questions you might ask:

What are the preoccupations of the poet?

What are the poems about?

When were they written?

Can you detect any themes running through the poems?

What do you know about the poet?

Does knowing a poet's biographical details assist you when reading the work?

How does this volume sit in the context of the poet's other volumes of poetry?

Is this a first collection? A posthumous one? A prize-winning one?

How has the collection been arranged?

Is there any significance to the order of the poems?

Are there any poems that you feel are pivotal ones in the collection?

Why has the title been chosen? Does it have any significance?

What is the importance of any epigrams or quotations included by the poet?

How would you describe the poet's style or way of writing?

Does the poet have a distinctive use of language or form?

How do the poems look on the page? How do they sound when read aloud?

How does the poet use rhyme, punctuation, line breaks?

What sort of words does the poet use and how are they arranged?

What makes work by this poet different to that of another poet?

What is your intellectual or emotional response to the poems?

Were there poems that you found difficult to understand or relate to? Why do you think this was?

How did you read the collection?

If you liked the collection, note some of the reasons. Equally, if you didn't like it, why was this?

Which poems stand out for you as a reader?

Are there any disappointing poems in the collection?

Which are the most memorable for you? Why?

What makes a good single collection?

What will you take away from reading this collection?

Will you read more by this poet?

What does this collection make you want to read next?



3: READING A POEM

Meeting a poem for the first time? Feeling slightly nervous? Here's a simple guide to breaking the ice.

1. **Slow down.** Read slowly. A good poet will have made every word in the poem count. Step into the poem and wander around. Take your time.
2. **Taste.** As you might a good wine, or a chocolate. Give it time to breathe. Let it dissolve on the tongue. Then, taste it all over again, like you would take another sip of that wine, another chocolate. Yes, reading a poem is a sensual experience. Enjoy it. Savour each word, each phrase, each turn of a line. Seek out its pleasures, its mysteries.
3. **Linger.** Like you might with a new companion. What mood is the poem in? Let the poem start to unwind in your presence. Let yourself unwind. Begin a conversation with the poem. See where the encounter takes you.
4. **Don't worry.** You might not like the poem. It might do nothing for you. Don't feel under any pressure to like every poem you meet. You won't.
5. **Relax.** Hmm... the poem has got you intrigued? But you don't understand it. Not to worry. Poems aren't crossword puzzles. There's no correct answer. A good poem will offer many paths to meander along.

The spaces in the poem are yours.
They are the place where you
Can enter as yourself alone
And think anything in.

W S Graham, from 'Private Poem to Norman MacLeod' in *New Collected Poems* (Faber, 2004)

6. **First impressions.** What caught your eye when you first encountered the poem? What drew you to it? Which parts of it are lingering in your mind? What are the questions that it makes you want to ask? What do you want to ask of it? Big questions, little questions, either are okay.
7. **Listen.** How does the poem sound? Are there patterns? Repeated sounds? Strange words? Long words, short words? Who's speaking? It's okay to use a dictionary.
8. **Look.** How does the poem look on the page? Long lines, or interesting line breaks? Is it a well-clipped hedge or a rambling rose? Is it a set of neat flower beds, or a free-flowing meadow? It's okay to be inquisitive, nosey.
9. **Ponder.** Start to bring it all together. Is the whole greater than the parts? What is your personal response to the poem? What do you like or dislike about it?
10. **Reflect.** Where has the poem taken you? How did it get you there? What has it allowed you think?

