

## Reading Poetry

Poetry is everywhere, not just within the pages of this book. Song lyrics, greeting-card messages, and commercial jingles can all be considered poetry. You might describe some poems as clever, others as inspiring, and still others as sappy. Every so often, though, you might encounter a poem that gets inside your heart and mind. How does a poem do that? Read on to find out.

### Part 1: What Makes Poetry Different?

One difference between poetry and prose has to do with **structure**, or the way a poem looks on the page. While short stories and news articles consist of sentences and paragraphs, poems are made up of lines. A **line** can be a single word, a sentence, or part of a sentence. In many poems, lines are arranged into groups called **stanzas**. The way a poet chooses to arrange lines and stanzas can affect a poem's meaning.

Poetry is different from prose in another way. Poetry *sounds* different from prose, as you'll see when you read the poem below, with all of its rhymes and bouncy rhythms. As you will also see, poems have speakers and the speaker may not be the poet.

#### *A Fine Head of Lettuce*

Poem by Jack Prelutsky

I'm a fine head of lettuce,  
a handsome romaine.  
I haven't a cranium  
made for a brain.

I'm simple and shy.  
I remain on my own.  
I'm known in the garden  
as lettuce alone.

#### STUDY THE POEM

- Who is the **speaker**?
- How many **stanzas** does the poem have?
- How many **lines** are in each stanza?
- What words rhyme in this poem? Is there a pattern to the rhymes?
- Poets like playing with words. What verbal joke do you find in the last line?

#### COMMON CORE

Included in this workshop:

**RL 4** Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative meanings; analyze the impact of a specific word choice on meaning.

**RL 5** Analyze how a particular stanza fits into the overall structure of a text.

## MODEL: STRUCTURE, SPEAKER, AND SOUNDS

The poem “Losing Face” is more serious than “A Fine Head of Lettuce.” The poem sounds different too—more like conversation. It doesn’t have the bouncy rhythm and comic rhymes of the lettuce poem. Read Wong’s poem aloud.

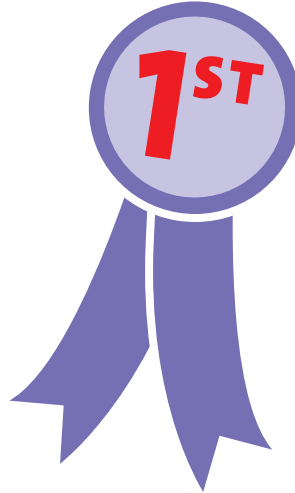
# Losing Face

Poem by Janet S. Wong

Finally Mother is proud  
of something  
I have done.  
“My girl won  
5 the art contest,”  
she tells the world,  
smiling so big  
and laughing so loud  
her gold tooth  
10 shows.

I’m the only one  
who knows  
how I drew so well,  
erasing the perfect lines  
15 I traced,  
drawing worse ones  
on purpose  
in their place.  
I feel awful.  
20 I want to tell.

But I don’t want to lose  
Mother’s glowing  
proud face.



### Close Read

1. Who is the speaker of this poem? Describe the conflict she is having.
2. Where does Wong use rhyme in the first stanza?
3. The poem is structured so that each stanza helps you understand the speaker’s feelings. In your own words, summarize what each stanza is about.
4. Reread the boxed section. It is the only place where each line contains a complete sentence. Why might the poet have chosen to emphasize these lines?
5. Reread the last stanza. Why doesn’t the speaker want to admit what she’s done?

## Part 2: What Are the Elements of Poetry?

Think about the comforting melody of a lullaby, the contagious beat of a certain song, or those few words in a poem that perfectly capture how you're feeling. The power of a poem comes from more than its structure and its speaker. Sound devices, imagery, and figurative language are the elements that can make a poem unforgettable.

### SOUND DEVICES

Most poems are meant to be heard, not just read. A poem's sounds are often as carefully chosen as its words. Poets use sound devices to make music and to emphasize ideas.

SOUND DEVICES	EXAMPLES
<p><b>RHyme</b> Rhyme is the repetition of accented vowel sounds, as in <i>thing</i> and <i>sing</i>, <i>cry</i> and <i>sky</i>.</p> <p><b>METER AND RHYTHM</b> Meter is a more or less regular pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables. Rhythm is a musical quality created by the alternation of accented and unaccented syllables.</p>	<p>The rhyme and meter in this poem help to create a singsong sound.</p> <p>Some people talk and talk and never say a thing Some people look at you and birds begin to sing. Some people laugh and laugh and yet you want to cry. Some people touch your hand and music fills the sky.</p> <p>—“People” by Charlotte Zolotow</p>
<p><b>ALLITERATION</b> Alliteration is the repetition of consonant sounds in words that are close together, such as the <i>s</i> in <i>makes still pools</i>, and <i>sleep-song</i>.</p> <p><b>REFRAIN</b> Refrain is a word or line that is repeated in a poem to create a certain effect, such as the phrase <i>the rain</i>.</p>	<p>The refrain in these lines suggests the steady downpour. The alliteration mimics the rain's soothing sounds.</p> <p>The rain makes still pools on the sidewalk. The rain makes running pools in the gutter. The rain plays a little sleep-song on our roof at night— And I love the rain.</p> <p>—from “April Rain Song” by Langston Hughes</p>

**MODEL 1: RHYME, RHYTHM, AND REFRAIN**

In “Pete at the Zoo,” a young speaker considers an important question: Do zoo animals ever get lonely? Read the poem aloud, paying particular attention to the use of rhymes and rhythms.

**PETE AT THE ZOO**Poem by **Gwendolyn Brooks**

I wonder if the elephant  
 Is lonely in his stall  
 When all the boys and girls are gone  
 And there's no shout at all,  
 5 And there's no one to stamp before,  
 No one to note his might.  
 Does he hunch up, as I do,  
 Against the dark of night?

**Close Read**

1. Which words rhyme at the ends of the lines?
2. Stressed and unstressed syllables are marked in lines 1–2. Read these lines aloud, emphasizing the stressed words.
3. What does the repetition of words and phrases in the boxed lines help to emphasize about nighttime at the zoo?

**MODEL 2: METER AND ALLITERATION**

What kinds of sounds do you associate with fireworks? In this poem, meter and alliteration help you to hear some of these sounds. Read the poem aloud to get the full effect.

**Fireworks**Poem by **Valerie Worth**

First  
 A far thud,  
 Then the rocket  
 Climbs the air,  
 5 A dull red flare,  
 To hang, a moment,  
 Invisible, before  
 Its shut black shell cracks  
 And claps against the ears,  
 10 Breaks and billows into bloom,  
 Spilling down clear green sparks, gold spears,  
 Silent sliding silver waterfalls and stars.

**Close Read**

1. Does this poem sound like conversation, or is it written in **meter**—a regular pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables?
2. What sounds are repeated in the boxed line to create alliteration? Where does the poet use **onomatopoeia**—words that sound like what they mean—to help you hear the fireworks?

## FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE AND IMAGERY

**Figurative language** is the use of imaginative comparisons to help you see the world in new ways. Figurative language is not literally true. Four common figures of speech are **simile**, **metaphor**, **personification**, and **hyperbole**. Review these figures of speech in the examples below. What comparison is each figure of speech built on? How does each figure of speech help you see a part of the world in a new imaginative way?

**Images** use sensory language to appeal to your senses of sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch. Most images are visual. Figures of speech often create images, as they do in each of the examples below. What do you see or hear in each figure of speech?

### SIMILE

**Simile is a comparison between two unlike things that includes the word *like* or *as*.**

In a high wind the  
leaves don't  
fall but fly  
straight out of the  
tree like birds

—“Poem” by A. R. Ammons

### METAPHOR

**Metaphor is a comparison between two unlike things that does not include the word *like* or *as*.**

The fallen leaves are cornflakes  
That fill the lawn's wide dish,

—from “December Leaves” by  
Kaye Starbird

### PERSONIFICATION

**Personification is a description of an object, an animal, or an idea as if it were human or had human qualities.**

New sounds to  
walk on  
today,  
dry  
leaves  
talking  
in hoarse  
whispers  
under bare trees.

—“New Sounds” by Lilian Moore

### HYPERBOLE

**Hyperbole is a figure of speech that uses exaggeration to create a special effect.**

He turns and drags half the lake out  
after him

—“Moose” by Ted Hughes

## Part 3: Analyze the Text

Eve Merriam transports you to a familiar scene—a dinner table. Merriam uses many of the techniques you just learned about to help you visualize the scene and understand the speaker’s relationship with his or her parents.



### LIKE BOOKENDS

Poem by **Eve Merriam**

Like bookends  
my father at one side  
my mother at the other

propping me up  
5 but unable to read  
what I feel.

Were they born with clothes on?  
Born with rules on?

10 When we sit at the dinner table  
we smooth our napkins into polite folds.

How was your day dear  
*Fine*

And how was yours dear  
*Fine*

15 And how was school  
*The same*

Only once in a while  
when we’re not trying so hard  
when we’re not trying at all  
20 our napkins suddenly whirl away  
and we float up to the ceiling  
where we sing and dance until it hurts from laughing

and then we float down  
with our napkin parachutes  
25 and once again spoon our soup  
and pass the bread please.

### Close Read

1. Notice the simile in lines 1–6. How are the mother and father like bookends?
2. Examine the two boxed images. What contrasting dinner scenes do they help you visualize?
3. Reread lines 17–20. What sounds are repeated to create alliteration?
4. **Hyperbole** is a kind of figure of speech that uses exaggeration to make a point. What hyperbole do you find in lines 20–21?
5. Lines 23–24 contain a metaphor. What two things does the metaphor compare?