

Pre-Reading Activity

“Why can’t poets just say what they mean? Why does poetry have to be so hard? Why do I have to read poetry anyway?”

This is your opportunity to let it all out. Write for a few minutes about what you *dislike* about poetry. If you actually *like* poetry, write about a couple of your favorite poems.



Reading and First Response

Read “Introduction to Poetry” by Billy Collins silently to yourself.

What did you think? Write freely for a few minutes, describing what the poem made you think and feel.



Read It Aloud

- ▶ Read the poem aloud a few times, and listen to it being read by a classmate. Experiment with different tones of voice or speeds of reading. Try to notice the cues the poem itself provides to guide your reading: the way it sits on the page, the length of the lines, its punctuation.
- ▶ In listening, did you notice anything about it as a poem that you hadn't noticed when you were just reading it on the page? Write briefly about how the experience of hearing the poem read and preparing to read it affected your ideas and feelings about it.



Extended Response

Write an extended journal response about the poem. You might begin by simply describing the poem. It is always good to start with the observable “facts.” Consider the following:

- ▶ Who is speaking, and to whom?
- ▶ What is the occasion?
- ▶ What is the speaker trying to do—what is his purpose? (Since the poem is by Billy Collins, we can refer to the speaker as “him.”)
- ▶ What is his subject, and what is he saying about it?
- ▶ What might have happened to cause him to write this poem?



Narrow your focus a little. Ask questions about particular words and phrases.

1. What is a “color slide”?
2. Why do they want to beat the poem with a hose?

Add at least two more questions you had about specific words and phrases.



Asking Questions: General to Specific

Begin with general questions you had as you read and heard the poem.

1. What is the setting? Who is “I” and who is “them”?
2. What do mice and water skiing have to do with poetry?
3. What makes this a poem? It doesn’t seem very “poetic.”

Add at least 2 more questions that you had as you read and heard the poem.



Finally, ask some questions about the speaker's tone. These questions may provide important clues about the poet's attitude. Here are some examples:

1. What does the speaker want "them" to do? Is it okay to assume he doesn't actually want them to water-ski or drop a mouse into a poem?
2. How does the speaker feel about what is happening in the poem? How does he feel about "them"?

Add at least two more questions about the speaker's tone.



Shared Inquiry

Get together with a partner and share the questions that you developed. See if you can agree about which of your questions are the most important or the hardest to answer.



Directed Inquiry

Discuss the following additional questions with your partner.

Skip any that you have already asked.


1. Why is the poem organized into little sections of one to three lines?
2. What is the speaker really asking “them” to do with the poem? What would it mean to “drop a mouse” into it or “water-ski” across it? How is the effort to understand a poem like holding a “color slide” up to the light?
3. What does the speaker think poetry is for? What is he suggesting the purpose of poetry is?
4. What do “they” think poetry is for? How do “they” feel about poetry?



Open the Tool Box

Detonate the metaphors: A metaphor can be a sort of explosive device: It doesn't look like anything particularly important or powerful, but it can alter the landscape. *Why* does the speaker compare a reader's experience of a poem with these specific things? *Why* does he ask "them" to hold it up to the light, press an ear against it, drop a mouse into it, water-ski across it, and turn a light on inside it? *Why* do they want to beat on it?

Listen for tone: Taking a clue from "press an ear against its hive," think, talk, and write about the poem's tone. How does the way the speaker talks to you help you understand his feeling? How does it help you better understand what he says and how he feels about "them," his class? How is the poem's tone *part of* what the speaker is trying to say?



Interpret the Poem

It should now be possible for you to write an explication or “reading” of this poem. Read the poem line-by-line, examine its parts in detail, and explain what each section accomplishes. Your conclusion will express a judgment on how all the individual parts of the poem contribute to its overall effect. For many poems the best explanation is a paraphrase, a translation of its poetic statements into ordinary language. But Collins’ poem is already in ordinary language. It is unnecessary to paraphrase it. To interpret this poem, take each of its statements and turn it into easily understood directions to its readers. Imagine that you are writing an instructional manual entitled “How to Understand ‘Introduction to Poetry’ in One Easy Lesson.”

