

## How to read poetry – Part 1

Many people struggle with poetry. It is scary for many reasons. Sometimes it doesn't seem to make sense no matter how many times you read it. It looks different on a page compared to words in a book – it is set out differently.

Poetry is not straight forward. You won't find all your answers the first time you read a poem. A lot of the meaning is hidden. You have to learn to dig it out.

I promise, poetry isn't as difficult as it seems. You just have to get used to it and there are many factors to consider.

1. **Poetry is a composition written in verse.** That's why the lines are shorter and sentences carry over to the next line. It is like a song. If someone had to write out the lyrics to Whitney Houston's *I will always love you*, it would look like a poem. Here it is:

If I should stay,

I'll only be in your way.  
So I'll go, but I know

I'll think of you every step of the way.

And I will always love you,  
I will always love you.  
You, my darling you.

Bittersweet memories,  
That is all I'm taking with me.  
So, goodbye,  
Please, don't cry,  
We both know I'm not what you, you need.

And I will always love you,  
I will always love you.

Read the song and think of the meanings. Think of the context. It's full of emotion; someone is leaving a relationship because she feels she is not good enough for or holding the one she loves back. Even though she loves him, she has to go because she says, "We both know I'm not what you, you need." Saying "you" twice in that line heightens the intensity. You can feel that she is choked up, crying, finding it hard to get words out. And even though she is leaving, she will always think of him and always love him.

You understand it, right? See, poetry is already getting easier.

2. Poetry paints pictures by means of poetic devices like language, rhythm and rhyme.

The language sets the tone and meaning of the poem, whether it is happy or sad, silly or serious.

The rhythm is the flow, the pace of the poem. If the pace or rhythm is slow, then the poem is sad, sombre, serious. Think of how Whitney sings *I will always love you*. She sings slowly, takes her time. It is slow and serious.

If it is fast paced, with a quick rhythm, it could reflect a happy mood. Look at the poem below for an example of this.

The poem below rhymes. That refers to the sound it makes when you read it out loud. This helps with rhythm.

Think of a children's poem like this silly one from *Alice in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll:

“You are old, Father William,” the young man said,

“And your hair has become very white;

And yet you incessantly stand on your head –

Do you think, at your age, it is right?”

“In my youth,” Father William replied to his son,

“I feared it might injure the brain;

But, now that I'm perfectly sure I have none,

Why, I do it again and again.”

It's a funny and happy poem. Remember, *Alice in Wonderland* is about a girl who wanders into a world where nothing makes sense and everything is weird so the poem fits the context. You can imagine a young boy scolding his father who is old with white hair and instead of his father sitting in an armchair; he is standing on his head! This is funny imagery. That is the picture that the poem conjures up in your head and what you imagine while reading it.

“Do you think it is right,” the boy says. Isn't that usually what the parent says? The boy is afraid his father will fall over and get injured.

His father, named William, says that he used to think that by standing on his head he would hurt his brain, but now he has realised that he doesn't have a brain so he stands on his head over and over again. Obviously, his father does have a brain. We all do. But this is not meant to be taken literally. He is just a silly person and enjoys standing on his head. It's not hurting him or anyone around him. He enjoys it.

The poem rhymes and has a nice, fast flow or rhythm. In fact, you can add music and make a song of it, which is what a few people have done. Listen to these two song versions of the poem. They are so different in style but their lyrics are the same:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5hidgRF3mCE>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-OlelcfSD-E>

See, poetry isn't hard!

### 3. Poets reflect on events and ideas of their times through their poetry.

You need to have an understanding of where the poet comes from: the city or country and the time. You need to know what was going on around them when they wrote their poems. That's why each poem is so different. You have to try to figure out what the poet was thinking by looking at the world around him at that specific moment. The poet's background is important.

For instance, “City Johannesburg” is about Johannesburg during the apartheid era and Mongane Wally Serote's experiences there. That's why there is a sense of suffering and oppression in the poem. It is a reflection of his reality at the time.

Why not try to write a poem about what you are experiencing as practice?

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**[Re: How to read poetry](#)**

by [S PRETORIUS](#) - 17 Feb 2017 @ 8:56

Thank you for this. I would like your help in understanding one verse in 'The Slave Dealer' please. It is the 7th verse.

'Such murder foul thou ne'er hast done

Some fiend they soul belied!'

Im not sure what this means. I wondered if the 'they' was a misprint and should say 'thy'? If not, who is the 'they'?

Can you help please?

Thanks

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**[Re: How to read poetry](#)**

by [R BEHARI](#) - 17 Feb 2017 @ 17:35

Well spotted. It is a misprint. It should be "thy". I will alert the lecturer and send out a notice once I have confirmation.

Also, remember to call it the 7th stanza, not verse.

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**[Re: How to read poetry](#)**

by [E TAGER](#) - 6 Mar 2017 @ 10:17

Thank you for guiding us so clearly.

Please can you clarify how we should reference poetry in-text. I have googled this and I see that we should reference the line in the poem. However, if we are mentioning the stanza from which the quotation is cited, should we then reference

the line in that particular stanza? Or still reference the line as it occurs in the poem? (Line 3 in the third stanza, for example, would be line 15 of the poem).

Thank you.

Trina

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**[Re: How to read poetry](#)**

by [R BEHARI](#) - 6 Mar 2017 @ 18:01

Hi,

I would reference just the line number within the whole poem. So for instance:

And oh! to turn his blood to good  
That Mother strove in vain,  
For fierce and fearful was his mood,  
Racked by remorse and pain. (9 - 12)

If you like, you can quote stanza and line as such for the above: (lines 3 - 6; stanza 2).

Does this help?

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**[Re: How to read poetry](#)**

by [E TAGER](#) - 7 Mar 2017 @ 9:16

Yes it does help. If you would reference the line number in the poem then I will do just that :)

Thank you.

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**[Re: How to read poetry](#)**

by [T MFEKA](#) - 9 Mar 2017 @ 22:59

Hi everyone Thank you soo much for your question Pretorius. I thought I was done writing my own analysis so I was confused with the line of the poem you wrote. I thought my poem was different from the rest. The poem has 8 stanzas. My goodness! I read page 35 I didn't see that it continues to 36. It just shows the importance of logging into myunisa,to interact with others. Thanks Regards Thobile

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**[Re: How to read poetry](#)**

by [H BELLIS](#) - 22 Mar 2017 @ 20:22

Hi there,just a question on referencing. Do we first reference then quote eg. line 7 - "bla bla bla", or

do we first quote and then reference "bla bla bla" - line 7. Thank you for your help.  
HC Bellis