

READING A POEM

To read a poem well, you have to try to figure out both what the poem says and what it means.

A **paraphrase** represents what the poem says. When you paraphrase, you give an accurate, thorough restatement of an original text in your own words. Although it has to be in your own words, a good paraphrase doesn't distort the meaning of the original text. The wording you choose should convey the same ideas to your reader that the original language would have communicated; thus, effective paraphrasing requires careful attention to the nuances of the original text's meaning. Usually, a paraphrase is more concise (shorter) than the original text.

An **interpretation** represents your idea of the poem's meaning. It's different from a paraphrase because it requires you to look for meanings that are hidden or implied—ideas that are not directly stated but are reasonably suggested, often through figurative language or structural elements (word choice and order, rhyme scheme, repetition, etc).

To effectively read your poem, follow these steps:

Paraphrase

1. Read the poem two or three times silently, and then read the poem aloud. Don't worry about what the poem means at this point. Just try to get a sense of the rhythm, mood, and sound of the poem.
2. Compose your paraphrase, writing what the poem says without trying to interpret what it means. Use complete sentences. Look up any words you don't know so you're sure your paraphrase is as accurate as possible.

Interpretation

1. Consider the speaker and setting of the poem. Who is talking and where does the poem take place? Does the speaker stay the same or change?
2. Is the speaker addressing a specific audience? Do you see any examples of **apostrophe**, a figure of speech in which a speaker or writer directly addresses an imaginary, absent, or dead person or an abstract quality or idea?
3. Scan the poems for various **figures of speech**. How do metaphors, similes, or personification change or impact the literal meaning of the poem? Consider both the denotation (the primary, literal meaning) and connotation (the range of associated meanings, depending on context and usage) of important places, words, or images in the poem. For instance, if the poem's setting is a kitchen, the connotations might include nurturance, warmth, and comfort. Or, if the poem explores an image of a bird in flight it might connote freedom or fulfillment. Alternatively, what would a caged bird suggest?

4. Look over the poem for information about **structural elements**:

- a. What effect do stanzas, line breaks, or other divisions of the poem have on its meaning? What if the lines were divided or grouped differently? Would the emphasis or meaning change? Do you see any examples of **enjambment**, in which a sentence or thought rolls over from one line or couplet into the next?
- b. Is there a rhyme scheme? What is the effect of the rhyme scheme?
- c. Does the poem fall into any poetic forms you know (sonnet, ballad)?
- d. Make note of any point at which the writer's arrangement of words catches your eye. Are there any reversals of "normal" word order? If so, what is the effect?
- e. Look for words that the poet has omitted from his or her lines that you ordinarily would expect to see supplied. What's missing, and what possible reasons can you come up with for the omission?
- f. Identify words that appear to have been selected at least partly for their sound, perhaps because they revolve around or repeat certain letters or combinations of letters. **Alliteration** is the repetition of initial consonant sounds in neighboring words: "around the rock the ragged rascal ran." **Consonance** is the repetition of consonants (or consonant patterns), especially at the ends of words: "Is it blunt and flat?" **Assonance** is the repetition of identical or similar vowel sounds: "tilting at windmills."

With all these things in mind, what does the poem mean? What possible interpretation(s) can you support through your close reading of the language and structure of the poem? Write a convincing explanation of the poem's primary meaning, as you see it. Be sure to refer to specific lines or images to support your claims.