

The Nine Rules* for Reading a Poem

by Jon Ummel & Vince DeMiero

1. You never have really read a poem until you have read it at least twice.
The first reading is a handshake; the second reading you look the poem in the eyes.
2. Know a little about the poem and the poet.
Use the 5Ws to investigate and provide context: Who, What, Why, Where, When
3. If the poem has footnotes, go over them first – then read the poem.
Footnotes may prepare you for the road ahead. Reading them first allows you to keep your eyes on the road.
4. Pay attention to the punctuation. Read the poem exactly as it is punctuated.
The punctuation marks serve as road signs on your journey through the poem.
5. Consider the title carefully.
Often times, the title is like a porthole revealing much of the poem's inner meaning and providing important context.
6. Read the poem as prose.
Think of the poem as a story the poet and the narrator are sharing with you.
7. Create a movie of the poem in your mind.
Start the movie early on; you can edit it in your mind along the way. Identify and put a clear voice to the poem's narrator.
8. Listen to the poem. Then watch it. Then taste it. Then smell it. Then feel it.
Poetry is almost always written for your ears. How do you know what it's saying if you're not listening to it? Some poems sing louder to your other senses, so give them a try, too.
9. Read the poem aloud to somebody else – and not just once.
Share the poet's voice with somebody else. In doing so you will find your voice in the poem. Read it with the emotion and interpretation that you believe the poet intended. Poetry provides your voice with a very personal stage, so take joy in it.

* Okay, these really aren't rules, per se, but suggestions. But "The Nine Suggestions for Reading a Poem" just didn't have the same impact.