

Teaching how to study poetry study: tips from the exam boards

1. The first reading of a poem

Students should read poems aloud, in order that they can appreciate the sounds as well as the words, images and so on. Much importance should then be addressed to students' own initial impressions of the poems. Teachers should ask such questions as:

Which words do you find most striking / vivid / disturbing / moving[etc.]?

Which sounds are particularly memorable?

Which images are most powerful or striking?

Which senses does the poet particularly appeal to?

What are your first impressions of the speaker of the poem (if there is one)?

Ask why particular aspects were memorable and striking, and so on, in order to begin considering how the poet's writing creates particular effects. A personal response is essential. There is no right answer, and there can be different interpretations so long as there is valid evidence to support them. If possible, listen to poets reading their poems.

2. Detailed study of the poems

Before exploring the poems in detail, review past papers for types of poetry questions set at IGCSE

Produce a carefully annotated copy of each poem. In the left margin, summarise the content of each stanza (or stage) of the poem. This serves as a will reminder of the structure and overview of the poem.

Key words, phrases, sounds and rhymes can be highlighted in the body of the poem, with brief comments on their effect appended in the right margin. Colour-coordinate, if preferred, highlighting of:

imagery

sound devices

rhetorical devices

This leads to a detailed exploration of the precise effects created by particular words and sounds, and a consideration of the way the poem is structured: how it begins, develops and ends. It should be stressed that listing poetic terms is not at all the same as analysis. More creditworthy is the sustained and detailed exploration of the ways in which poets achieve their effects. The student who writes that 'Marvell's use of "Time's winged chariot" is personification' has barely begun to explore the poet's language. It conveys nothing of the way Marvell captures the sense of time passing with incredible speed.

3. Preparing for Poetry exam questions

Questions often use words such as the following, designed to elicit personal responses to the poetic writing:

memorable

vivid

moving

dramatic

tense

striking

amusing

ironic

The first question on each Poetry set text deals with a particular poem (or extract from a poem). The

second and third questions set on poetry questions are general essay questions. Read carefully the key words and rubrics of these questions. They might ask for students to write about one poem or two poems. The poems could be specified or students might have to select from a list. Or the student might have a free choice of poem(s). Teachers should devise a range of question types in order to prepare students adequately for the examination questions. Where questions ask for students to write about two poems, there will be no requirement to compare poems (CIE only).

Students' written responses

Students should have regular opportunities to practise responding in writing to poetry questions. The earlier exercises will require a degree of scaffolding: the question stem could, for example, be followed by bullet points offering prompts which ensure they cover important areas of enquiry. The level of scaffolding can be gradually reduced as students become better versed at 'interrogating' the poem(s) for themselves. Activities might focus on the selection of relevant, as opposed to, peripheral detail found in the poems. A line-by-line account can too readily descend into narration and description.

Practise effective ways of planning poetry essays, emphasising the importance of selecting relevant evidence rather than indulging in an exhaustive approach which can affect adversely the quality of analysis. Mark your own responses using a copy of the assessment criteria. Try to identify and root out problem areas:

- # generalisations about use of language
- # unsupported assertions
- # repetition of points