

How to respond to a poem: unseen



Use this guide sheet to help you develop your own personal response to any poem.



Step 1: read the poem and make notes to support your understanding

- What is the title? What are they keywords in the title? Can you make any guesses about the poem?
- Read the poem. Think about the title as you do so – were any of your ideas correct?
- What is the poem about?
 - What is the **'story'** of the poem? It may help to look at what each stanza is about and make a **summary**.
 - Is there a particular setting that is described?
 - What happens?
 - What / who is described?
 - Are there any characters? Who is the speaker? Are there any relationships you can identify?
 - Is this literal or a metaphor for something else?
 - What are the **themes**?
- Look at the first and last lines. What is the relationship between them?
 - Structure?
 - Language?
 - Message?
 - Any changes or developments?
 - Circular structure?
- Track the *language* of the poem. Which words stand out across the stanzas? Do they tell a story? Are there any patterns with regards to the language used? This will also help you to understand the tone.
- Think about the perspective you are given. Who is the **speaker**?
 - Whose voice do we hear?
 - What situation are they in?
 - What is their significance to the story being told?
 - Why does the poet choose this voice?
 - What do we learn about the persona created?
 - What is their attitude?
 - How do we learn this?
 - How do they feel? How is this conveyed?
 - Are there any other characters in the poem? What is their role?
- What is the **message**?
 - What are the **'big ideas'** that are presented?
 - What does the poet want you to understand?
 - Why did they write the poem?
 - What are their concerns/ideas?
 - Is there a moral/religious/philosophical lesson?
 - Is this a universal message? A personal message? A societal message?
 - Why does the poet want to leave you with this message?
 - Are they highlighting, critiquing, emphasising, revealing etc.



What are 'big ideas'?

These are the bigger issues that are being presented in the poem. These can be *social, political, environmental, moral, existential or religious*. These are often ideas that go beyond what is merely written on the page e.g. a poem about a cat and mouse may actually be about family relationships. Try and think about what is being suggested in the poem and see if you can spot any *wider issues* that the poet may be alluding to.



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Now you understand the poem, you can start to identify the methods used by the poet.



Step 2: looking at the methods used and analysing their effect The methods are like the poet's toolbox.

You will need to be able to identify the methods used by the poet and comment on their effect. You should not merely technique spot, but should instead consider why these methods have been used, how they reinforce the message and what effect they have on the reader. You can use all of the notes you made for step 1 to help you with this.



- ❑ Language
 - What kinds of words have been used?
 - Try and identify word classes. What are the connotations of these words? Why have they been used? What do they suggest about the speaker, the characters or the topic of the poem? How do these words enhance a technique or vice versa?
- ❑ Poetic Techniques
 - Identify the different techniques used.
 - Why have they been used? What is the effect?
 - How do they reinforce the message/meaning?
 - How do they help to create a tone/mood?
 - How can you interpret meaning?
 - What do these techniques reveal about character/action/events/setting/relationships?
 - How do the techniques reflect the themes?
- ❑ Structure and Form
 - What can you say about the structure of the poem?
 - Is the poem organised in stages?
 - How do ideas progress throughout the stanzas?
 - How are ideas organised?
 - Does the tone change or is it consistent?
 - Does the setting change?
 - Is there a shift in the direction of the poem? At what point?
 - How does the poem begin and end?
 - How does it look on the page? What is the effect?
 - What can you say about stanzas and line length?
 - What is the tense?
 - What person is it written in?
 - Is there a rhyme scheme?
 - Is there a rhythm? How is it created? Why?



Use the acronym MASSTT as a way of helping you to understand, interpret and analyse a poem. This is covered in steps 1 & 2. Imagine the mast on a ship!



Meaning / message
Analysis (of methods)
Summary / story
Speaker
Themes
Tone



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Don't be afraid of your own opinion! Be confident in your own personal response and interpretations.

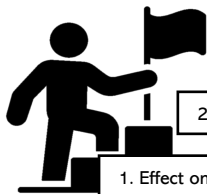


Top Tips:

- ❑ Try to identify patterns throughout the poem: images, word classes, rhyme etc
- ❑ Look at how the poem develops:
 - Are there any changes?
 - At what point in the poem is there a change? Why at that particular point?
- ❑ Use what, how, why.
 - **What** kind of word or technique has been used? **Why** has this been used? **How** has it been used? **What** is the effect?
 - **What** is presented to the reader? **How** has it been presented? **Why** has it been presented in this way?
- ❑ Use the **2-step approach** when writing about a poem. You can use both **2-step** approaches when writing about a poem. *See below.*
- ❑ Link everything back to what the poem is about, the big ideas and the poet's message/intention.
- ❑ Build up your personal response by offering alternative interpretations.

The 2-step approach

Discussing the **effect on the reader** and **poet's intention**



1. Effect on reader

2. Poet intention or message

Step 1: Effect on reader: thoughts, feelings, understanding.

Step 2: Link to the poet's intention or message – this could be embedded into the effect on the reader/audience.

Analysing a quotation



1. Analyse the effect of a technique in a quotation

2. Zoom in on a word within the quotation and analyse.

Step 1: Identify a technique and analyse the effect.

Step 2: Within the same quotation, add another layer your analysis by zooming in on a word and analysing it. Identify the word class and discuss why this particular word has been used; what the effect is; and how it reinforces adds or develops meaning.