How to Read a Poem Out Loud

We know that a poem will live or die depending on how it is read. Since most of us have very little experience reading poetry aloud – especially in front of a large group – here are a few pointers about the oral recitation of poetry to get the intrepid reader started on the road to a good performance. Readers, by the way, should NEVER read cold; they should be given their poem sufficiently in advance so they have time to practice, maybe in the presence of a teacher.

Here are a few basic tips:

1. Read the poem slowly. Most people, but especially college-age people 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. Read in a normal, relaxed tone of voice. It is not necessary to give any of these poems a dramatic reading as if from a stage. The poems selected are mostly written in a natural, colloquial style and should be read that way. Let the words of the poem do the work. Just speak clearly and slowly.

3. 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. Did I mention that the reader should read slowly? Read slowly.

4. During the practice period, 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.

Adapted from an on-line tip sheet written by former U.S. Poet Laureate Billy Collins http://www.loc.gov/poetry/180/p180-hwtoread.html