After you’ve read a poem two or three times, a deeper, closer reading – line by line, word by word, syllable by syllable – will help you discover even more about the poem. Ask yourself:

1. What happens (or does not happen) in the poem?
2. What are the poem’s central ideas?
3. How do the poem’s words, images, and sounds, for example, contribute to its meaning?
4. What is the poem’s overall tone?
5. How is the poem put together?
6. Who is the speaker? Is it possible to determine the speaker’s age, sex, sensibilities, level of awareness, values?
7. Is the speaker addressing anyone in particular?
8. How do you respond to the speaker? Favourably? Negatively? What is the situation? Are there any special circumstances that inform what the speaker says?
9. Is there a specific time and place?
10. How does the diction reveal meaning? Are any words repeated? Do any carry evocative connotative meaning? Are there any puns or other forms of verbal wit?
11. Are figures of speech used? How does the figurative language contribute to the poem’s vividness and meaning?
12. Do any objects, persons, places, events, or actions have allegorical or symbolic meanings? What other details in the poem support your interpretation?
13. Is irony used? Are there any examples of situational irony, verbal irony, or dramatic irony? Is understatement or paradox used?
14. What is the tone of the poem? Is the tone consistent?
15. Does the poem use onomatopoeia, assonance, consonance, or alliteration? How do these sounds affect you?
16. What sounds are repeated? If there are rhymes, what is their effect? Do they seem forced or natural? Is there a rhyme scheme? Do the rhymes contribute to the poem’s meaning?
17. Does the poem’s form – its overall structure – follow an established pattern? Do you think the form is suitable vehicle for the poem’s meaning and effects?
18. Is the language of the poem intense and concentrated? Do you think it warrants more than one or two close readings?
19. Did you enjoy the poem? What, specifically, pleased or displeased you about what was expressed and how it was expressed.
20. Which critical approach seems especially appropriate for this poem? Why?
21. How might biographical information about the poem provide a useful context for interpretation?
22. To what extent do your own experiences, values, beliefs and assumptions inform your interpretation?
23. What kinds of evidence from the poem are you focusing on to support your interpretation? Does your interpretation leave out any important elements that might undercut or qualify your interpretation?
24. Given that there are a variety of ways to interpret the poem, which one seems the most useful to you?

**Suggestions for Approaching Poetry**

* Assume it will be necessary to read the poem more than once. Give yourself a chance to become familiar with the poem. Like music, a poem becomes more understandable and enjoyable with each encounter.
* Pay attention to the title.
* Avoid being put off by words or lines that you don’t understand.
* On a second reading, identify words or passages you don’t understand. Look up words you don’t know; these might include names, p laces, historical and mythical references, or anything else that is unfamiliar to you.
* Read the punctuation. Poems use punctuation marks – in addition to the space on the page – as signals for readers. Be especially careful not to assume that the end of a line marks the end of a sentence, unless it is concluded by punctuation.
* Paraphrase the poem to determine whether you understand what happens it it. As you work through each line of the poem, a paraphrase will help you to see which words or passages need further attention.
* Assume that each element has a purpose. Try to explain how the elements of the poem work together.
* Don’t expect to produce a definitive reading. Many poems do not resolve all of the ideas, issues, or tensions in them, and so it is not always possible to drive their meaning into an absolute corner. Your reading will explore rather than define the poem. Poetry is usually elusive.