How to Read a Poem

1. READ the poem through—preferably aloud—paying attention to the sounds of the poem. Pause primarily with the punctuation, rather than the line breaks.

2. DEFINE unfamiliar words.

3. IDENTIFY who is speaking and to whom? What is the general situation or setting? What is the tone or mood? Do these things change? If so, when? How?

4. NOTE FORMAL ELEMENTS: Figure out the meter and rhyme scheme. Do you recognize the type of poem (e.g., sonnet, ode, ballad, etc.)? If so, does the poet alter the traditional definition of the form in any way? Identify run-on lines (enjambment), end-stopped lines, alliteration, repetition.

5. BREAK THE POEM INTO SMALLER PARTS. Follow the poet’s divisions if possible. These are often marked by rhyme scheme or stanza breaks. How does the poem move? When does the language speed up or slow down? How does the poet create this effect?

6. WHAT IS HAPPENING? Identify what is happening in each section of the poem. Where are there shifts?

7. ATTEND TO IMAGERY. Look for images, metaphors, similes, and other types of figurative language. Attend to paradoxes, double meanings, contradictions, and striking patterns of any kind. Also consider any context you are aware of, especially any references to events, people, or situations outside of the poem.

8. BRING IT ALL TOGETHER: What does the poem mean? How do the different stages of your reading fit together? Work through any contradictions or tensions. DON’T REDUCE TOO MUCH. Poems often work by suggesting several meanings simultaneously.