Beginner's Guide to Poetry

Grades 9–12

Reading poetry offers you an effective reading comprehension practice, unlocking the skills you need to understand and analyze any text. Writing poetry gives you an outlet to practice creative expression and exploration. However, before you can enjoy these benefits of reading and writing poetry, you must first understand what poetry is.

What is Poetry?

Poetry is a literary genre characterized by its attention to rhythm, sound, and language. What draws many toward writing poetry is its openness to experimentation. While some poetic forms have many rules and constraints, others have very few. When writing poetry, you decide which rules of grammar to follow and which ones not to follow. You decide where to break up your words and sentences using spaces or line breaks. You might choose unconventional spacing like in **Danez Smith's *broke n rice***. You can even decide whether you want to use real words or made-up ones! In essence, poetry is a space of limitless creation. After all, the word "poetry" is derived from the Greek word *poiesis*, which means "making." In this infinite-making space, however, you might find yourself wondering: How do I differentiate writing that is poetry from writing that is "not poetry"?

What Differentiates Poetry From "Not Poetry"?

In elementary school, you likely practiced writing complete sentences, or stringing together words that express a complete idea, contain a subject and verb, start with a capital letter, and end with a punctuation mark. *The dog likes food.* There are many choices you might make when writing a sentence like that. Do you call the dog by its name? *Clifford likes food.* Do you conclude the sentence with a period or an exclamation point, communicating excitement or alarm about the dog liking food? *Clifford likes food!* Do you end the sentence with only one clause, or do you add more information? *Clifford likes food, but the cat won't let him eat!* All writing, no matter the genre, is laden with choices. Through these choices, you decide how best to communicate your intended meaning.

Now, imagine that all of those rules for sentence-writing do not apply, and you have complete control over which rules or constraints to introduce or exclude. Not only will you consider the words themselves, what punctuation is most appropriate, and how much information to include in each sentence, you also have the space to think about which letters to capitalize, where you might want to add punctuation, where it makes sense to divide each letter and word and line, and more. You might come up with something like this:

the dog LIKES
food

What differentiates this example from pervious example sentences is that it is written in verse instead of prose. One indicator that can often differentiate poetry from "not poetry" is that most poetry is written in verse, rather than prose. In this table, we break down what those terms mean:

Verse	Prose
Verse is a form of writing grouped into *lines* and *stanzas*. This writing can often include *rhyme* and *meter*. • **Lines:** *Lines* of poetry are words grouped into a single lineation. They do not have to express a complete idea but may express many. • **Stanza:** *Stanzas* are groups of poetic lines. • **Rhyme:** *Rhyme* refers to the repetitions of similar sounds in the final syllable of words. Some poems use a rhyming pattern. • **Meter:** *Meter* refers to the rhythm of words, guided by which syllables we stress in spoken language. Some poems use a metrical structure.	*Prose* is a form of writing intended to resemble how we naturally speak. Organized into *sentences* and *paragraphs*, prose writing tends to follow conventional grammar rules. • **Sentences:** *Sentences* contain a subject and a verb. They start with a capital letter and end with a punctuation mark. They express a complete idea. • **Paragraphs:** *Paragraph*s are groups of related sentences organized around a main idea or purpose.
Example: *Youth* by Langston Hughes We have tomorrow Bright before us Like a flame Yesterday A night-gone thing, A sun-down name. A dawn to-day Broad arch above the road we came. We march!	**Example:** An excerpt of *Little Women* by Louis May Alcott: Jo was the first to wake in the gray dawn of Christmas morning. No stockings hung at the fireplace, and for a moment she felt as much disappointed as she did long ago, when her little sock fell down because it was crammed so full of goodies. Then she remembered her mother's promise and, slipping her hand under her pillow, drew out a little crimson-covered book.

Reading Poetry

If you are new to poetry, it can be helpful to read a wide range of poems in order to familiarize yourself with what poetry can look and sound like. Just as there is no one right way to write a poem, there is also no one right way to read a poem. A poet might have a specific meaning in mind when writing a poem, but the meaning you take out of the poem is up to you! Still, the way you read poetry can influence the way you write poetry. Understanding how to make meaning of poetry helps you understand how to infuse meaning into your own poetry. Next, we will dive deeper into what making meaning out of poetry can look like.

What Do You Notice?

Reading and making meaning out of poetry is an exercise in attentiveness. Every observation you make about a poem shapes the meaning you take from it. Making more observations can lead to deeper meaning-making. For guidance, consider the following poetic elements and download our **"Reading Poetry Graphic Organizer."**

Word Choice

Poets often try to convey the most meaning they can using the fewest words possible. Therefore, they are very intentional with the words they choose, playing with words' *connotations*, or the associations we have with words beyond their literal meaning. For example, the words "childish" and "childlike" have the same definition, as they are adjectives to describe someone who is like a child. However, the word "childish" holds a more negative connotation than "childlike," as it can often be used to call someone silly or immature. Sometimes, poets will repeat words to emphasize their importance. As you read a poem, pay attention to each word.

As you read a poem, ask yourself:

- What does each word mean?
- Which words in this poem carry strong connotations? What are they?
- Are any words repeated? Why might that be?
- What connections can I draw between these words?

Speaker

When you read a piece of fiction, the voice telling the story is called "the narrator". When you read a poem, the voice of the poem is called "the speaker". Sometimes, the speaker of a poem is the author of the poem, and, other times, it is not. The writer might also influence the speaker's presence by writing from different points of view. Sometimes, a poem will use the first-person "I," situating the poem around the speaker's own perspective. Other times, a poem will use the second-perspective "you" or the third-person perspective, which can distance the speaker from the subject matter.

As you read a poem, ask yourself:

- Who is the speaker?

- What do I know about the speaker from this poem?
- From which perspective is the poem written?

Punctuation

You likely make intentional choices about punctuation when writing prose, adding an exclamation point at the end of your sentence to indicate excitement or a question mark to indicate confusion. When writing poetry, there is even more to consider. Poets can decide whether or not to follow grammatical rules, such as forgoing the commas and periods that a sentence of prose might usually have. Often, poets play with grammatical rules. For example, they might decide to omit a comma where readers might expect it in order to indicate, perhaps, that the speaker of the poem cannot pause. A poem with no punctuation marks might give the poem a breathless quality. Meanwhile, a poem with more punctuation than expected might indicate that the speaker of the poem is struggling to get their words out.

As you read a poem, ask yourself:

- What punctuation is here?
- What punctuation did I expect here?
- How does the punctuation affect the meaning of the poem's words?
- How does the punctuation affect the pace of the poem?

Sound

One of the most defining elements of poetry is its attention to sound. *Rhyme* is a common use of sound in poetry. A *rhyme scheme*, or an intentional pattern of rhyming words in a poem, can do many things: emphasize important words, create a pattern of sound that stays in the reader's mind, and more. Sometimes, poets will break their rhyme scheme, using the subversion of expectations to further emphasize a particular word or idea. Poets also use *assonance*, or the repetition of similar vowel sounds, as well as *consonance*, or the repetition of similar consonant sounds. *Alliteration* is a type of consonance in which the repeated consonants are at the beginning of each word. These devices can add to the rhythm of a poem and have similar effects as rhyme. You might also find yourself paying attention to the effect of each single, articulated sound, or *phoneme*, in a word. For example, you might observe how the /l/ and /sh/ and /s/ sounds in the word "luscious" sound pleasingly rich, mimicking the word's meaning and strengthening its effect.

As you read a poem, ask yourself:

- What sounds do I hear? Are there rhyming words? Is there alliteration?
- How do the sounds in the poem relate to the words of the poem?

Meter

Meter is the rhythm of words, guided by which syllables we stress in spoken language. Consider the word "alone" for example. When you say the word aloud, you put the stress on the second syllable, articulating it with greater breath and effort than you do the first syllable. Sometimes, poets do not put much thought into where stress falls in each word. In those cases, poets may choose to write in *free verse*, a poetic

form that does not use a strict meter or rhyme scheme. Other times, poets pay great attention to where the stress falls in each word and intentionally create a pattern of stress in their lines. Take, for example, the following line:

> *Alone and lost upon this frigid sea,*

The meter in this line switches back and forth between unstressed and stressed syllables. This is called "iambic meter." There are many other patterns of stress that poets can use beyond iambic meter. For example, some poems are written in *anapestic meter*, following a repeated pattern of two unstressed syllables and a final stressed syllable, such as in the word "interrupt."

Often, when following a strict meter, poets are not only intentional about the pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables in a line, they are also intentional about the number of syllables in a line. Take, for example, the following two lines:

> *Alone and lost upon this frigid sea,*
> *I call upon the hope inside of me.*

Both of these lines have ten syllables in them, or five sets of an unstressed-stressed syllable grouping. This *metrical structure* is called "iambic pentameter." There are many metrical structures a poet can choose to employ in a poem, each with different patterns of stressed and unstressed syllables and different numbers of syllables. For a deeper look into different metrical structures, check out **this guide from the Purdue Online Writing Lab.**

Sometimes, poets may break the metrical structures that they established in a poem. As a reader, pay attention to those instances. Breaking a pattern in a poem's meter can emphasize certain words or lines. Now, we will revisit the previous example:

> *Alone and lost upon the frigid sea,*
> *I call upon the hope inside of me - please!*

Here, we see that the second line includes an eleventh syllable, breaking the established pattern of ten-syllable lines. One way to interpret this is that breaking the pattern draws attention to that eleventh syllable, placing emphasis on the word "please." The added emphasis may communicate an extra level of desperation in the speaker's plea. When analyzing meter in poetry, pay extra attention to any irregularities in a poem's metrical structure and think about what effect they have.

Shape

Sometimes, poets write lines and stanzas in a specific length, direction, and position in order to create an image on the page that relates to the subject matter of the poem. This is often called "concrete poetry" or "visual poetry." For example, a poem that includes ocean imagery in its words might alternate between stanzas of short lines and stanzas of long lines, creating an image like the rise and fall of ocean waves.

As you read a poem, ask yourself:

- Do I see an image in the shape of the poem's words?
- If so, how does this image relate to the subject matter of the poem?

Lineation

Lines of poetry can contain as many or as few words as a poet chooses. They can contain one or several sentences, or they can be made up of sentence fragments, using *enjambment* as the sentence continues beyond the end of the line. Sometimes, poets even break a line in the middle of a word, creating a line with only a few letters. Where a poet chooses to break onto the next line is entirely up to them. Therefore, line breaks are often very intentional decisions that poetry readers should pay attention to. Take extra care to notice the word that a line ends on and the word that the next line begins with—line breaks are often intended to emphasize these words in particular. Often, line breaks mimic the natural pauses of speech or thought, but occasionally, poets use line breaks to purposefully disrupt those natural pauses.

As you read a poem, ask yourself:

- Which words are emphasized by the poem's line breaks?
- What meaning can I take from those words?
- What rhythm is created by the poem's line breaks?
- Where is each line indented on the page?

Stanzas

Similar to how line breaks separate one line of poetry from the next, stanzas separate one group of lines from the next. A stanza can contain as many or as few lines as a poet chooses, and a poet can end a stanza wherever they see fit. Often, poets will write the same number of lines in each stanza or follow an alternating pattern of stanza length. Other times, poets choose to not follow any pattern of stanza length. Alternatively, they might follow a pattern initially and then break it to place emphasis on a particular area of their poem.

As you read a poem, ask yourself:

- How many lines are in each stanza?
- Is there a pattern of stanza length?
- Does each stanza end at the end of a sentence or thought? Or does the stanza break up the sentence?
- What do these choices draw my attention toward?

What Has Poetry Looked Like Over Time?

The practice of poetry writing has no limits. This may leave you looking at a poem and wondering: *Where do I even start?* One entryway into reading poetry is in understanding what poetry has looked like throughout history. Throughout time, there have been several movements and schools of poetry writing that hold distinct approaches to writing it. Understanding the key elements of these approaches can

provide valuable context, allowing you to analyze a poem alongside other poems that employ similar elements.

Poetry Movements

This table outlines several key poetry movements, their characteristics, and notable poets and poems from that movement. This is not an exhaustive list, as it focuses on poetry that has strongly influenced Western literature. Dates are estimated from the peak of each movement; some poets may fall outside of this range due to the lasting influence of many poetic styles.

	Key Elements	Notable Poets	Examples
Ancient Poetry 5000–50 BC	Ancient poetry was often shared orally, though there are poems recorded in writing from Ancient Greece and Rome. The subject matter of ancient poetry often included historical accounts, myths, and legends.	• Enheduanna • Homer • Virgil • Sappho • Catallus	• The Epic of Gilgamesh • The Iliad • The Aeneid
Taoist Poetry 300 BC–1000 AD	Taoist poetry is rooted in Taoism, a Chinese philosophical and religious movement that viewed poetry as a way to teach simplistic truths.	• Lao Tzu • Li Po • Tu Fu	• The Solitude of Night • Pounding the Clothes
Medieval Poetry 400 AD	Medieval poetry, often containing themes of war and religion, witnessed the emergence of rhyming couplets and ballads. During this time, poetry was seen as part of	• Chaucer • Marie de France • Dante Alighieri	• Beowulf • The Parliament of Fowls

	proper education for nobility.		
The Renaissance 1400s–1600s	During the Renaissance, poetic themes included love, nature, and mythology. It was at this time that the sonnet form arose, and some poets sought to revive ancient Greek and Roman styles like the epic.	• William Shakespeare • John Milton • George Herbert	• At a Solemn Music • The Altar • The Phoenix and the Turtle
Romanticism 1790–1850s	Romanticism saw the rise of lyric poetry in first person, containing subjective themes of self-expression, everyday life, and how the speaker experiences nature and emotion.	• William Wordsworth • Samuel Taylor Coleridge • John Keats • Rainer Maria Rilke	• A Complaint • Constancy to an Ideal Object • Bright star, would I were stedfast as thou art
Transcendentalism 1820s–1840s	A descendant of Romanticism, Transcendentalism was characterized by themes of self-realization and philosophical exploration of humanity in time.	• Ralph Waldo Emerson • Henry David Thoreau • Louisa May Alcott	• Transfiguration • Fate • I Am a Parcel of Vain Strivings Tied

Modernism 1890s–1950s	Modernism moved away from the personal and toward the intellectual, featuring a rejection of literary tradition and a reevaluation of aesthetics.	• W.H. Auden • William Butler Yeats • Katherine Mansfield	• Musée des Beaux Arts • Adam's Curse • Voices of the Air
Imagism 1910s–1930s	A subgenre of Modernism, Imagism is a reaction to Romanticism that emphasized accurate observations and simplicity.	• Ezra Pound • Amy Lowell • T.S. Eliot • Hilda Doolittle	• Aunt Helen • Eurydice • Autumn • Peace on Earth
Dadaism 1910s–1920s	Dadaism, a reaction to the lack of reason during wartime, featured spontaneous and irrational themes.	• Hugo Ball • Tristan Tzara • Kurt Schwitters	• Karawane • Speaking Alone • Ursonate
The Harlem Renaissance 1920s–1930s	Rooted in New York's African-American community, poetry of the Harlem Renaissance explored themes of cultural identity and expression.	• Langston Hughes • Claude McKay • James Weldon Johnson • Gwendolyn B. Bennett	• Dream Boogie • If We Must Die • A Poet to His Baby Son
Surrealism 1920s–1950s	Originating in Paris, Surrealism focused on truth revealed through unconscious thought and dreams.	• Federico García Lorca • Charles Baudelaire	• Two Evening Moons • Destruction

		• Pablo Neruda	• Finale
Beat Poetry 1940s–1960s	The Beat Movement called for a cultural rejection of American institutions. Poetry during this time was concerned with authenticity, the expansion of consciousness, and political and poetic experimentation.	• Allen Ginsburg • Jack Kerouac • Michael McClure • Diane Di Prima	• Howl* • The bottoms of my shoes • Buddhist New Year Song
Confessional Poetry 1950s–1960s	Confessional poetry is characterized by self-revelation and self-disclosure, as the poet and speaker are the same.	• Robert Lowell • Sylvia Plath • Anne Sexton	• Epilogue • Morning Song • The Ambition Bird
Black Arts Movement 1960s–1970s	The Black Arts movement was a poetic partner to the political Black Power movement. This poetry expressed Black joy and culture.	• Amiri Baraka • Haki Madhubuti • Sonia Sanchez • Audre Lorde • Nikki Giovanni	• An Agony. As Now. • For the Consideration of Poets
Contemporary Poetry (now)	Contemporary poetry has great stylistic and thematic diversity, with an emphasis on breaking	• Maya Angelou • Carolyn Forche	• Caged Bird • Skin Canoes

	traditional rules of form and meter.	• Mary Oliver • Ocean Vuong • Ada Limón • Joy Harjo	• Breakage • Torso of Air • The Leash

*Note: Poetry provides space for poets to explore difficult topics. Please ensure poem content is appropriate for your students before incorporating poems into instruction.

Writing Poetry

Now that you have practiced making meaning out of poetry, we can turn our focus toward how to make meaning *into* poetry.

Where To Start

A poem can emerge from any number of thoughts and ideas. Perhaps you want to unpack the emotions you have about a particular memory. Or maybe you find that something you observed in nature, like the falling of leaves, is the perfect analogy for a feeling you have and want to explore through metaphor. Once you have found the roots of a poem, it may blossom in many directions. Downloading our **"Poetry Brainstorming Worksheet"** and asking yourself the following questions can help with that process.

Asking Questions

Content

- What is the poem about? What will the poem say? How clearly do I want the poem to say it?
- Does the poem come to any conclusions or answer any questions?

Structure

- Would it make sense for the poem to follow a strict structure (e.g., sonnets, haikus)? How closely do I want the poem to follow this structure?
- Would it make sense for the poem to rhyme? If so, what rhyming pattern would work best?
- Would it make sense for the poem to have a metrical structure? If so, which structure would work best?

Language and Voice

- Who is speaking in the poem? Who are they speaking to? What tone would they take?
- Would it make sense for the poem to include a lot of figurative language or literary devices? If so, what kinds? Would it make sense for the poem to be very literal?

Where to Go

Once you have a general idea of what you want to write about and how you want to write it, you are ready to start writing!

Let Your Ideas Flow

As you write, it is important to remember that you can choose the rules of your poem. Poetry is a space of exploration. You do not need to start by writing the first line—you could start anywhere in the poem and build out from there! You do not need to fully understand your own words at first—lean into ideas you are unsure of, associations you have that do not straightforwardly connect, and emotions you do not quite have the words for.
When you begin to write, you might have a strong idea of what you want your poem to be. Let that initial conception of your poem guide you as you begin, but also remain open to new ideas as your poem evolves. To that point, do not expect to finish the poem in one sitting. Writing a poem can take as many minutes, days, months, or years as it needs. If the words are not coming to you when you sit down to write, that is okay. Sometimes, you have to wait for inspiration to come to you. Other times, you have to write many words that do not quite feel like the right ones in order to get to what feels right.

Revision

A poem may not take the shape you envisioned in the first draft. Revision is an important part of all writing. To revise a poem, you can follow a process of personal review, look to others for feedback, or both.

Personal Review

After you have written a first draft, there may be certain areas of your poem that you are not content with. Perhaps you are unsure whether a certain word or line break accurately reflects the meaning you intend to convey. Perhaps you have read your work aloud and would like to reconsider the meter, rhyme pattern, or alliteration in your poem. When reviewing your poem with a critical eye, trust your gut and change what feels right. You might identify an area that you are unsure of and write several versions of it to see which you prefer. You can always go back to an earlier draft if you do not like the new directions you explored. Identifying the areas you are unsure of and playing around with them is the only way to find the poem that aligns with your vision.

Once you have worked on the issues that immediately jump out to you, you may want to take a deeper dive. No matter how intentional you are with each stanza, line, word, and comma of your piece, there may be parts of your poem that you have overlooked. You will want to watch out for unintentionally confusing or unclear areas of your poem. To clear up any confusion you did not intend to create, consider the following areas:

Mixed Metaphors

A *metaphor* draws a comparison between two objects or concepts without using “like” or “as.” A mixed metaphor occurs when two or more metaphors are combined in an illogical way. Take the sentence “She wears an open book on her sleeve” as an example. This sentence mixes two common metaphors together:

Comparing someone to an open book means that they are not a secretive person. Meanwhile, saying that someone wears their heart on their sleeve compares a person's emotional vulnerability to their clothing, emphasizing that both things are plainly visible. While these metaphors have similar meanings, when you put them together, the meaning becomes difficult to interpret. That does not mean you should avoid mixing metaphors. When used intentionally, mixed metaphors can create surprising and complex comparisons. However, sometimes you might mix your metaphors by mistake, especially when using common figures of speech. You might be so familiar with calling someone an "open book" that you do not even realize when you have brought it into another metaphor that does not complement it.

As you revise your poem, take note of each metaphor and figure of speech to ensure that you have used each one intentionally.

Abstractions

An *abstraction* refers to a concept or thought that is not associated with a concrete image, sound, smell, taste, or feeling. "Love," "nostalgia," "hope," and more are all abstractions of complex, intangible concepts. Sometimes, poets gravitate toward abstractions, leaning away from specific senses or meanings and opening their poetry up to wider ranges of interpretation. Other times, poets may avoid abstraction, finding that descriptions of concrete senses capture abstract ideas more meaningfully than the conceptual words associated with them. For example, instead of using abstractions like "cozy" or "safety," Ada Limón describes, "Your shoes are piled up with mine, and the heat / comes on, makes a simple noise, a dog-yawn" in her poem "During the Impossible Age of Everyone." The warmth, the "yawn" of the heater, and the image of the shoes entangled together evoke the coziness and safety of home without saying any of those words explicitly. Instead, Limón opts to immerse readers in the sensations of these abstractions.

As you revise your poem, take note of each abstract word and assess how it is serving the piece. Does the word hold strong on its own? Or would it benefit from more tangible imagery?

Getting Feedback

It is always up to you whether or not you would like to share your poetry with others. If you are interested in sharing it, you might benefit from receiving feedback from people you trust to be thoughtful readers. After you have completed your personal review process, an outside pair of eyes can help you see how others interpret your poetry.

When asking for feedback, it is important to remember that you can set parameters for what kind of feedback you are looking to receive. You might be interested in hearing general feedback about your piece, but you can also ask for feedback in specific areas (i.e. word choice, line breaks, punctuation, etc.). In those areas, you can let others know whether you are interested in hearing ideas about how to revise. Here are some examples of questions you might pose when asking for feedback:

- What did you think this poem/stanza/line was about?
- What image or feeling did these words bring to mind?
- What parts of the poem were your favorite? What is working for you here?
- What parts of the poem did you find confusing? Do you have suggestions for how I might revise?

For further guidance, download our "**Poetry Peer Feedback Form**."

Feedback can be a useful tool to guide your revision process, and inviting other trusted writers into your writing process can make you a stronger writer. Still, not everyone will understand your poetry or be able to offer valuable feedback. At the end of the day, your poetry is yours. Don't forget to listen to your own artistic voice. If you are happy with how your poem has turned out, then that is the most important thing!

Poetry Glossary

Poetic Devices

Alliteration is the repetition of sounds at the start of multiple successive words.
Example: "The big brown bear finds berries."

An **allusion** is an indirect reference to an object, concept, or person outside of the text.
Example: "Chocolate is my kryptonite" alludes to Superman.

An **analogy** draws a comparison between two things.
Example: "The store was a zoo during the sale!"

A **metaphor** draws a comparison between two objects or concepts without using "like" or "as," and an extended metaphor continues this comparison throughout an entire poem or text.;

Example: Shakespeare's "Sonnet 18" features a metaphor with the famous line, "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?"

A **simile** draws a comparison between two objects or concepts using "like" or "as."
Example: "Her voice is as sweet as honey."

An **anaphora** is the repetition of a word or phrase at the beginning of a series of successive lines, sentences, or clauses.
Example: Charles Dickens begins A Tale of Two Cities with, "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times…"

An **aphorism**, also known as an "adage" or "maxim," is a short, often humorous saying that observes a general moral truth.
Example: "The pen is mightier than the sword."

Apostrophe in poetry occurs when the speaker of the poem addresses an absent person, an inanimate object, or a concept.
Example: "Twinkle, twinkle little star, how I wonder what you are."

Assonance occurs when two or more words in a line contain similar vowel sounds.
Example: "eyes on the prize" or "surf and turf"

Chiasmus is a figure of speech featuring the reversal of grammar structures in successive phrases; the order of concepts is inverted in the second iteration.
Example: "She has all my love; my heart belongs to her."

Antimetabole is related to chiasmus, and some consider it to be a type of chiasmus. This device features an exact inversion of concepts.

Example: "Live simply so that others may simply live."

Consonance refers to the repetition of a given consonant sound within a line of text.
Example: "odds and ends" or "front and center"

Enjambment occurs when a sentence continues past one line of a poem into the next.
Example: In Romeo and Juliet, Shakespeare writes, "When he shall die / take him and cut him out in little stars." Note: A forward slash when writing about poetry refers to a line break.

Hyperbole uses deliberate exaggeration to emphasize a point and evoke an emotional response in the reader.
Example: They love their cat to the moon and back.

Imagery refers to descriptive elements of a poem that engage a reader's senses through sights, sounds, feelings, and smells.
Example: In the poem "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud," William Wordsworth uses visual imagery to reflect an internal, emotional journey.

Juxtaposition is a literary device that places two contrasting things next to each other to emphasize their differences and establish tone.
Example: In Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken," juxtaposition is observed through the contrast of the well-worn and less traveled paths.

Meter is the rhythm of words, guided by which syllables we stress in spoken language. Some poems use a metrical structure in which a given meter is applied to most or all of the poem. Groups of syllables (either within a word or across multiple words) that follow a specific pattern of stress are called feet. Next, we will take a look at a few different metrical feet:

An **anapest** is a three-syllable foot in which two unstressed syllables are followed by a stressed syllable.
Example: The words "understand" and "interrupt" are anapests.

A **dactyl** is a three-syllable foot in which a stressed syllable is followed by two unstressed syllables
Example: The words "poetry" and "mockingbird" are dactyls. This metrical pattern is often used in epic poetry such as the Odyssey.

An **iamb** is a two-syllable foot in which an unstressed syllable is followed by a stressed syllable.
Example: The words "beneath" and "acquire" are iambs. A line of poetry with five iambs is called iambic pentameter, which is a common meter for sonnets as well as many of Shakespeare's plays.

A **spondee** is a two-syllable foot in which both syllables are stressed.
Example: The words "bookmark" and "handshake" are spondaic.

A **trochee** is a two-syllable foot in which a stressed syllable is followed by an unstressed syllable.

Example: The words "inward" and "garden" are trochaic.

Metonymy refers to substituting one word for another in poetry.
Example: Someone might address "the crown" when they are actually referring to the king or queen.

Onomatopoeia is a word that mimics a sound we hear, often used to create imagery in poetry.
Example: "Splash," "clang," "buzz," and "whir" are all instances of onomatopoeia.

A **paradox** is a contradictory statement that, upon reflection, illuminates a truth often intended to challenge a reader's perspective on a concept.
Example: "Youth is wasted on the young."

Personification occurs when a writer grants human characteristics to an animal, inanimate object, or abstract idea.
Example: The Grim Reaper is a personification of death. Many fables personify animals to tell a story with a moral message.

Repetition occurs when a writer uses a word, phrase, image, or structure more than once within a poem or text.
Example: Alliteration is one type of repetition, as is the refrain of a poem or song.

Words that **rhyme** have a pattern of similar sounds, like "cricket" and "ticket." In poetry, a **rhyme scheme** refers to the pattern of rhyme in a poem, like ABAB (alternate rhyme). When rhyme patterns are described by letters such as ABAB CDCD or ABAB BCBC, each letter refers to a line of the poem. Lines that rhyme are given the same letter. So, in a quatrain with alternate rhyme (ABAB), lines 1 and 3 would have rhyming end sounds, and lines 2 and 4 would have different rhyming end sounds.
Example: "**Little Miss Muffet**" illustrates a rhyme scheme (AABBCCB) when you look at the last sounds of each line:

Little Miss Muffet
Sat on a tuffet,
Eating her curds and whey;
Along came a spider,
Who sat down beside her,
And frightened Miss Muffet away.

End rhyme involves a rhyme between the final words in separate lines of poetry.
*Example: Robert Frost uses end rhyme in his poem, "**Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening**." End rhymes are often used in children's poetry today but are less common among contemporary poets.*

Internal rhyme involves a rhyme between a word in the middle of a line and another at the end of the same line or within the next line.
Example: Edgar Allen Poe uses internal rhyme in "The Raven," which reads, "Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered, weak and weary."

Slant rhyme uses consonance or assonance at the end of words to make two or more lines sound similar but not identical.

Example: In "Hope is the thing with feathers," Emily Dickinson rhymes "soul" with "all" in the first stanza.

A **speaker** in poetry is equivalent to a narrator in prose. The speaker may be the author, an imagined person, an animal, or an inanimate object from whom the point of view originates.

*Example: In Langston Hughes' "**Mother to Son**," the speaker of the poem is a woman addressing her child.*

Symbolism is a literary device in which one object or character represents another, more abstract idea. This device is often used to help readers follow the development of important themes in the poem or text.

Example: A dove is often a symbol for peace.

A **stanza** consists of a series of lines arranged together in a poem, sometimes containing a repeating pattern of rhythm and rhyme. Common stanza types include couplets (two lines), tercets (three lines), quatrains, (four lines), sestets (six lines), and octets (eight lines).

*Example: Kiki Petrosino writes her poem, "**Whole 30**," in six stanzas. The first five are tercets, with a final quatrain.*

Synecdoche is a figure of speech in which a part of something is used to represent its whole. For a similar literary device, see "metonymy," or check out **this resource** to read about the differences between the two terms.

Example: The part "threads" may be used to refer to the whole "clothing."

A **zeugma** is a figure of speech in which one word, usually a verb or an adjective, is applied to two other words in a sentence. This "governing" word means something different when applied to each of the words that follow it, but the sentence as a whole makes grammatical and logical sense.

Example: "She carried an old backpack and the responsibility for the apocalypse." Here, the governing word "carried" has a different meaning when paired with "backpack" and "responsibility," but each object still makes grammatical sense with the governing word.

Poetic Forms

Acrostic Poetry

An acrostic poem spells out a word or phrase when you read the first letter of each line. **Lewis Carroll's "A Boat Beneath a Sunny Sky**" is a great example of an acrostic poem. When read vertically, the first letters of the first five lines of the poem reveal the name of Carroll's inspiration for Alice in Wonderland.

Ars Poetica

"Ars Poetica" refers to a poem about the "art of poetry" through a reflection on poetic craft and technique. This form originates from Horace's "**Ars Poetica**" addressed to beginning poets. For a more contemporary example, take a look at **"Introduction to Poetry"** by Billy Collins.

Blackout Poetry

When writing blackout poetry (also known as "redacted poetry" or "erasure poetry"), poets carefully select words and phrases from existing texts before blacking out the rest of the text. Materials may include novels, articles, magazines, or newspapers. Check out **this poem** or **these examples** to explore the different forms blackout poetry can take.

Concrete Poetry

Also called "visual poetry," a concrete poem takes the shape of an image, often one related to the poem's content. For example, the lines of a poem about a forest may be arranged to form a tree when you look at the page. This shape can be obvious, like in **these poems**, or more subtle, like in **this example**.

Duplex

Created by Jericho Brown and illustrated in his poem, "**Duplex**," this poetic form involves a series of couplets (two-line stanzas) scaffolded with a repetitive structure. The first line of each couplet mirrors the last line of the couplet before it, and the second line of each couplet introduces a new idea that is repeated in the first line of the following couplet.

Ekphrastic Poetry

Ekphrastic poems are inspired by artwork and often describe the scene, setting, and/or perspective of a painting or sculpture. William Carlos Williams wrote the ekphrastic poem "**Landscape with the Fall of Icarus**," inspired by **Pieter Bruegel's oil painting** of the same name.

Free Verse

Free verse poetry does not use a strict meter or rhyme scheme; instead, it often mimics the natural flow of speech. **"[i carry your heart with me (i carry it in]"** is a free verse poem by E. E. Cummings, who was known to test the boundaries of widely recognized poetry during the time in which he wrote.

Golden Shovel

A form created by Terrance Hayes, golden shovel poems borrow a line or more from an existing poem and use each word of that line(s) as the final word in each line of their own new poem. This allows poets to pay tribute to other works they admire, as Hayes did with his poem, "**The Golden Shovel**", which uses the entirety of Gwendolyn Brooks's "**We Real Cool**" to supply the final word of each of its lines.

Haiku

Haikus are a Japanese form of short poetry containing three lines with five syllables in the first line, seven syllables in the second line, and five syllables in the third line. These poems often draw themes from nature, as can be observed in the work of **Bashō**.

Prose Poetry

Prose poetry combines the form of prose with the style and figurative language of poetry. Amy Lowell's "**Bath**" is an example of a prose poem.

Persona Poetry

In persona poetry, the speaker is a dramatic character who is not the poet. In "**Abt Vogler**," Robert Browning uses the persona of the famous organist Vogler to deliver a reflective poem on the experiences of a musician addressing the audience.

Sestina

A sestina is a French form of poetry that has no rhyme scheme but follows a pattern for word repetition across its six stanzas. Check out the **Poetry Foundation's definition of a sestina** for more details and examples.

Sonnet

Originally a form intended to lament unrequited love, a sonnet is a poem of fourteen lines that often uses a rhyme scheme and pentameter. Sonnets often introduce a new idea or shift in perspective in the last few lines, known as a "volta." Molly Peacok's "**Altruism**" is an example of an English sonnet. Check out **this resource** to learn more about the many types of sonnets.

Terza Rima

Originating from Dante Alighieri's The Divine Comedy, this Italian poetic form consists of tercets, or groupings of three lines, that are interwoven with the rhyming pattern ABA, BCB, DED, and so on. Jacqueline Osherow's "**Autumn Psalm**" is an example of a terza rima poem that also uses slant rhyme.

Terzanelle

A terzanelle combines the terza rima and villanelle forms of poetry to create a poem with nineteen lines. Poets Collective goes into greater depth about the rhyme scheme **here**.

Villanelle

Villanelles, such as Elizabeth Bishop's "**One Art**," include five stanzas with three lines each followed by a quatrain with an ABAA rhyming pattern.