

How To Read a Poem Out Loud: Tips from Billy Collins

A poem will live or die depending on how it is read.

Here are a few basic tips:

1. Read the poem slowly. Most adolescents speak rapidly, and a nervous reader will tend to do the same in order to get the reading over with. Reading a poem slowly is the best way to ensure that the poem will be read clearly and understood by its listeners. Learning to read a poem slowly will not just make the poem easier to hear; it will underscore the importance in poetry of each and every word. A poem cannot be read too slowly, and a good way for a reader to set an easy pace is to pause for a few seconds between the title and the poem's first line.
2. Obviously, poems come in lines, but pausing at the end of every line will create a choppy effect and interrupt the flow of the poem's sense. Readers should pause only where there is punctuation, just as you would when reading prose, only more slowly.
3. Use a dictionary to look up unfamiliar words and hard-to-pronounce words. To read with conviction, a reader needs to know at least the dictionary sense of every word. In some cases, a reader might want to write out a word phonetically as a reminder of how it should sound. It should be emphasized that learning to read a poem out loud is a way of coming to a full understanding of that poem, perhaps a better way than writing a paper on the subject.

Possible Poem Choices for Presentation

1. Advice to a Girl by Sara Teasdale
2. I am a Rock by Simon and Garfunkel
3. Is My Team Ploughing by A. E. Housman
4. No Man is an Island by John Donne
5. Ozymandias by Percy Bysshe Shelley
6. Porphyria's Lover by Robert Browning (Long, but dramatic... and dark, if you like that)
7. Reach Out and Touch by Maxine Tynes
8. Shall I Compare Thee to a Summer's Day (Sonnet 18) by William Shakespeare
9. Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening by Robert Frost
10. The Road Not Taken by Robert Frost
11. *The Art of Disappearing* by Naomi Shihab Nye
12. The Logical Song by Supertramp
13. To an Athlete Dying Young by A. E. Housman
14. Warning by Jenny Joseph
15. Because I Could Not Stop for Death by Emily Dickinson
16. The History Teacher by Billy Collins
17. Kindness by Naomi Shihab Nye
18. Our Other Sister by Jeffrey Harrison
19. Imperfection by Elizabeth Carlson
20. The Sleeper by Edward Field (about Football and compassion for others)
21. On Turning Ten by Billy Collins (poem about not wanting to grow up)
22. The Key of the Kingdom by Ed Reed (another poem about not wanting to grow up)