How to Read Poetry

The aim of explicating poetry is NOT merely to figure out what the poem is about, but rather to come up with an interpretation. It’s less about “what did the author say” and more about “why might the author have said this?” and “what messages, concepts, ideas, etc. are they getting across?”

- **Read the poem at least twice, if you can.** On the first read, just read.
  - Try to visualize the images presented by the poet
  - Read out loud or in a whisper to get the full effect of devices like alliteration, rhyming, and meter.
  - You don’t need to stop at the end of each line if there is no punctuation.
  - **On the second read through, take notes.**
    - Mark up your page, write thoughts in the margins
    - Underline words you find important. Look up words you don’t know
      - If you plan to cite that dictionary in a paper, it’s best to look at academically acceptable dictionaries like the Oxford English Dictionary or Merriam-Webster Online.
    - Draw arrows between similar or dissimilar lines
    - Look for patterns of words, images, concepts, ideas, themes
    - Note poetic devices (simile, metaphor, symbols, alliteration, etc.) See below.
- Try to figure the poem out on your own before turning to outside sources like the web
  - If you use an outside source on a paper, you MUST cite it, so make sure it’s a valid source (no Wikipedia, Sparknotes, etc.)
- Take note of the poetic devices a poet uses. What concepts is the author getting across by using them? Go beyond just noticing/noting there is a device such as a metaphor--your real point is to figure out what ideas that particular choice of literary device suggests. For example, in your essay make interpretative statements like “By using the word ‘wild’ to describe the night, Mary Oliver suggests the night is full of possibility. This choice of diction reminds us that our journey of life does not have to follow rules.”
  - **diction**—word choice (look for words that imply concepts, themes, etc.)
    - “It was already late/ enough, and a wild night” (Mary Oliver) What is implied by describing the night as “wild” in the context of the poem?
  - **metaphor**—a comparison that doesn’t use like or as
    - “Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day” (Shakespeare)
  - **symbolism**—when an object stands for a concept
    - “In there stepped a stately Raven of the saintly days of Yore…” (Edgar Allan Poe who said the raven in his poem symbolizes “Mournful and Never-ending Remembrance”)
  - **simile**—a comparison using “like” or “as”
    - “Death lies on her like an untimely frost.” (Shakespeare)
  - **imagery**—language that vividly appeal to our senses
    - “The water I taste is warm and salt like the sea” (Sylvia Plath, also has a simile here!)
  - **alliteration**—similar first letters or sounds
    - “Hot-hearted Beowulf was bent upon battle”
• **assonance**—when the vowel sounds of two or more words is the same
  - “From what I’ve tasted of desire / I hold with those who favor fire.” (Robert Frost)

• **end rhyme**—rhyming that occurs at the end of each line
  - “Life is but life, and death but death!
    Bliss is but bliss, and breath but breath!” (Emily Dickinson)

• **internal rhyme**—rhyming that occurs other than at the end of lines such as within a line
  - “Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered, weak and weary” (Edgar Allan Poe)

There are many more poetic devices than those listed above, so make sure to acquaint yourself with them or ask a professor or tutor for help.

**Example Poem (numbers given link to a comment on the right)**

(1) The Emperor of Ice-Cream  
by (2) Wallace Stevens

Call the roller of big cigars,  
The muscular one, and bid him whip  
In kitchen cups (3) concupiscent curds.  
Let the (4) wenches dawdle in such dress  
As they are used to wear, and let the boys  
Bring flowers in last month's newspapers.  
Let (5) be be finale of seem.  
The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream.

Take from the dresser of deal,  
Lacking the three glass knobs, that sheet  
On which (6) she embroidered fantails once  
And spread (7) it so as to cover her face.  
If her (8) horny feet protrude, they come  
To show how cold she is, and (8) dumb.  
Let the lamp affix its beam.  
(9) The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream.