

TEACHER'S GUIDE

**WHY**

**POETRY**

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## About this Guide

Thank you for using *Why Poetry*, either in your classroom, or as a preparation for teaching poetry. I know from my own experiences, first as a student, then as a teacher in college and graduate classrooms, how challenging it can be to teach poetry. One of the main reasons I wrote this book was to help educators address this difficulty directly: to ask what exactly is hard about teaching poetry, and what can be done to change this.

In this guide I will first summarize the chapters of the book, pointing in particular to their relevance for instructors and students. Then I will explain a specific method for reading all types of poetry, adaptable for all levels of instruction. At the end of this guide is a sample syllabus, which includes a list of all poems discussed at significant length in *Why Poetry*, so that you can refer to them and see if any are appropriate for your classroom. Most, if not all, are available in the public domain. The syllabus also includes some suggestions for writing exercises to make concrete some of the ideas in the book.

## CHAPTER SUMMARY

*Why Poetry* interweaves close reading, autobiographical writing, literary criticism, and a polemical exploration of the purposes of poetry (societal and individual) to build a case for the singularity and necessity of poetic thinking. The book begins with an Introduction, which is about why I chose to write a book about poetry, and an overview of the basic ideas and themes and approaches of the book.

The first chapter, “Three Beginnings and the Machine of Poetry,” is mostly about my experience as a student — in high school, elementary school, and then college and graduate school — and how I was both attracted to it, and also struggled to understand it, before starting to write it myself in my early 20’s.

The second and third chapters, “Literalists of the Imagination” and “Three Literal Readings,” are about what I have come to see, through my experiences as a poet and teacher, is the biggest problem that stands between readers and poetry: a sense that the words in poems do not mean what they say. This causes readers to immediately lose confidence, and to search for the “true meaning” of the words, and the poem, outside of the text itself. These two chapters explain why that attitude towards language in poetry is incorrect, and makes it impossible to understand and appreciate poetry. In “Three Literal Readings,” I discuss poems by Walt Whitman, Wallace Stevens, and Brenda Hillman.

The fourth chapter, “Make It Strange,” is about how a focus on the words in poems through literal readings can actually make reading poetry a far more powerful and useful experience. The chapter is anchored by the concept of “defamiliarization,” the concept that the purpose of art is to wake us up out of the familiar ways we experience language and reality, so that we can appreciate what we take for granted again. I explore this idea by close readings of poems by Langston Hughes, Emily Dickinson, Antonio Machado and Adrienne Rich.

The fifth chapter, “Some Thoughts on Form and Why I Rhyme,” uses my own halting early efforts at writing poetry as framework to discuss why poems are constructed in form. In the chapter, I discuss rhyme, free verse, prose poetry, line breaks, and what I call “conceptual rhyme,” which is the basic structural element of most free verse.

The sixth chapter, “The One Thing That Can Save America,” is an extended discussion of the poem by the same name by John Ashbery, as well as the ideas of Wallace Stevens, particularly his concept of the “pressure of the real.” In the chapter I introduce ideas that will be further explored in the rest of the book, including the usefulness of poetry as an alternate mode of thinking, the social and political functions of poetry, and how poems are constructed and move in different ways from prose.

The seventh chapter, “Negative Capability,” is a discussion of that concept, invented by John Keats in a letter to his brothers. In the chapter I discuss my own gradually developing understanding of the thinking possible in poetry, the idea of “ambiguity” in poetry and meaning (pages 109-111 discuss a common experience teachers have in the classroom, when students insist that poems can mean anything at all, and resist any specific interpretation of a poem), as well as poems by Keats and Ashbery.

The eight chapter, “Three Political Poems,” uses extended discussions of poems by Amiri Baraka, Audre Lorde, and W.S. Merwin, to explore how poetry can illuminate political issues in ways that prose cannot.

The ninth chapter, “Dream Meaning,” begins to synthesize concepts that have appeared earlier in the book to explain more specifically the way that poetry makes meaning by creating a leaping, meditative space of attention. Many poems are discussed and read closely, including those by several haiku poets, Robert Hass, Terrance Hayes, Victoria Chang, James Tate, Frank O’Hara, Rilke, James Wright, and Alice Notley.

The tenth chapter, “Alien Names,” explores metaphor: how it works in poetry, and why it is absolutely essential to poetic thinking. The chapter uses two poems by Wallace Stevens to explain these ideas.

The eleventh chapter, “True Symbols,” returns to the problem of a certain kind of symbolic reading critiqued in earlier chapters (particularly “Literalists of the Imagination” and “Three Literal Readings”). I then explore how that crude symbolic reading can give way to a deeper understanding of the symbol and symbolic thinking which is essential both to creating and understanding poetry.

The twelfth chapter, “Most of the Stories Have to Do With Vanishing,” is an extended discussion of the work of W.S. Merwin, focused on his 1996 volume *The Vixen*. In the chapter, I talk about being a young poet in an MFA program at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst, and the problems in writing poetry that I encountered as a young poet and how Merwin’s combination of narrative and lyric pointed the way to possibilities in my own writing and thinking.

The thirteenth chapter, “Nothing is the Force that Renovates the World,” is about the limits of poetic thinking, and the relationship poetry has to silence and absence. The chapter explores how poems bring us together to the limits of understanding, and concludes with some thoughts on the death of my own father, and how that experience of loss was a reminder both of limits and community. The chapter concludes with a close reading of Wallace Stevens’s great late poem “The Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour.”

The afterword, “Poetry and Poets in a Time of Crisis,” was written after the 2016 presidential election, and explores the political and social uses of poetry, in this time of political, environmental, and spiritual crisis.

## HOW TO READ A POEM

The most frequent request I get from readers, students, teachers, is: please, just tell me how to read, understand, interpret a poem. Below, I explain the reading method I used in *Why Poetry*, as well as in my own classroom. Teachers who are not particularly familiar or comfortable with poetry can use this method in relation to any poem, from the classic to the modern to the contemporary.

We are told a lot of things about poetry that are wrong, and make it impossible to read it. So the first thing to do is to unlearn those things. In particular, most of us are taught two extremely pernicious ideas: that poetry has a “secret message” and that the words in the poem are often “symbolic,” that is, standing in for other words or concepts. On pages 17-21 I briefly describe these ideas, explore why they are wrong, and try to show how holding them will make it basically impossible to read poetry with confidence.

The main principle of reading poetry is to begin with a “literal” reading of the text. But what, specifically, does it mean to “read literally?” And what do we do after we have done so, in order to deepen interpretation, and connect students and ourselves with the exciting, mysterious, pleasurable aspects of poetry, which go far beyond mere communication of facts or messages?

The reading method below is designed to sidestep the major inimical lessons of poetry instruction, and to then give a space for the deeper meanings and singular experience of poetry to emerge.

I have observed that people who have a lot of confidence and experience reading poetry have a natural tendency to go through certain stages of interpretation, which can be broken down as follows:

## STEP ONE

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Ask students to look at the title of the poem, as well as its first lines, and say what it tells us about any basic information. Does the poem take place in a specific location? Is the poem addressed to anyone, or anything? Does the poem appear to have a specific speaker, or not? What seems to be the mood or experience or concern of the poem? I often ask students the simple question: reading the title and first lines of the poem, what can we know?

This first step should take as long as it needs to. Often, this collective exploration of what we can know from the poem . Students should be encouraged to get as much information out of the beginning of the poems as possible. It is important not to allow them to drift into speculation about bigger themes, what the poem is “about,” etc. Just tell them that there will be plenty of time to talk about that in a little while, but first we need to get grounded all together in the poem.

You may find that students disagree about certain basic facts in the poem, such as who is speaking, where the poem is taking place, and so on. Ask the class to decide together what can be known. Sometimes, there will not be specific speaker (some poems don't have any speaker at all, or even have multiple speakers). It's ok not to know or be sure, but an extended discussion of those basic facts will ground the students in interpretation, and also remind them that the poem is an act of communication that can be understood without reference to outside information.

## STEP TWO

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Now that the students have grounded themselves, at least somewhat, ask them to look for what seems strange or hard to understand about the poem. Often beginning readers of poetry will experience this as a type of resistance, or even anger at the poem: why is it this way? Why doesn't the poem come out and say what it means directly? Why is it so weird?

One of the most exhilarating and productive experiences I have as a teacher is demonstrating to these students how this sense of resistance to the text is just a disguised version of the critical faculty. What they object to is, more often than not, related to the central mystery of the text.

This is also the place to talk about the formal aspects of the text: why do they think it might have been written with certain line breaks, or not? Why might it sound a certain way? There are no right answer to these questions, but they can open up further explorations of the text.

## STEP THREE

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Here is the place to allow them to speculate: to talk about what the poem seems to be implying, contending, arguing. They should be reminded that most poems, unlike sermons or newspaper editorials, and more about asking questions and raising issues than about providing concrete answers. What questions does this poem bring out? What are the unresolved contradictions? What do we think about them?

From the work in the first two steps, you have a firm grounding in the text. Often it helps to put the basic points that the class has agreed upon (speaker, location, moments of strangeness and difficulty, formal elements) onto the board, so that during the discussion of larger ideas and issues, you can ask the students to express where, specifically, the ideas they are getting originate in the text. If they cannot point to places in the poem that give them the ideas they are having, ask them to hold onto those thoughts for the final step.

## STEP FOUR

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Finally, if there is time, tell them they can take a little time to leave the poem and just think about what the experience of reading it brings up in their own minds. They do not have to relate what it makes them think about to anything specific in the poem, though it is sometimes useful to ask them whether there was a specific moment, image, metaphor, sound, which made them thinking of something. Whether or not this is a creative writing class, you can give them space here to write their own poem, maybe in direct imitation or response to the poem you have just been reading.

If you are dealing with beginning students, or if you do not have a lot of experience teaching poetry, it might be helpful to use poems that have extended discussions in *Why Poetry*. You can go through the same four steps, which you will see reflected in the close readings in the book.

One note about testing: I am sure that using this method will prepare students to do close readings on standardized exams. This reading method will prepare them to approach poetry confidently, whether they are writing about it or trying to answer multiple choice reading comprehension questions, while also giving them a sense of how poetry works, and what its pleasures can be outside of the classroom. The close reading skills they are developing will also be of immense help in all sorts of other testing and academic circumstances, not to mention in life.

## SAMPLE SYLLABUS

NOTE: some instructors have used the book as a primary text, and made the poems in it the main discussion texts for the course (a list of those poems and where they are discussed in the book is below). The page numbers listed correspond to where the poems are discussed in *Why Poetry*.

## WEEK ONE: FIRST EXPERIENCES IN READING POETRY

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W.H. Auden, "Musée Des Beaux Arts" pp. 1-5

Longfellow, "The Song of Hiawatha" pp. 5-7

**Exercise:** ask them to write about their first experiences with reading poetry: what do they remember, good and bad? Do they remember any poems they didn't understand? This might be a good place to try working together as a class on the method of reading described above.

## WEEK TWO: READING LITERALLY

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Marianne Moore, "Poetry" pp. 15-16 (reading literally)

T.S. Eliot, "The Waste Land" pp. 21-24 (dealing with difficult poetry)

Paul Éluard, "La terre est bleu comme une orange" pp. 24-26

Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself" pp. 27-32 (reading literally)

Wallace Stevens "Tea at the Palaz of Hoon" pp. 32-34

Brenda Hillman, "First Tractate" pp. 35-40 (more dealing with "difficult" poetry)

**Exercise:** ask students to take a poem and choose a word that intrigues them from the poem, and go find out as much as they can about it (its etymology, various meanings, the ways it was first used in a sentence, etc.). If you have access to the Oxford English Dictionary, either physically or on-line, this can be helpful and fun. This is also a good place to introduce library and research elements, whether or not that is a requirement of your course. It can be fun to do this as an in-class exercise, to go to the library together, then to report in the next class whatever they have discovered. Remind them that everything they find does not have to relate to the poem, but after they have explored the word as much as possible, they should return to the poem and see what their research might illuminate.

## WEEK THREE: DEFAMILIARIZATION

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Langston Hughes, "Suicide's Note" p. 44

Emily Dickinson, "I Felt a Funeral" pp. 44-47

Antonio Machado, "At a Friend's Burial" pp. 47-49

Adrienne Rich, "Rape" pp. 50-52 (warning: this poem has explicit violence and sexual content, and may not be appropriate for younger readers)

**Exercise:** ask students to take a common phrase, and translate it into the simplest possible language, out of cliché and familiarization. You can also ask them to think together as a class of as many of those types of phrases as possible, write them on the board, and then together as a class or in groups rewrite them in ordinary language.

## WEEK FOUR: FORM AND RHYME

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William Carlos Williams, "The Red Wheelbarrow" pp. 59-61 (line breaks)

Charles Baudelaire, "The Double Room" pp. 63-65 (prose poetry)

T.S. Eliot "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" pp. 68-69 (rhyme and free verse)

**Exercise:** ask them to write a poem that rhymes, a poem in free verse that uses conceptual rhyme, and a poem in prose. What was different and similar about those experiences?

**Exercise:** write a poem in form (a sonnet, pantoum, sestina). Then, without looking at that text at all, rewrite it in free verse, feeling free to change whatever you want. Compare the two experiences.

## WEEK FIVE: NEGATIVE CAPABILITY

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John Keats, "Ode on a Grecian Urn" pp. 106-109

John Keats, "Ode to Autumn," pp. 111-114

**Exercise:** ask them to write an ode to something specific, which should be stated in the title: make it full of questions and contradictions and negative capability. There are many examples of odes

## WEEK SIX: POLITICAL POETRY

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Amiri Baraka, "Somebody Blew Up America" pp. 118-120

Audre Lorde, "Power" pp. 120-124

W.S. Merwin, "When the War is Over" pp. 124-127

**Exercise:** Write a poem about a political issue that you feel passionately about, in which you ask at least three questions you do not know the answers to

## WEEK SEVEN: ASSOCIATIVE MOVEMENT, LEAPING AND DREAM LOGIC

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Haiku (Basho, Sora, Yaha), pp. 130-131

Robert Hass, "Meditation at Lagunitas" pp. 134-138

Terrance Hayes, "The Avocado" pp. 139-141

Victoria Chang, from *The Boss* pp. 141-143

James Tate, "Rapture" pp. 144-145

**Exercise:** choose one of the poems by either Terrance Hayes, Victoria Chang or Robert Hass, and write an imitation. The poem must "leap" or "associate" at least three times. After the poem is done, discuss those leaping moments, and how you feel they work in the poem, adding or detracting from the effect.

## WEEK EIGHT: METAPHOR

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Wallace Stevens, "Gubbinal" and "The Motive for Metaphor" pp. 154-159

**Exercise:** Write down the names of ten objects. Then write down ten feelings and colors. Match one item from each column with another, in a way that feels strange and unexpected (such as "golden sofa" or "angry tree"). Create a metaphor for each pair of words, and write a poem in which you use all ten of the metaphors.

## WEEK NINE: SYMBOLS

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Charles Baudelaire, "Correspondences" pp. 167-8

Sappho, pp. 169-170

Basho and haiku, pp. 170-1

Elizabeth Bishop, "Sestina" pp. 173-176

Robert Hayden, "These Winter Sundays" pp. 176-178

Joshua Beckman, from *The Inside of an Apple*, pp. 178-181

**Exercise:** write an imitation of Baudelaire's "Correspondences," (p. 167-8), that takes place in a contemporary environment you are familiar with (your room, a public place, school, work, etc.). Use as many symbols as possible, imagining that the "real world" you experience is connected by your imagination to a secret other world, and the poem describes this connection

**Exercise:** choose a symbol from your childhood, and write a poem that shares the mood and approaches of poems by Bishop and Hayden.

## WEEK TEN: NEGATION

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Pablo Neruda, "The Enigmas" pp. 205-206

W.H. Auden, "In Memory of W.B. Yeats" pp. 206-207

Gillian Conoley, "Fatherless Afternoon" pp. 212-213

Wallace Stevens, "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour" pp. 214-217

**Exercise:** Read Neruda's "The Enigmas," and write a poem that includes at least three negations and three questions to which you do not know the answer.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The following websites have full texts of most of the poems discussed in *Why Poetry*, as well as many other resources, including teaching guides and searchable databases for poems by subject matter:

[Poetry Foundation](#)

[Academy of American Poets](#)

[Poetry Society of America](#)

Some of the best books for teaching poetry to children were written by the poet Kenneth Koch: *Wishes, Lies and Dreams*, and *Rose, Where Did You Get That Red*. A book for older students that is an excellent beginning is Koch's *Sleeping on the Wing*.

There are many books that aggregate creative writing exercises. An excellent one is *Wingbeats: Exercises and Practices in Poetry*, edited by Scott Wiggerman and Davide Meischen. Another is *The Teachers and Writers Handbook of Poetic Forms*, ed. Ron Padgett. For a discussion of poems in form, try *The Making of a Poem*, ed. Eavan Boland and Mark Strand. For a more contemporary anthology that might be helpful for supplementing these texts, look at *The BreakBeat Poets: New American Poetry in the Age of Hip Hop*, ed. Coval, Lansana, and Marshall.

For a discussion of poetry and form appropriate for more advanced students, there is Robert Hass's *A Little Book on Form*, as well as Mary Ruefle's *Madness, Rack, and Honey*.

For collections of important writings about poetry: *Classic Writings on Poetry*, ed. William Harmon, *Toward the Open Field*, ed. Melissa Kwasny, and *Poetry in Theory: an Anthology*, ed. Jon Cook.

For more information about the author of *Why Poetry*, including reviews and interviews and supplementary material, go to [matthewzapruder.com](http://matthewzapruder.com)

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