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# How to Read a Poem

Julie Patterson

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### Julie Patterson

is associate director and writer-in-residence at the Indiana Partnership for Young Writers. Her poems, essays and articles have appeared in literary journals, magazines and newspapers throughout the U.S. She has a Master of Fine Arts degree in creative writing from Lesley University.

### You, Reader

by Billy Collins

I wonder how you are going to feel  
when you find out  
that I wrote this instead of you,

that it was I who got up early  
to sit in the kitchen  
and mention with a pen

the rain-soaked windows,  
the ivy wallpaper,  
and the goldfish circling in its bowl.

Go ahead and turn aside,  
bite your lip and tear out the page,  
but, listen-- it was just a matter  
of time

before one of us happened  
to notice the unlit candles  
and the clock humming on the wall.

Plus, nothing happened that  
morning--  
a song on the radio,  
a car whistling along the road  
outside--

and I was only thinking  
about the shakers of salt and  
pepper  
that were standing side by side  
on a place mat.

I wondered if they had become  
friends  
after all these years  
or if they were still strangers to  
one another

like you and I  
who manage to be unknown  
and known  
to each other at the same time--

me at this table with a bowl of  
pears,  
you leaning in a doorway  
somewhere  
near some blue hydrangeas,  
reading this.

## How to Read a Poem

by Julie Patterson

Readers and writers have strong - and disparate - opinions about the "right" way to read a poem. Worse yet, there's wide disagreement among accomplished and highly educated poets, too. There's really only one point we all agree on - poems are meant to be read **aloud**. Beyond that, it gets dicey, but here are some things to consider.

Former poet laureate Billy Collins says, "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."

Look at the text of his poem "You, Reader" (at left) as you listen to him read it, and you'll see what he means.



Billy Collins reads "You, Reader"

Yet poet Georgia Heard says, "...after every single line, my voice is going to stop a little-because in poetry, blank space means silence" (*For the Good of the Earth and Sun*).

Clearly other poets agree with Heard. Read Gwendolyn Brooks' poem "We Real Cool" below, pausing at the end of each line and stanza.

We real cool. We  
Left school. We

Lurk late. We  
Strike straight. We

Sing sin. We  
Thin gin. We

Jazz June. We  
Die soon.

You can also click here to listen to Brooks read her poem (and tell what inspired it):



Gwendolyn Brooks - We Real Cool

This poem sounds very different when read as Brooks does, with pauses at the end of each line, instead of as Collins suggests, to the punctuation only.

So if brilliant poets like Billy Collins and Gwendolyn Brooks don't agree, what are we readers to do?

I say it is not a cut and dry either/or decision. You should consider punctuation, line breaks *and* white space as your guides. In fact, that's one of the many reasons why you should read a poem aloud more than once (especially before reading it to a class or audience). You have to get a feel for it, let the poem sort of emerge in its own rhythm. I believe the "right" way to read a poem evolves as you become more familiar with it.

Most importantly, I'd encourage you to loosen up your belief that there *is* a right way to read a poem. Just as every dramatic script is subject to a director's interpretation, and as every jazz standard is personalized by each musician, every poem is interpreted and personalized, too. The fact that each of us can look at the same text and see/hear it differently is what makes these genres special. It's why remakes and tribute albums are popular in music, why my husband owns three DVD versions of the same *Batman* story, and why I'll go see a Shakespeare play every time the Indiana Repertory Theatre produces one-because a slight variation in presentation can help us discover or appreciate something new in the printed text.

As long as you're reading poems aloud, staying true to the exact words the poet chose, and using something about the poem's structure to guide your voice through the lines, you're doing it right.

