

How to approach your poetry exam (seen poetry)

When preparing for your 'seen' poems, make sure that you are fully familiar with the content and any issues the poet may address in his or her poem (occasionally fun, nonsense poems are included). Often knowledge of the poet's background and intention in writing the poem is crucial for your understanding of the poem. If you don't already have this information, you can ask your teacher or search the library or the internet.

Your examiners will obviously expect you to have a deeper understanding of these poems than they will expect from your reading of the unseen poem. In particular, if you are given only an extract from one of the longer poems in your syllabus, they will expect you to be familiar with the rest of the poem.

During the year you may have analysed the poem in class. If you would like to refresh your memory, we suggest you use the **SIFT** method, where you consider the *Sense, Intention, Feeling* and *Tone* of the poem.

For the *SENSE*, you explain briefly what the poem is about; then you identify the poet's *INTENTION* or purpose in writing it. When you comment on the *FEELINGS* that the poem evokes, you would refer to poetic language and techniques (metaphors and images, use of sound effects, structural considerations etc.) Finally, you need to identify the *TONE* of the poem, which needs to be consistent with the poet's intentions.

One area which poses particular problems in poetry analysis is that of **RHYTHM**. It is, of course, one of the most important aspects of a poem because rhythm is one of the key features that separates poetry from prose. It has been said that 'music is the poetry of our generation' and indeed poetry has a greater affinity to music than to prose. When you listen to music, doesn't the kind of music you choose to listen to depend on your mood at that particular time? And isn't it the rhythm that counts? If you are feeling depressed, you aren't going to choose a song with a lively rhythm (unless you are trying to snap out of that feeling). Things aren't very different with poetry. We tend to focus mainly on the meaning of the words when we read poetry but through considering rhythm too, we deepen our understanding of the poem as a whole. This is because the rhythm reflects the thoughts and feelings conveyed in the poem – the mood, or emotional weight, of what is being said.

When analysing the rhythm of a particular poem, always consider the following elements:

- **Metre:** the regular pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables. Words more heavily stressed are usually central to the poem's meaning.
- **Rhyme:** repetition of similar sounds in endings of words. Identify if there is a discernible rhyme scheme or not, and whether it changes or not. This can indicate a particular form e.g. a sonnet. A change in the rhyme can alert the reader to a change of tone or purpose.
- **Lines:** consider the use of end-stopped versus run-on lines and whether the choice is purposeful. Look out for caesurae, which are breaks within lines that create a dramatic pause.
- **Punctuation:** consider how punctuation influences pausing, and thus the rhythm and effect of the poem. How does this contribute to meaning in the poem?
- **Sound imagery:** consider use of sound techniques such as alliteration, assonance and onomatopoeia, all of which influence the rhythm and atmosphere of the poem.

Remember that variation in any of the above elements is usually meant to achieve a certain effect. If, for example, the first four lines of a poem have 10 syllables each and then suddenly the fifth line has five syllables, it is most likely that the fifth line is being emphasised. Analyse the meaning of that line to determine why the poet is stressing its importance.

Refer to Macrat's notes on *How to approach the unseen poetry section* for more useful hints and tips:

<https://www.macrat.co.za/resources/additional-resources>.



Revising your poetry

Try the following approach when you tackle your revision:

1. Read through each poem two or three times and determine what the main idea is.
2. Jot down rough notes about tone and atmosphere, rhythm and rhyme scheme (if appropriate), striking words and images.
3. Consider the following factors:

❖ **MEANING** of the poem:

WHAT is it about?

What is the main idea?

What happens in the poem?



❖ **METHOD** of the poem:

HOW is it written?

Ascertain the **poetic form**: the physical structure or shape, stanzas, length of lines and the rhyme scheme used to express the poet's ideas and emotions.

Consider **poetic devices** (style) used by the poet to convey his intention: rhythm, punctuation, diction, phrasing, figurative language and sound devices.

How do all of these add to the meaning of the poem?

Consider imagery, atmosphere, tone, mood or feeling.

Show their effectiveness.

Exclude irrelevant details.

❖ **MESSAGE** of the poem: What is the poet's INTENTION?

Has he/she conveyed it in an effective manner? Does the poem succeed?

Complete your revision by working through a worksheet or set yourself a couple of questions and then – preferably on the following day (so that you are really testing yourself) – answer them on paper.

Finally, remember that poetry is meant to be read aloud.
Enjoy its **sound** as well as its meaning!

Good luck!



Macrat offers a set of revision worksheets for Grade 12 prescribed poems. It is extremely useful working through these worksheets when you revise for your exams:

<https://www.digital.macrat.co.za/product-category/pdf-resource-packs/poetry/>

