Understanding the Discipline of English Literature – Poetry edition

A guide to Disciplinary Literacy in the English Literature classroom – Poetry edition

Greenshaw
Research School

Contents

Acknowledgements

Authors:

Johnny Richards
Assistant Director at Greenshaw Research School, Deputy Head of English at Greenshaw High School

Phil Stock
Director at Greenshaw Research School, Deputy Head of Greenshaw High School

Special thanks to:

Stephen Trafford, Deputy Director at Greenshaw Research School and Head of English at Greenshaw High School

Eleanor Rider, Teacher of English at Greenshaw High School

Anjalie Vairavanathan, Teacher of English at Greenshaw High School

Stewart Pinnock, Assistant Headteacher at The Broxbourne School

Literary Literacy: An introduction

Why disciplinary literacy for literature?

English Literature is a discipline for which the 'boundaries have always been loose'[1] perhaps due to its broad nature, and crossover with other disciplines. But it also seems that approaches to Literature, at least in teaching, change more than any other subject.

When new governments arrive, the Secretary for Education usually brings their own values for literature to the changes they make, more so than with other subjects. These changes have perhaps distracted us from the most important thing: **what does it mean to read literature successfully?**

We might also expect that teachers of English literature, due to the nature of the subject, and their knowledge of English language, are better teachers of literacy generally.

While English teachers may have more experience with teaching elements of language and reading strategies, we are not necessarily experts in all three forms – *poetry, prose, drama.*

Since their grammars, conventions and patterns differ, then the knowledge and strategies we teach to read them should differ also. Perhaps this gives us our most pertinent reason for considering a more disciplinary approach to teaching literature.

What is the aim of the resource?

This resource aims to bridge the gap between theory and practice, offering a guide on the discipline of English literature generally, but also how we might consider the three separate forms:

- **poetry**
- **prose**
- **drama**

Our resource aims to simplify, to purify the approach, negating the need for endless slides and information overload, but focusing instead on the need for asking good questions.

It could be used by individual teachers to improve their practice, or by department leads to begin developing their teams' understanding of what we mean by disciplinary literacy.

Greenshaw Research School

1. Fang, Zhihui. *Demystifying Academic Reading: A Disciplinary Literacy Approach to Reading Across Content Areas*. Routledge.

Literary Literacy: An introduction

How might you use our resource?

We have structured the guide into two main parts:

1. *An introduction to Disciplinary Literacy in the subject of English Literature*
2. *How-to guides for effective use of Disciplinary Literacy in English Literature – Poetry*

1 An introduction to Disciplinary Literacy in the subject of English Literature

Here we briefly describe the discipline of English Literature as a reminder to ourselves of the purpose of our subject. We then consider what experts read and how they read, as by considering the 'habits' of literature experts, we can consider the strategies for reading literature that we want to teach our pupils.

It provides a chance to reflect on individual and collective knowledge and understanding of literature. It is important for us to challenge ourselves, our assumptions, and the importance of English literature for pupils.

Due to different genres of literature, we have further divided our guide into focusing separately on *poetry*, *prose* and *drama*. It is recommended to focus on one genre at a time – at Greenshaw High School, in the academic year of 2024-2025, we focused on developing our approach in the teaching of poetry, and will continue to do so.

We start with a background of each genre, and then consider five challenges for each for teachers to consider. Our strategies then offer some ways around these challenges.

2 How-to guides for effective use of Disciplinary Literacy in English Literature – Poetry

Since disciplinary literacy is both generic and specific to subjects (*EEF, Improving Literacy in Secondary Schools*), we use the 'Big Five' strategies in our approach to designing questions. This format helps consider disciplinary approaches to reading across subjects, but also to make concrete how disciplinary literacy might work in the classroom, through a familiar framework.

We have devised a series of questions, a focused list, for each form, to guide pupils when reading literature. We have edited and re-edited from our research as well as our own reading and practice of the approach.

The main aim is to use the questions and lists with metacognitive approaches to:

- **build pupils' knowledge and understanding of literature**
- **teach them to attend to the fundamental aspects of the different forms, and**
- **develop specific reading strategies of the different forms.**

The ultimate goal, as ever, is developing pupils' independent use of such strategies, which will take time, modelling and remodeling, and ample opportunity to tackle texts independently, discuss their reading, while having structured support where necessary.

Part 1

Exploring Disciplinary Literacy in English Literature

What is the discipline of English Literature?

The discipline of English Literature involves the study of literary texts.

These texts are forms of art that are primarily concerned with *understanding and expressing* the human condition through language: what it means to fall in love or experience loss and all the myriad thoughts, feelings and relationships that make us who we are.

Unlike with science or maths, the discourse of literary texts is different. Literature uses language in a self-conscious, poetic way, based on the belief that human experience is rarely reducible to singular or literal representation.

The term Literature was coined sometime around the early 1700s, but the rise of English literature as we understand it today, really began following the Romantic Period.

During this time, literature became more closely associated with the imagination and increasingly divorced from everyday social realities. It also became an object worthy of aesthetic contemplation and analysis. In addition, the declining role of religion, particularly during the Victorian age, played a role in elevating the status of literature, giving it an additional moral and spiritual dimension in society.

It was not really until the early 20th century that English Literature became institutionalised as a formal academic discipline in its own right. Even then, because of its reliance on feelings, its inherent subjectivity and its stereotypical associations with feminine qualities, it tended to be viewed as inferior to more established subjects like the sciences or Classics. In this sense, Literature is still a relatively young academic discipline.

> **"Like religion, Literature works primarily by emotion and experience, and so was admirably well-fitted to carry through the ideological task which religion left off"**
>
> Terry Eagleton[1]

What do literary critics read?

Literary critics read literacy texts that span thousands of years from Classical antiquity through to the modern world. Over this time, three overarching forms have endured – drama, poetry and the novel.

Wittgenstein's concept of 'family resemblances' is a useful way of thinking about the relationship between text and genre. Like members of a family, texts in a given literary genre may not have any essential defining feature, but rather share a common set of family resemblances.

Such methods of classification are in many ways somewhat arbitrary, but they do serve a useful starting point for interpreting texts by considering the differences and similarities with other texts within the same family.

These 'traditional' ways of categorising literary works are becoming increasingly blurred with texts often belonging to multiple genres, or not fitting easily into any. This breaking down of categories is a reflection of changes to society with much more fluid ideas of identity.

The concept of genre began with Aristotle, who in *Poetics* applied biological concepts to the classification of literary genres, which he called 'species'.

How do literary pupils read literary texts?

Literature pupils read texts from the three main literary forms, but they approach reading them in different ways. This idea of 'form' has considerable overlap with the concept of 'genre' and is often used interchangeably.

For the purposes of this booklet, the difference between **form** and **genre** will mean the difference between the structural components of a text (such as the formal properties that mark a sonnet a sonnet) and the content, tone, style and concerns within it (the different themes of comedy and tragedy, for instance). Genres can contain sub-genres, and within each genre or subgenre there are different rules or patterns for making meaning.

Because literary forms represent human experience in different ways and establish different relationships between readers and the text, they require their own specialist methods of interpretation.

Drama, which presents audiences with characters on a stage in often recognisable situations, requires a very different interpretative approach then poetry, which typically sets up a more solitary and therefore personal interaction between reader and text.

The greater space of the novel, which generally affords the reader extended time in imaginative worlds, also requires its own unique approach to interpretation.

While all are forms of literature, each one has its own conventions and patterns of language that require specialist ways of reading.

Literature pupils learn these different approaches to interpretation, which vary not only according to the form and genre of the text, but also to when it was written and when it is being read.

These approaches encompass both meaning and representation – in other words, what the text is about *and* how that meaning is conveyed through the aesthetic choices made.

Often there is an intrinsic relationship between the meanings and the methods used to express them. As pupils develop their reading practices, they are introduced to even more highly specialised reading approaches, such as those with a particular political or theoretical lens through which the text is read, such as feminism, structuralism and psychoanalysis.

What are the disciplinary reading habits of literature?

Different literary forms and genres require different approaches to reading, but there are two central orientations that literary pupils generally undertake when they read any text.

These two ways of reading are both concerned with making meaning, but with slightly different emphasis:

- **Interpretation** is more interested in *what* a text is about (the ideas, attitudes and emotions) while...
- **Analysis** is more interested in *how* that text has been constructed through language and structural choices (the aesthetics).

These ways of reading are usually closely related so that a text's meaning is bound up with the methods of artistic representation used to create it.

Experts read literary texts differently to novices. While there may be no common agreement of exactly what this involves, it is clear experts approach reading differently.

David Didau proposes two disciplinary practices at work in English Literature, *noticing* and *analogising*.[2] These two disciplinary habits can be seen to underpin the acts of interpretation and analysis:

- **Noticing** involves 'being attuned to the choices and effects of everything that language has to offer' while...
- **Analogising** refers to 'our ability to make sense of what we have noticed by relating to what we have already read before.'

This ability to analogise requires us to 'know a lot': that is, to have a wealth of experience of reading and studying many different writers, forms, genres, and time periods.

This reminds us of the importance of a well-planned, well-sequenced curriculum that will arm pupils with the knowledge to become skilled readers in the discipline of literature.

Greenshaw Research School

2. Didau, D. (2021) *Making Meaning in English: Exploring the Role of Knowledge in the English Curriculum*

Part 2

How-to guides for effective use of Disciplinary Literacy in English Literature – Poetry

How to read poetry in the classroom

Different forms of poetry have evolved. Often these have developed according to changing social, historical and cultural contexts. Some of these forms remain popular, while others have fallen out of favour.

Forms can have tight structural conventions, such as the rhyming patterns in a sonnet, but can also be concerned with overall tone, as is the case with an ode or an elegy. The main poetic forms can be broadly organised into three categories: lyric, dramatic and narrative.

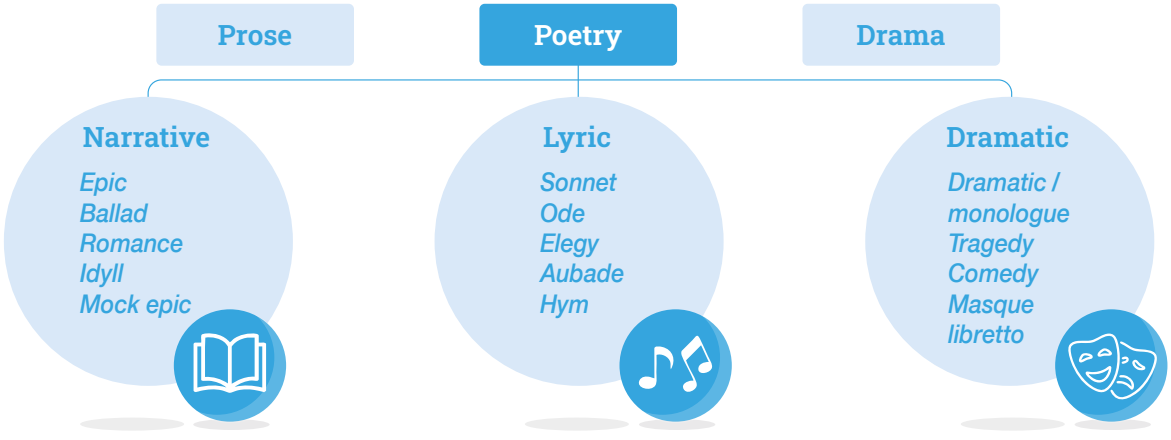
Specific approaches to reading poetry therefore depend on the form and genre of the individual poem concerned – a ***lyric*** poem will focus more on the intensity of emotion conveyed through the combination of visual images and sound effects, while the range of a ***narrative*** poem adopts an approach that looks more at elements of character and plot. ***Dramatic*** poetry leans more towards how the voice of voices at work in the poem reveal themselves through monologue or dramatic interaction.

When approaching the reading of poetry – all literature, in fact – it's useful to consider the kinds of questions that can guide pupils towards reaching an understanding of the poem's meaning as well as an appreciation of the poet's craft.

Adopting a structured approach that supports pupils' ability to notice will help them to develop the disciplinary habit for themselves and learn how to organise their observation into a coherent reading.

An approach to reading a poem with pupils:

- Read the poem aloud to the class so that pupils get an overall sense of the story and/or tone of the poem and its rhythms.
- Pupils read the poem to themselves using the questions below to help them notice interesting things, such as the sounds, images and patterns.
- Group together these observations into categories, then turn them into questions. For example, from pupil observations about a poem's title, we might get the question: *Why does Frost focus on The Road not Taken?*



Five challenges of reading poetry

1 Poems are more difficult to read than other forms of literature

As poetry subverts the usual rules of syntax, they are harder to read, and appear more abstract. Careful questioning[3] around syntax and grammar, using *Check Link Connect* questioning, during the reading of a poem, is therefore necessary. This is important for 'Worked Examples' – see p14.

2 Seeing poems as 'codes to crack'

Pupils often see poems as puzzles with right and wrong answers that they need to solve. Searching for a meaning or the idea of there being a 'solution' undermines the idea of reading critically or exploring layers of meaning. This can lead to pupils guessing, simply repeating what teachers say, or simply giving up because they 'cannot work it out'.

3 Reading poetry requires a substantial amount of knowledge

We perhaps neglect the amount of knowledge to read poetry successfully, perhaps due to a preoccupation with 'personal responses' and emotions that we associate more with poetry than with other forms. While this is a fundamental component of poetry, and perhaps a good starting point, it is not enough for deeper and higher-level readings.

In her expert-novice study, Joan Peskin concludes: "knowledge is an important component of poetic communication, not only in the construction of meaning but in the resultant pleasure experienced when reading a poem".[4]

Experts use their rich knowledge of genre, context, patterns and literary devices, alongside reading strategies such as scanning to contextualise, attending to rhythm and rhyme, and finding meaning at the point of binary opposition.[5]

4 The difference between form & structure

As a form, poetry looks different and sounds different to prose: its rhythms, its syntax, its use of metaphor. This fundamental difference is what we want pupils to notice. We might agonise over the differences between 'form' and 'structure', but this may confuse things more. Perhaps it is more impactful to focus on features such as line length, organisation of stanzas and rhyme.

5 Poems are abstract in nature

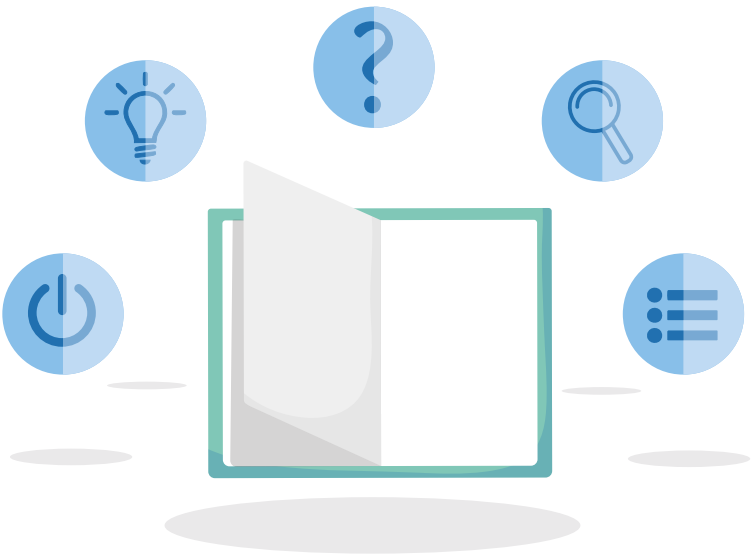
The way readers make sense of images will depend on their experiences and levels of background knowledge. Images are often symbolic and it is the symbolic meanings that help unlock further understanding. If this understanding is lost, regardless of what the image conjures for an individual, the potential for further interpretation is lost.

3. Greenshaw Research School (2025) *Supporting Reading in the Secondary Classroom, part 6*
4. Peskin, J. *Constructing Meaning When Reading Poetry: An Expert-Novice Study*, 1998
5. Fang, Z. *Demystifying Academic Reading: A Disciplinary Literacy Approach to Reading Across Content Areas,* pp.52-53 2024

Greenshaw Research School

The Big Five strategies

Activate prior knowledge	Make predictions	Generate questions	Clarify uncertainty	Summarise reading
Where have I seen this before?	**What might I be about to read?**	**What else seems important?**	**What is important?**	**What does it seem to be about?**
Names: what we already know about a poet's life, their style, themes and concerns	**Form:** using titles, stanza types and other features of form to anticipate likely meaning	**Initial thought:** question 'what resonates?' upon first reading[6]	**Re-reading:** the whole poem as well as certain lines causing difficulty	**Genre:** make comparisons to other poems to determine themes
Dates: what we already know about a historical period or artistic movement	**Structure:** looking at line length, punctuation obvious patterns of rhythm and rhyme to predict possible ideas	**Patterns:** consider patterns of sound, images, words, repetition to begin to formulate more confident ideas	**Connections:** confirm ideas through connecting patterns and expectations of form	**Context:** use personal, social, historical for a deeper appreciation and understanding



6. Andrew Atherton (2023) *Experiencing English Literature*

Strategies for reading poetry

Using the Big Five

1. Activate prior knowledge
2. Make predictions
3. Generate questions
4. Clarify understanding
5. Summary

Activate prior knowledge

Understanding a poet's background, influences, and the context in which they wrote can greatly enhance pupils' ability to interpret meaning.

For example, consider the poet William Blake. Although a pupil may not recall every detail from a previous unit studied in Year 8, remembering that Blake was a 'political poet' who was anti-establishment and part of the early Romantic movement can help deepen their understanding of his poem 'London' when they encounter it in their GCSE studies.

This contextual knowledge allows pupils to connect the poem to broader themes and historical circumstances, as well as understanding certain allusions made, such as the references to the pain and suffering of the poor and marginalised.

Make predictions

The title often provides crucial insight into a poem's themes, tone, and context, serving as a lens through which the entire work can be interpreted.

For example, in *The Road Not Taken* by Robert Frost, the title prompts pupils to reflect on the choices we face in life and the impact those choices have on our journeys. By discussing the title first, pupils can formulate initial impressions and predictions about the poem's content, fostering engagement and curiosity.

This exploration encourages them to think critically about the relationship between the title and the poem itself, enhancing their analytical skills.

Additionally, analysing how the title frames the poem allows pupils to consider the poet's choices and intentions, deepening their understanding of the text.

Generate questions

Generating questions while reading any text is an important aspect of successful comprehension. The same is true of poetry. As we read a poem, we begin to form an initial understanding of its themes and potential ideas.

Next, we focus on its tone, imagery, and patterns, continually asking ourselves questions about these elements. For instance, we might consider questions like:

- ***How does the imagery contribute to the poem's mood?*** *or*
- ***What patterns can I identify in the structure or language?***

These questions help us explore the poem's nuances and can either confirm our expectations or lead to further questions that deepen our analysis.

Importantly, we should avoid jumping straight to questions like, *What is the poem about?* or *What is the poet trying to say?* during our first or second readings. Such questions can limit pupils' exploration, as they often come with preconceived answers.

Instead, we should encourage pupils to consider connections between tone, imagery, and patterns without seeking definitive answers right away.

For example, while reading William Wordsworth's *I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud*, we might model asking ourselves questions about how the poem's serene imagery of daffodils relates to its overall tone of nostalgia and joy, prompting a richer discussion about the interplay of these elements.

Clarify understanding

Once we have made initial observations about a poem's structure, tone, use of visual and aural imagery and any patterns, we then re-read it to explore how these elements work together and consider any relevant contextual cues.

For example, in Christina Rossetti's *When I am dead, my dearest*, we might initially observe a relatively buoyant tone, which is created through the use of regular rhyme, various forms of repetition, and natural imagery.

When we examine this alongside the use of binary opposites, such as the lines '*Haply I may remember / And haply may forget,*' it becomes clear that the poem challenges our expectations of a dark and melancholy treatment of death.

Instead, it offers a more positive perspective on a topic that all humans contemplate at some point in their lives. This process of continually updating our initial impressions allows us to gain a deeper understanding of the poem's complexity and the ways in which its elements interact to convey meaning.

Summary

After clarifying our understanding of a poem's potential themes based on its tone, imagery, patterns, and form, we can compare it to other poems, perhaps by the same poet, from the same period, or of a similar style.

For instance, Christina Rossetti's *When I am dead, my dearest* can be examined alongside her poem *Remember* or Emily Dickinson's *If I should die*. These works form a tradition of poets reflecting on themes such as death, memories of loved ones, and the concept of legacy.

Additionally, considering Rossetti's personal beliefs and views on the afterlife can enrich our interpretation. Knowing that she held a strong faith in heaven may lead us to conclude that she does not fear death or worry about how she will be remembered, as she believes she will find peace in the afterlife. This broader context allows readers to appreciate not only the poem itself but also its connections to other works and the poet's life and beliefs.

Questions to encourage noticing: poetry

To help develop pupils' ability to develop their literary 'habits of thinking', you may want to consider using some of the questions below.

These are not exhaustive and you probably wouldn't ask all these questions every time you read a new poem with your class.

Possible question/s	Examples	The 'Big Five' in use
1. **What do you already know about the poet and period?** *Have you read anything from them before?*	• He was an anti-establishment poet, who was interested in social justice • She wrote about female experience • Victorian society was patriarchal	• Activate prior knowledge • Make predictions
2. **What is the shape of the poem?** *How are the stanzas organised? What associations do you make with this?*	• There are six stanzas of 4 lines • There is no regular pattern • It seems like a sonnet / dramatic monologue / lyric / free verse poem	• Activate prior knowledge • Make predictions
3. **What does the title make you think of?** *How does this connect to the first and last line?*	• Feelings of hope, entrapment, injustice, sorrow, loss, joy, choice • It seems part of a collection • It's confrontational, ambiguous	• Make predictions • Generate questions • Clarify understanding
4. **What do you notice about the rhyme?** *Is it regular?*	• The rhyme follows a strict pattern • There is some rhyme but it is not regular / there is no rhyme at all • It follows a Petrarchan sonnet rhyme scheme	• Make predictions • Generate questions • Clarify understanding
5. **What do you notice about the rhythm?** *What do you associate with its sound?*	• The rhythm is quite upbeat and joyful • It feels quite loose and irregular • The iambic pentameter is broken by the spondee 'rough winds'	• Make predictions • Generate questions • Clarify understanding

Table continued on next page

Possible question/s	Examples	The 'Big Five' in use
6. What other patterns are present? *Is this structural, sounds, images?*	• 'six hundred' ends every stanza • Each stanza is end-stopped • The binary opposites throughout challenge our perception of death	• Generate questions • Clarify understanding
7. What is the tone of the poem? *What creates this?*	• Joyful / depressing / energetic • The regular anapaests make it sound like a nursery rhyme	• Generate questions • Clarify understanding
8. What images jump out? *Why might this be?*	• 'eternal summer' seems quite extreme • The repetition of 'sunlight' emphasises a feeling of hope	• Generate questions • Clarify understanding
9. What contrasts are present? *How does this affect your reading?*	• The first half seems casual while the second half shows trauma • Its buoyant tone contrasts with the topic of death	• Generate questions • Clarify understanding
10. What is the subject? *What could the poet be saying about their subject?*	• Beauty is pointless compared to true love • Death is not a thing to fear because it can lead to heaven	• Clarify understanding • Summarise
11. How does the subject fit the poem's context? *Is it similar to the poet's other works?*	• People were very pro-war at this time • It reflects soldiers' suffering during WWI • It demonstrates the poet's anger and frustration with the marginalisation of certain groups in society	• Clarify understanding • Summarise

Worked Example: How to read Shakespeare's Sonnet 130

Sonnet 130 is a great example of a poem that follows several conventions (form, structure, rhythm, rhyme) but with images and ideas that are more unconventional. Using questions can help pupils 'notice' these discrepancies and develop a deeper understanding of the way Shakespeare rejects the conventional depiction of love.

In the worked example that follows, the questions from the table have been reframed to make them more accessible in the secondary classroom.

The aim is to draw pupils into the process of reading a poem, modelling and scaffolding answers, making everything explicit, so that they begin to ask questions that encourage noticing for themselves.

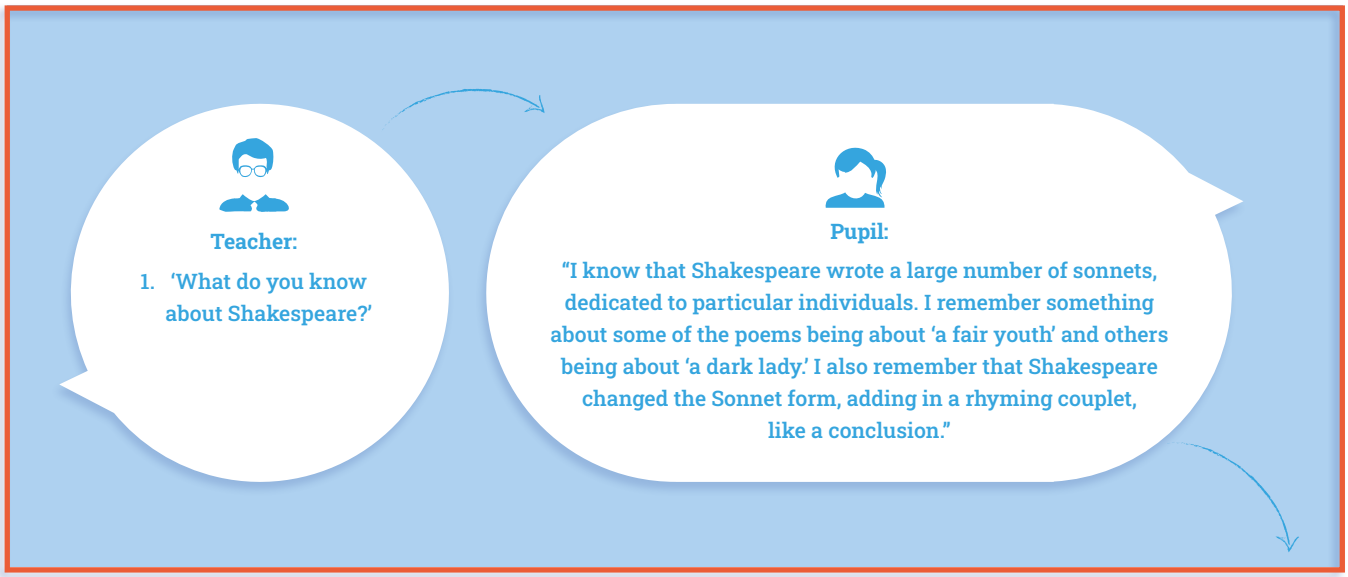
We may of course ask questions about imagery and contrast, but perhaps if reading this poem with a class of Year 7 pupils, the focus is repeatedly on structure and rhyme.

Sonnet 130

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;
Coral is far more red than her lips' red;
If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;
If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.
I have seen roses damasked, red and white,
But no such roses see I in her cheeks;
And in some perfumes is there more delight
Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.
I love to hear her speak, yet well I know
That music hath a far more pleasing sound;
I grant I never saw a goddess go;
My mistress, when she walks, treads on the ground.
And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare
As any she belied with false compare.

William Shakespeare

How to read Shakespeare's *Sonnet 130*



Teacher:

2. 'Does the shape of the sonnet look typical?'

Pupil:

"It is 14 lines, and has a rhyming couplet, so it seems typical for a Shakespearean sonnet. Most lines seem about 10 syllables, which is expected."

Teacher:

3. 'What do you notice about the end of most of the lines?'

Pupil:

"Most lines have a pause at the end. Some have either a full-stop or semi-colon, so quite strong pauses. There is a full-stop at the end of each quatrain and the rhyming couplet."

After this initial reading, the teacher reads the poem aloud.

Teacher:

4. 'What comparison is repeatedly made in lines 1-12?' 'How is the rhyming couplet different?

Pupil:

"There are similar contrasting images about the same idea – his mistress is not as beautiful as something else. So the imagery builds up on top of each other. The rhyming couplet, the final two lines, is more of a direct message."

Teacher:

5. 'What do you notice about the words that rhyme?'

Pupil:

"Most rhyming words are only one syllable. This makes the rhyme quite strong. With this, and the pauses at the end of each line, each line is like a single thought."

Teacher:

6. 'What does the poem seem to be about?'

Pupil:

"Like in most sonnets, the subject seems to be beauty and love. I remember that the rhyming couplet in a Shakespearean sonnet is really important, so I should re-read that:

'And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare
As any she belied with false compare.'

"So, 'my love' shows the speaker clearly loves this woman. 'As rare' suggests something special – that their love is unique, like we saw in Sonnet 18."

Teacher:

7. 'The final phrase is 'false compare. What false comparisons are in the poem?'

Pupil:

"Like comparing women to 'roses' or 'perfume'. These are too perfect. Not real."

Teacher:

8. 'Which famous Renaissance poet of sonnets painted their lover to be perfect? What could Shakespeare be saying about these sonnets?'

Pupil:

"This reminds me of Petrarch. He described his Laura as perfect – he idealised her. Could Shakespeare be mocking Petrarch or similar poets? Is he saying that idealised love is not real?"

Answers are unlikely to be so complete. Repeating these interactions, with similar 'noticing' questions across a unit of poetry, is of course necessary.

Worked Example: Bayonet Charge

In the example, many of the answers do not contain much technical terminology. This is by no means suggesting we do not teach or use technical terminology – a shared terminology allows us to communicate authentically about a poem.

What the answers aim to demonstrate is that hesitant interpretations that show pupils 'noticing' should be accepted and even encouraged. If we search for a single meaning or word when asking pupils for their interpretations, then we might put pupils off from reading and interpreting poetry.

At every stage, we can introduce, model, and re-introduce terminology, to help pupils build their understanding, communicating, and their writing.

We should also consider how we might use different questions in the classroom. Some possible strategies might include:

- **the whole class working on mini whiteboards (MWBs) in silence – *for pre-reading tasks to train pupils into 'noticing' elements of structure or organisation***
- **using paired talk – *for more complex questions such as 'What is the poem saying?'***
- **providing sentence stems to support pupils with communicating their ideas – *perhaps best for drawing different aspects of 'noticing' together***

Andrew Atherton[7] offers some useful sentence stems to allow what he calls 'interpretative vulnerability':

- ***I'm not sure about this but …***
- ***I did think … but ….***
- ***This made me think of ….***
- ***Perhaps this isn't quite right but ….***
- ***I suppose we might think …. but perhaps it is more plausible….***

Bayonet Charge, due to its abstract nature and 'free verse' form, provides another good example for how we might approach poem differently with a class.

Bayonet Charge (1957)

Suddenly he awoke and was running – raw
In raw-seamed hot khaki, his sweat heavy,
Stumbling across a field of clods towards a green hedge
That dazzled with rifle fire, hearing
Bullets smacking the belly out of the air –
He lugged a rifle numb as a smashed arm;
The patriotic tear that had brimmed in his eye
Sweating like molten iron from the centre of his chest, –

In bewilderment then he almost stopped –
In what cold clockwork of the stars and the nations
Was he the hand pointing that second? He was running
Like a man who has jumped up in the dark and runs
Listening between his footfalls for the reason
Of his still running, and his foot hung like
Statuary in mid-stride. Then the shot-slashed furrows

Threw up a yellow hare that rolled like a flame
And crawled in a threshing circle, its mouth wide
Open silent, its eyes standing out.
He plunged past with his bayonet toward the green hedge,
King, honour, human dignity, etcetera
Dropped like luxuries in a yelling alarm
To get out of that blue crackling air
His terror's touchy dynamite.

Ted Hughes

7. Andrew Atherton (2023) *Experiencing English Literature*

Teacher:

1. 'What does the title tell you?'

Pupil:

"I know bayonets were used in WWI. 'Bayonet Charge' suggests this is about a charge in war, so I'm assuming it is set in WWI."

Teacher:

2. 'What do you know about Ted Hughes and the year 1957?'

Pupil:

"I do not really know Ted Hughes as a poet. But I remember Wilfred Owen wrote war poetry during WWI. He was anti-war and described the harsh conditions of war. Maybe this poem is like those?

1957 is many years after WWI. So, if it is describing a 'bayonet charge' in WWI, it is not about direct experience, but perhaps looking back?"

Teacher:

3. 'Describe the shape of the poem.'

Pupil:

"The poem has three large stanzas. The lines do not seem particularly regular, and I can see lots of dashes and enjambment sort of scattered."

After first reading...

Teacher:

4. 'How is the poem organised? How does it differ to other poems from the anthology?'

Pupil:

"In the first stanza, the soldier is running and seems to be panicking. He then stops in the second stanza, and there seems to be questions about why he stopped. Then in the third stanza he is running again, and fear seems to be the main idea here. So, he runs, he stops, he runs."

Apart from this, the poem seems quite disordered, which I guess links to the scattered pauses and irregular line lengths. It lacks structure when compared to a poem like Blake's *London*."

Teacher:

5. 'How does this link to the first and last lines?'

Pupil:

"The poem begins 'Suddenly he awoke'. It starts with confusion, and it's very intense. The last line 'terror's touchy dynamite' is similar. With a feeling of panic. Perhaps this links to the soldier running, stopping and running again – the lack of structure in the whole poem links to the panic of the language."

Teacher:

6. 'What could be important about the contrast of the soldier's mind (internal) and the battlefield (external)?

Pupil:

"The first and last stanzas seem to focus on the action and chaos of the battlefield, but the second stanza seems to focus on the soldier sort of waking up, where he starts to question and consider his experiences. We get an insight into the soldier's mind. This sort of merges with him running in the final stanza. He can't seem to think properly with the chaos around him and everything 'drops like luxuries'.

Worked Example: London

Since a classroom interaction is never as neat as this, additional questions to support students to share their thoughts quickly before individual questioning may be necessary.

What is more, at the early stages of teaching, much of this dialogue would be weighted towards the teacher as they model the thinking process: initially this may involve the teacher asking questions and answering them themselves.

Metacognition is a crucial element to bring pupils into successful habits of thinking, so using sentences such as:

- ***'When first reading a poem, it is important to….'***
- ***'When considering a poem's structure, we should look at the length of lines and stanzas to help us…'***
- ***'I know that the organisation of a poem really matters as well. So I look at its shape, the length of the lines and pauses.'***

We also want to support consolidation and memorisation of these strategies with questions such as:

- ***'What do we do before reading a poem?'***
- ***'What might we look for when describing the line length or stanzas of a poem?'***

William Blake's *London* offers another good example of where the structure and patterns of a poem are very visible, and our knowledge of the poet and time period help us move towards determining its messages early on.

London (1792)

I wander thro' each charter'd street,

Near where the charter'd Thames does flow.

And mark in every face I meet

Marks of weakness, marks of woe.

In every cry of every Man,

In every Infants cry of fear,

In every voice: in every ban,

The mind-forg'd manacles I hear

How the Chimney-sweepers cry

Every blackning Church appalls,

And the hapless Soldiers sigh

Runs in blood down Palace walls

But most thro' midnight streets I hear

How the youthful Harlots curse

Blasts the new-born Infants tear

And blights with plagues the Marriage hearse

William Blake

Teacher:

1. 'What do you remember about William Blake?'

Pupil:

"As I look at this poem, I immediately recognise the poet, Blake. I think I remember *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience*. I remember he questioned people in power and was concerned about the poor in Britain."

Teacher:

2. 'What do the title and date tell you?'

Pupil:

"1792 was around the time of the Industrial Revolution. This changed people's lives a lot. More people worked in factories. Also, chimney sweepers were a big thing. I think Blake wrote about chimney sweepers, and how they were unfairly treated. Exploited?

The title makes me think of smog, or smoke from factories in a busy city. There might have been lots of workers in London at the time. I assume the poem is set in London, or is about London and people living there."

Teacher:

3. 'Describe the shape of the poem.'

Pupil:

"I don't think it has a name. But it is in four stanzas of the same size, four lines each. Quatrains? Each stanza ends in a full-stop as well. It seems quite strict. The line lengths are also even, seven or eight syllables each. Maybe this links to people's lives in London?"

After this initial reading – focus pupils' attention on sounds, patterns and core ideas

Teacher:

4. 'How does the poem sound?'

Pupil:

"It sounds quite harsh. A lot of poetry is 10 syllables per line. This is shorter. It feels stricter maybe. There is also rhyme, which is regular and the rhyming words are only one syllable each. Again it is very strict. Some lines have stresses at the beginning and end of the line, like 'Marks of weakness, marks of woe.' It sounds quite angry."

Teacher:

5. 'What other patterns do you notice?'

Pupil:

"The rhyme is very regular, in ABAB. Or alternating rhyme scheme? This adds to the angry sounds of the stressed words. Some of these rhyming words are also sounds the speaker might hear: 'cry', 'sigh', 'curse' and sees 'woe'. These are all quite painful. Is it the people who suffer this pain?

There is also lots of repetition: 'every' and 'marks'. Perhaps this is suggesting there is pain and suffering everywhere."

Teacher:

6. 'There seems to be two sides in this poem. 'What are the two contrasting sides being described in London?'

Pupil:

"One side seems to be normal people: soldiers, chimney sweepers, 'every face', 'youthful harlots', or prostitutes. All of these people are vulnerable. Except for soldiers, but it describes their 'blood' so maybe it is about soldiers who die.

The other side seems to be powerful groups: the church and the monarchy."

Teacher:

7. 'What does the poem seem to be saying about London and its people?'

Pupil:

"So, it must be about suffering and pain of ordinary people in London. Or the vulnerable in the world? And the powerful exploit them? This makes sense based on what Blake often wrote about. The angry sound of the poem suggests Blake is angry about this suffering."