

Introduction to Understanding Poetry

“If I read a book,” wrote the poet Emily Dickinson, “and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can ever warm me, I know that is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry.”

Poetry:

- Is one of the three main types of literature (prose and drama being the other two)
- Makes use of highly concise (brief), musical, and emotionally charged language
- Uses imagery, figurative language, and special devices of sound such as rhyme
- Is divided into lines and stanzas and often has regular rhythmic patterns or meters
- Can also be written just like prose and can be written in free verse

(Prentice Hall - Gold 515)

Strategies for Reading Poetry: (McDougal Littell –Orange level 61)

1. **Read the poem aloud:** You hear the sounds of the poem by reading it aloud. As you read, remember that the end of a line is not necessarily the end of a thought. Read to the end punctuation to understand the complete thought. Listen to the rhyme, rhythm, and sounds of the words as you read.
2. **Visualize the images:** Picture the images that the poems suggest. Think about any comparisons that the poem makes. Try to create a mental picture even if there are unfamiliar vocabulary words.
3. **Figure out who the speaker is:** Use clues in the poem to decide if the speaker (the imaginary voice of the poem) is male or female, young or old, and so on. The speaker’s identity will influence how you feel about his or her theme.
4. **Look carefully at individually words or phrases:** Poets try to choose words that convey an exact meaning, feeling, and sound. As you read, try to figure out what each word adds to the poem. Think about why the poet chose those words. What is the tone (the writer’s attitude toward his/her audience and subject) vs what is the mood (the atmosphere created in the reader by the poem)?
5. **Think about the poem’s message or theme:** Ask yourself what idea all the elements of the poem combine to suggest. Paraphrase, or put into your own words, the idea or feeling or picture the poem gives you. What poetic devices did the author use to convey the theme to his/her audience?