Most people find the poetry comprehension harder than the prose comprehension. This may be because you have not read much poetry. And when you read it, it probably seems complicated. This is because language is used in a much more daring way in poetry: pictures come thick and fast and the rules of grammar are often stretched to the limits. Words are left out and sentences are incomplete. Another difficulty may be the extreme focus on detail. A poem can spend half a page describing something as simple and seemingly uninteresting as a tree trunk. This level of detail, which we are not used to, can also make appreciating poetry difficult, especially when the poem suddenly moves from a detailed description to some philosophical musing. When reading poetry you need to keep an open mind that is ready for surprises.

However, don't be scared of poetry. It's all English and it all makes sense. Poetry does ask you, as a reader, to put more effort into your reading, to use your imagination to fill in gaps left by the poem. A poem does not usually tell a story in sequence, as prose does, but circles its objects with language. It is usually more thought and image than plot.

There are a few tricks to help you get to grips with poetry. Ultimately, the best way to grasp how poetry works is to read as much of it as possible. Familiarise yourself with the tips below and use them when reading poems.

**Understanding poems**

**Reading to punctuation**

The most important thing you need to bear in mind when reading poetry is that you should follow the grammar and not the line breaks. What you probably know of poetry is based on nursery rhymes or pop songs. These usually have a distinct rhyme and each line contains a thought. However, in most modern poetry, phrases
do not end at the end of a line. So, unless there is a punctuation mark at the end of the line, don’t stop there.

Take the following example:

I remember one death in my boyhood
That next to my father’s, and darker, endures;
Not Queen Victoria’s, but Davidson, yours,
And something in me has always stood
Since then looking down the sandslope
On your small black shape by the edge of the sea,
– A bullet-hole through a great scene’s beauty,
God through the wrong end of a telescope.

(‘Of John Davidson’ by Hugh MacDiarmid)

If you stop at the end of each line, parts of the poem won’t make sense:

I remember one death in my boyhood. That next to
my father’s, and darker, endures ... And something
in me has always stood. Since then looking down the
sandslope. On your small black shape by the edge of the
sea.

Only by following the punctuation does the meaning become clear:

I remember one death in my boyhood that next to my
father’s, and darker, endures ... And something in me
has always stood since then looking down the sandslope
on your small black shape by the edge of the sea.

An exercise you can do to help get this into your system is to find a partner and to read a poem aloud, changing reader at every punctuation mark (with the exception of apostrophes). This will help to bring out the sense of the poem as well as train you to read to the punctuation marks rather than the line endings.

**Words can have more than one meaning**

English words can be tricky to pin down: either because they have more than one meaning or because they can be used in more than one way. A verb can be used as a noun, a noun as an adjective, an adjective as an adverb – and so on.

Look at the following lines taken from the poem above:

I remember one death in my boyhood
That next to my father’s, and darker, endures;

Words that are spelt the same, but mean different things, like the various kinds of bow and pole, are called **homonyms**. Words that sound the same, but mean different things, like bored and board, are **homophones**.
‘Endures’ can mean either to suffer (e.g. the pain I had to endure) or to remain in existence (e.g. of all creatures only the rats endure). As it is the death that endures and it nowhere says what death might have suffered, it is clear that the second meaning is the correct one here.

**Word order**

It is interesting to note that while pupils have no difficulty understanding Yoda (of *Star Wars* fame), when he utters his Yodaisms, as soon as a poet does the same, no one understands. Word order in poems can be surprising, so while reading open keep your mind and work out what's what in a sentence.

In the poem on page 34 some words are not in the order you would speak them, as indicated by the arrows:

I remember one death in my boyhood
That next to my father’s, and darker, endures; [...] 
And something in me has always stood
Since then looking down the sandslope
On your small black shape by the edge of the sea,

**Missing words**

Often poets leave out words that are grammatically necessary, but are not absolutely essential to understand the meaning.

For example, in the poem above the author writes:

I remember one death in my boyhood
That next to my father’s, and darker, endures;

There is a word missing in this, as it should read: that endures next to my father’s and is darker.

**Examiner’s tip**

As you can only recognise double meanings of words you know, make it a habit to use a dictionary to broaden your vocabulary.

**Key term**

The technical term for leaving out words is **ellipsis**. This is also the name given to three dots …
Test yourself

Use the techniques above to transform these lines from Charles Causley’s poem ‘Manjimup’ into more easily understandable lines.

At One Tree Bridge a single kookaburra
Machine-guns the noon light. The cormorant
Casts over the rigid pool its barb of eyes.
Somewhere beyond the rocks and rushes, a bright
Secrecy of maidenhair fern, the stream fidgets
Through sharp stones.

Reading for meaning

The best way to go about discovering what a poem is about (while also straightening it out in your head, as described above) is to read the poem a number of times. While reading, it is important to keep an open mind as to what the poem might be about; don’t be quick to jump to conclusions and be ready to change your mind if something doesn’t fit. Remember also to read the title; it is there for a reason.

Here is a suggested mode of attacking a poem:

1. Read the title of the poem and the poem once.
2. Think what the poem might be about. Use clues from the title and the text. Also use your knowledge of everyday life.
3. Using your first guess, read the poem again, checking whether the words of the poem support your idea. Be ready to discard an idea that does not fit the words. Do not force the words to say things they don’t; don’t think, ‘It’s poetry, words can mean different things there.’ They can’t and they won’t.
4. Based on your second reading re-visit your ideas.
5. Read the poem sentence by sentence and find out what is going on in each. Remember: it’s all English and all makes sense and will probably be about actions you can relate to either from your own experience or from reading or watching TV. When you string this together, you should have a good understanding of the poem.
6. Read the whole poem one last time and see how all the things you have discovered fit into place.
Literal and metaphorical meaning

A poem usually has (at least) two levels of meaning. Many poems appear to be about simple, everyday matters that are of no great interest. However, these are used to make a point about some basic truth of life. In a way it is like a conjuring trick: you think you are seeing one thing, which then turns out to be something very different. For example, you might read Blake’s poem ‘The Sick Rose’ as being about a rose being attacked by a worm, but then realise that the poem is really about the dangers of obsessive love.
When first reading a poem, you should try to understand the literal meaning – what is actually going on. When you feel comfortable with the events being described, try to work out what (else) the poem is about.

As with all comprehension questions and answers, bear in mind that here, too, there is not necessarily a right or wrong answer. This sort of deeper analysis can form the basis for answers to response questions.

Test yourself

What do you think the following poem by Robert Frost is about, both literally and metaphorically?

The Road Not Taken
Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveller, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less travelled by,
And that has made all the difference.