

# Poems by Complexity

Hey there! In the not-too-distant past, I posted [a thread](#) on selecting poetry that could be great for teaching. Besides a framework for reading poems, I suggested some possibilities and received a number of great ideas in response!

## Building a Complexity Curriculum

In *Three Genres*, Stephen Minot makes the case that rather than think of good poetry versus bad poetry (ultimately a matter of taste), we might focus on which poems are most complex. I've always liked that approach in teaching. Every text we choose has its own complexity profile – and one of the ways to choose a poem for teaching is to find texts whose complexity matches your students' needs and your class's goals.

Of course, students might miss these complexities on first glance – actually, it's great if they do, since we want them to struggle productively with the work we study together. One way to encourage them, though, is by reading in "rounds." Help your students savor poems, then return to their language and structure across multiple reads. To help you, here are some free resources:

- The one-pager [here](#) (pictured at right) will help students organize to read in rounds
- Chapter 1 of *Love and Literacy* (free [here](#)) discusses how to factor complexity or any type of text into your curriculum planning. The full book includes 1-pagers on things like reading comprehension and discourse, along with more than 20 videos of teachers applying them, if that's interesting to you. More info [here](#), if so!

Reading and Annotating Poetry	
<p><b>Poetry</b></p> <p><i>Poems function differently than prose, so you need to read them differently: you need to read and mean intensive attention.</i></p> <p><b>Analyze and understand writing where structure is as important as language.</b></p>	
1 <sup>st</sup> Read	<p><b>Give the Poem Some Breathing Room</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Read the poem without any expectations. Just enjoy it. If you can, read it out loud.</li> <li>Just a note on the poem's narrative: who is the speaker, and what are they speaking about?</li> </ul>
2 <sup>nd</sup> Read	<p><b>Read for Literal Meaning</b></p> <p>Reread each stanza and determine what the speaker is literally discussing:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Mark up the title</li> <li>Write notes that answer the questions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What is literally happening in the poem?</li> <li>What is the speaker discussing/describing? Identify the speaker if you can.</li> </ul> </li> <li>Reread the last stanza and jot a note on its tone. Make a hypothesis about the poem's theme.</li> </ul>
3 <sup>rd</sup> Read	<p><b>Read for Language and Figurative Meaning</b></p> <p>Underline figurative language that might suggest the poem's subtext (its implied meaning):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Get a quick note about author's purpose</li> <li><b>Similes</b> – comparisons using like or as</li> <li><b>Metaphors</b> – direct comparisons between two things</li> <li><b>Diction</b> – word choice (multiple meanings, repeated usage, charged connotations, unexpected usage, repeated usage, or diction used in figurative language)</li> <li><b>Imagery</b> – language that conjures any of the five senses</li> <li><b>Symbolism</b> – objects that may represent abstract ideas</li> <li>Refine your hypothesis about the poem's theme.</li> </ul>
4 <sup>th</sup> Read (Advanced)	<p><b>Read for Structure and Sound [advanced]</b></p> <p>Once you have a starting hypothesis, examine and take notes on the poem's structure:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Structure</b> – Note how the poem is organized and why the author may have made these choices: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Form</b> – What is the genre of the poem? Does the form connect to its meaning?</li> <li><b>Organization</b> – Is the poem split into sections by stanzas or ideas? Why?</li> <li><b>Enjambment</b> – where does the author split lines? Splitting a line places emphasis on the final word in it. Why were these words important?</li> </ul> </li> <li><b>Sound</b> – Note the techniques that affect the way the poem sounds: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Rhyme</b> – If rhyme is used, what words rhyme? Why might the author have paired these?</li> <li><b>Rhythm</b> – Is there a rhythm, a beat, to the line? What words are emphasized as a result?</li> <li><b>Cadence</b> – Does the author link words by repeating vowel sounds (assonance) or consonant sounds (consonance, alliteration)? What is the effect?</li> <li><b>Panama</b> – does the author establish a pattern through alliteration or repetition? If so, what is linked? If the pattern is broken, why?</li> </ul> </li> <li>Refine your hypothesis about the poem's theme.</li> </ul>
Theme Note	<p><b>At the End of the Poem, Generate an End Note on the Possible Theme</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Review your annotations: how do all of my notes connect to build to a theme?</li> <li>Write a final end note: Theme(s).</li> <li>If the theme feels hard to grasp, answer: <i>To what does the poem call our notice?</i></li> <li>Check that your end note language is precise and avoids cliché.</li> </ul>

OK! Here's a linked list of what everyone said, including a few extras I'll add. A few quick caveats:

- Age matters. Many of these texts work great in upper MS or HS but would be inappropriate for younger grades. Use this as a reference to help get you thinking, but preview everything and use your expertise/judgment.
- Of course, texts contain multitudes. To keep this compact, the goal here was to name 1-2 complexities in each poem that could make for fruitful study, but every poem has far more to offer than that!
- Like any text, most poems aren't written with pedagogy in mind. Treat them with care and honor, so you avoid the situation Billy Collins writes about in "[Introduction to Poetry](#)."

A big thank you to the folks who suggested poems, re-tweeted my call, or decide to share this document. There's plenty more we could add! If you have additional ideas, send them to me @stevechiger or [steve@stevechiger.com](mailto:steve@stevechiger.com) for the next edition of this list!

Author	Title w/link	Complexity Component/Something to Notice/Probe
Safia Elhillo	<a href="#">"vocabulary"</a>	<b>Ambiguous Diction:</b> Elhillo's poem hinges on the ambiguity in diction. How does it make use of that tension?
Rita Dove	<a href="#">"Persephone, Falling"</a>	<b>Allusion:</b> What is added by the allusions to Greek myth and the Bible. <b>Ambiguous Diction:</b> Notice how the poem's final lines use the "this" to leave room for interpretation.
William Stafford	<a href="#">"A Ritual to Read to Each Other"</a>	<b>Rhyme Scheme:</b> The poem shifts from rhyme to near rhyme to no rhyme and back again. How might this connect to meaning?
W.H. Auden	<a href="#">"Musée des Beaux Arts"</a>	<b>Rhyme Scheme:</b> The rhyme scheme in this poem is subtle – easy to miss! How might that connect to meaning? [Note: poem responds to <a href="#">this painting</a> ]
Nikki Giovanni	<a href="#">"Legacies"</a>	<b>Symbolism:</b> What is the significance of the rolls? <b>Structure:</b> How does the use of enjambment interact with the themes of this poem?

Keith Taylor	<a href="#">“Consolation”</a>	<b>Structure:</b> What does the space do in this poem? What work is it doing? Why? H/T @Gplastrik for the poem and prompts
Harryette Mullins	<a href="#">“Elliptical”</a>	<b>Ambiguity:</b> What is this poem trying to say? How is its resistance to meaning part of its meaning?
Langston Hughes	<a href="#">“Mother to Son”</a>	<b>Consonance:</b> How does the consonance in this poem contribute to its meaning? What shifts do you detect?
Hayden Saunier	<a href="#">“I Need to Live Near a Creek”</a>	<b>Assonance and Sibilance:</b> How might this language link to the poem's meaning  H/T @theVogelman who wrote about this one on the brilliant and recently completed <a href="#">Go Poems</a>
Simon Armitage	<a href="#">“Out of the Blue”</a>	<b>Consonance/Assonance/Alliteration:</b> Notice these techniques in the text. What do they contribute? What changes without them? <b>Perspective:</b> Who is the “you” in this poem? *Heads up: this one’s about 9/11. It’s a gut punch of a poem – brilliant but hard to read.
Ted Kooser	<a href="#">“Abandoned Farmhouse”</a>	<b>Personification:</b> What effect does the personification in this poem have?
	<a href="#">“Student”</a>	<b>Extended Metaphor:</b> Notice the choice of extended metaphor in this poem. What does it add to the description?  H/T @Gplastrik for suggesting this text!
Maggie Smith	<a href="#">“Good Bones”</a>	<b>Repetition:</b> This poem reads almost like a monologue, but there is ample repetition. What does the use of repetition add?
Philip Larkin	<a href="#">“This Be the Verse”</a>	<b>Structure and rhythm:</b> Notice the poem’s sing-song quality, which contrasts with its serious themes. <b>Allusion:</b> Notice the allusion in the title. (Robert Louis Stevenson's <a href="#">“Requiem.”</a> )  H/T @jason_catoire, who flags that this one has profanity, for the poem and these foci!
Sharon Olds	<a href="#">“The Clasp”</a>	<b>Perspective:</b> At various points in the poem, the perspective is ambiguous. Why? <b>Structure:</b> How does the delayed reveal of the characters and their relationships contribute to the poem’s meaning?  H/T @litandlife101 for the poem and above prompts!  It’s a heavy topic, but this poem might pair well with both Larkin’s “This Be The Verse” and Joanne Avallon’s micro-fiction <a href="#">“All This.”</a> - SC
Theodore Roethke	<a href="#">“My Papa’s Waltz”</a>	<b>Near Rhyme:</b> It wouldn’t have been hard for Roethke to have rhymed in this text. So why didn’t he? <b>Ambivalent Imagery/Diction:</b> How do these lead to multiple ways of reading this poem?
Walt Whitman	<a href="#">“When I Heard the Learn’d Astronomer”</a>	<b>Structure:</b> How does the structure of this poem interact with its meaning? <b>Cadence:</b> How does the cadence of language interact with meaning?
Jimi Santiago Baca	<a href="#">“Who Understands Me But Me?”</a>	<b>Allusion:</b> What’s being alluded to here? How does it inform your reading of the poem? (Could be good to also share Hughes’s <a href="#">“I, Too,”</a> which like this text alludes to Walt Whitman.

Sylvia Plath	<a href="#">“Morning Song”</a>	<p><b>Metaphor:</b> How does this poem’s use of metaphor contribute to its meaning [and the speaker’s ambivalence]?</p> <p>H/T @jenglishtchr for suggesting this one!</p> <p>Like the last three rows, this is another poem about relationships between parents and children, arguably the most positive of the bunch, despite its ambivalence. Yikes! - SC</p>
Gary Snyder	<a href="#">“For the Children”</a>	<p><b>Extended metaphor:</b> How would this poem be different without the second line?</p> <p><b>Cadence:</b> How does the cadence of this text support its ideas?</p> <p>H/T @mosswa for this suggestion! They also suggest the alliteration in Snyder’s <a href="#">“Riprap”</a> so pairing could make for an opportunity to talk about cadence</p>
Robert Hayden	<a href="#">“Those Winter Sundays”</a>	<p><b>Diction:</b> What’s up with that last line? Why describe love this way?</p> <p><b>Form:</b> This poem is 14 lines, and about love: we’re at the border of sonnet country! But, if so, the rhyme scheme is intentionally missing... why?</p>
Edna St. Vincent Millay	<a href="#">"Oh, oh, you will be sorry for that word!"</a>	<b>Form:</b> How does this poem play with our expectations of sonnet form? Why?
Robert Frost	<a href="#">“Design”</a>	<b>Form:</b> How does this poem play with our expectations of sonnet form? Why?
Rhina P. Espaillat	<a href="#">“Find Work”</a>	<p><b>Form:</b> How does this poem play with our expectations of sonnet form? Why?</p> <p>H/T @kzimmerbaum for this text!</p>
Elizabeth Bishop	<a href="#">“One Art”</a>	<p><b>Form:</b> Why might Bishop have chosen a villanelle as the form for this message?</p> <p><b>Perspective:</b> Whom is the speaker addressing? Does this change during the poem?</p>
Tupac Shakur	<a href="#">“The Rose that Grew from Concrete”</a>	<p><b>Symbolism:</b> Notice the symbolism in this poem and how it interacts with meaning.</p> <p>H/T @mamabourne for suggesting this text!</p>
Andrew Hudgins	<a href="#">"Tree"</a>	<p><b>Symbolism:</b> Notice how nature is used to symbolize aspects of humanity.</p> <p>H/T @kzimmerbaum for suggesting these poems as a pair!</p> <p>Along these lines, I might also look at Polanco’s “Identity.” – SC</p>
Marge Piercy	<a href="#">“A Work of Artifice”</a>	
Julio Noboa Polanco	<a href="#">“Identity”</a>	
Mary Oliver	<a href="#">“Crossing the Swamp”</a>	<p><b>Diction:</b> What words surprise you? Why use them and how does it connect to the poem’s larger ideas?</p> <p><b>Symbolism:</b> Notice how nature is used to symbolize aspects of humanity.</p> <p>H/T @DamascusHS_SDT for suggesting this text!</p>
Gary Soto	<a href="#">“Oranges”</a>	<p><b>Imagery:</b> Notice Soto’s use of color imagery and how it contributes to mood.</p> <p>H/T @DamascusHS_SDT for suggesting this text and focus!</p>
Ryan Walsh	<a href="#">“Backyard Journal”</a>	<p><b>Juxtaposition:</b> Notice how contrasts interact with the poem’s larger themes.</p> <p>H/T @Gplastrik for suggesting this poem and focus!</p>

Clint Smith	<a href="#">“Playground Elegy”</a>	<b>Structure:</b> How does the organization of the poem contribute to its meaning? <b>Repetition:</b> What does the repetition of “raised hands” contribute to the text?  H/T @jenglishtchr for this text and the suggestion to consider its structure
Bob Hicok	<a href="#">“What Would Freud Say?”</a>	<b>Allusion:</b> Why such varied allusions? What's the connection with the poem's message?  H/T @Gplastrik for the poem and prompts! (NB: this one is most appropriate for HS students)
William Butler Yeats	<a href="#">“When You are Old”</a>	H/T @mrpchessell who suggests exploring this poems <b>imagery</b> and <b>ironic tone</b>
Amanda Gorman	<a href="#">“The Hill We Climb”</a>	See @CarolJago’s awesome, full lesson on this poem! H/T @hodge_miki for suggesting this text!
Gwendolyn Brooks	<a href="#">“Kitchenette Building”</a>	<b>Imagery:</b> How does the imagery in this text contribute to its meaning? <b>Language:</b> Why does the poem shift to solely using the pronoun “it” in the penultimate stanza? <b>POV:</b> Is this poem hopeful? Negative? Ambivalent? Does the mere fact of the poem’s existence suggest a POV?  This could of course be paired with Hughes’s <a href="#">“Harlem.”</a>

## Still here?

You’re a teacher after my own heart. If you’re looking for further resources:

- Here’s a [thread](#) I made of **key pedagogy research** I think teachers should know about. Please consider retweeting!
- Here’s a [link](#) to a **similar compilation of very short stories**. Please consider retweeting!
- Here’s [my blog](#) on some pedagogy/English-y stuff. Please consider reading!
- Here’s [the first chapter](#) of *Love and Literacy* (my book – a multi-year labor of love; more info [here](#)) Please consider buying hundreds of copies and giving one to everyone you know. ;)

Feel free to reach out with suggestions, ideas, and questions! Visit [stevechiger.com](#) to find me.