

Some suggestions for reading a poem

“The reader must not sit back and expect the poet to do all the work.”

—Edith Sitwell

“you fit into me” by Margaret Atwood

you fit into me
like a hook into an eye

a fish hook
an open eye

Reading a poem successfully takes time. You might read this four-line poem by Atwood literally in seven seconds—but if you do, you’ve barely scratched the surface (pardon the pun). What images does Atwood use to create first a sense of domestic connection, and then, a more jarring image of disconnection? How does the juxtaposition of the images affect the reader? Reading is about asking questions.

- Expect to **read** a poem **several times**, not just once or twice.
- Read the poem **out loud**, and *listen* to it.
- Paraphrase the poem, or **restate it in your own words**. Just look at what the words literally say, without worrying yet about the “deep hidden meaning.”
- **Pay attention to sentences**—don’t stop reading at the end of the line, but at the end of the phrase or sentence. Skim over the poem looking at where the sentences begin and end.
- And then **look at lines**. Where are the lines breaking? Do any lines vary from the established pattern in the poem—are some very short? or very long in comparison to others?
- Look at the **words** the poem uses—any words you don’t know? Look them up! Any words repeated in the poem?
- What **images** does the poem present? Poems might use visual images, or descriptions that appeal to your other senses as well.
- What objects in the poem might take on symbolic value? Remember, a **symbol** might be a person, a thing, a place, even an event that begins to mean something beyond its surface meaning, as winter can symbolize death.
- What **comparisons** does the poet make? Remember the difference between a metaphor and a simile:

Metaphor: a metaphor compares two things, sometimes directly equating them. In Emily Dickinson’s metaphor, “The Brain—is wider than the Sky.”

Simile: also a comparison, but using “as” or “like” or “as if.” “There came a Wind like a Bugle,” Dickinson begins another poem.

- Pay attention to **punctuation**—why a comma, or a period? Punctuation establishes a relationship between the parts of a sentence.
- **Do a little research**. What content does the poem reference that you need more information about? Does the poem appear to be using a form that you don’t recognize (and there are loads of other poetic forms than the sonnet!)?