

MEETING, GREETING, AND GETTING TO KNOW A POEM

SOME SUGGESTIONS

1. Come to a poem feeling good, relaxed, and open-minded. Really. In fact, bonk yourself on the head and empty out any and all nervous tension, any and all preconceptions about what poems should or shouldn't be.
2. Orient yourself a bit to the poem. What are you about to encounter? When and where was the piece likely written? Is it contemporary or historical? Does it look "traditional" or is it unusual/experimental in some way? Just get a sense of whether you are about to read an apple, a banana, or a peach.
3. Now read the poem through a few times, simply enjoying it. *Don't strain to make sense of it.* If a line here or there doesn't make sense—so what. Just keep reading.
4. Observe your responses. What does the poem feel like? What lines, phrases, words or images really POP, punch you or kick you, stroke you lightly, tickle you, whisper to you, chew on you, unsettle you, or just linger in a lovely way in your mind?
5. What is the poem's "situation"? Who is speaking and where are they?
6. What would be a good, line-by-line paraphrase (explication) of the poem?
7. In what mode does the poem seem to be written? What's its "color" or "species" or primary impulse? Is it an inward-looking, private reflection? Is it a loud, meant-to-be-performed-from-the-rooftops kind of piece? Is it a painful, emotional YELP, or a story, or a surreal, nonlinear thing, like a dream?
8. What allusions or references are obscure to you? Do some research for answers!
9. Tape the poem to your refrigerator, mirror, or laptop.
10. No, I mean it. Tape the poem to your refrigerator, mirror, or laptop. Or TV. Or car door. What's it like to encounter it repeatedly and at odd moments? What do others say about it? Do they think you've lost your mind? Does your landlord want to evict you?
11. Very importantly, at some point (early on would be good), *read the poem outloud, slowly.*
12. NO! NO! NO! I said *s—l—o—w—l—y*. Read it outloud AGAIN. Don't rush.
13. Have someone else read the poem *to you*. Slowly, slowly. Bonk them on the head if they read too fast.
14. Now, what's it like to re-read the poem after grappling with the questions above?
15. Put the poem away and read it again in a week.

16. Then read it again in a month.
17. A year.
18. On your sixtieth birthday...
19. Oh forget everything. Just enjoy the damned thing.