How to Read a Poem

Julie Patterson
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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 passing 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!"

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, passing at the end of each line and stanza.

We real cool. We left school.
Lurt late. We
Spike i'stream. We
Sing sin. We
Thin gin. We
Jazz June. We
She met us.

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

Billy Collins reads "You, Reader"

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 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.

Most importantly, I'd encourage you to loosen up your own rhythm. I believe the "right" way to read a poem evolves as you become more familiar with it. And, beyond that, it gets dicey, but here are some things to consider.

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Gwendolyn Brooks - 'We Real Cool'

‘We Real Cool’ by Gwendolyn Brooks

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Billy Collins reads "You, Reader"

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