



Open Mic Readings

Many bookstores, coffee shops, and churches like to host open mic readings if someone is willing to organize the evening. Most shops are happy to attract the extra business, though some may charge a fee to cover the cost of staffing the place after hours.

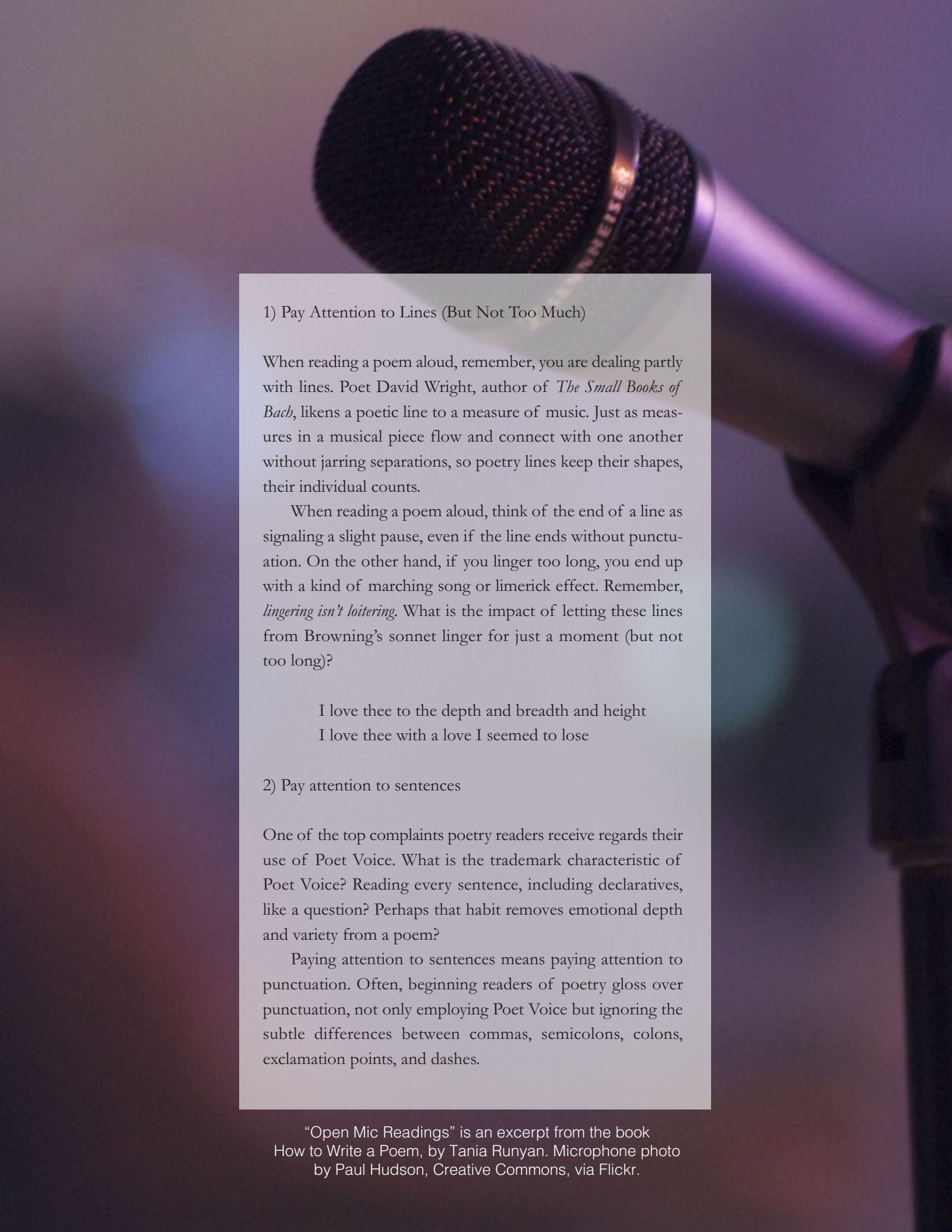
A successful open mic features a variety of writers who read for no more than five minutes each. Even literary folk can have short attention spans, and you want people to wish poets had read more, not less. When reading your own poetry, make the best of your work by keeping the following tips in mind when you read aloud. Let's practice with this classic poem:

Sonnets from the Portuguese 43

Elizabeth Barrett Browning

How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.
I love thee to the depth and breadth and height
My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight
For the ends of being and ideal grace.
I love thee to the level of every day's
Most quiet need, by sun and candle-light.
I love thee freely, as men strive for right;
I love thee purely, as they turn from praise.
I love thee with the passion put to use
In my old griefs, and with my childhood's faith.
I love thee with a love I seemed to lose
With my lost saints. I love thee with the breath,
Smiles, tears, of all my life; and, if God choose,
I shall but love thee better after death.

"Open Mic Readings" is an excerpt from the book
How to Write a Poem, by Tania Runyan. Microphone photo
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1) Pay Attention to Lines (But Not Too Much)

When reading a poem aloud, remember, you are dealing partly with lines. Poet David Wright, author of *The Small Books of Bach*, likens a poetic line to a measure of music. Just as measures in a musical piece flow and connect with one another without jarring separations, so poetry lines keep their shapes, their individual counts.

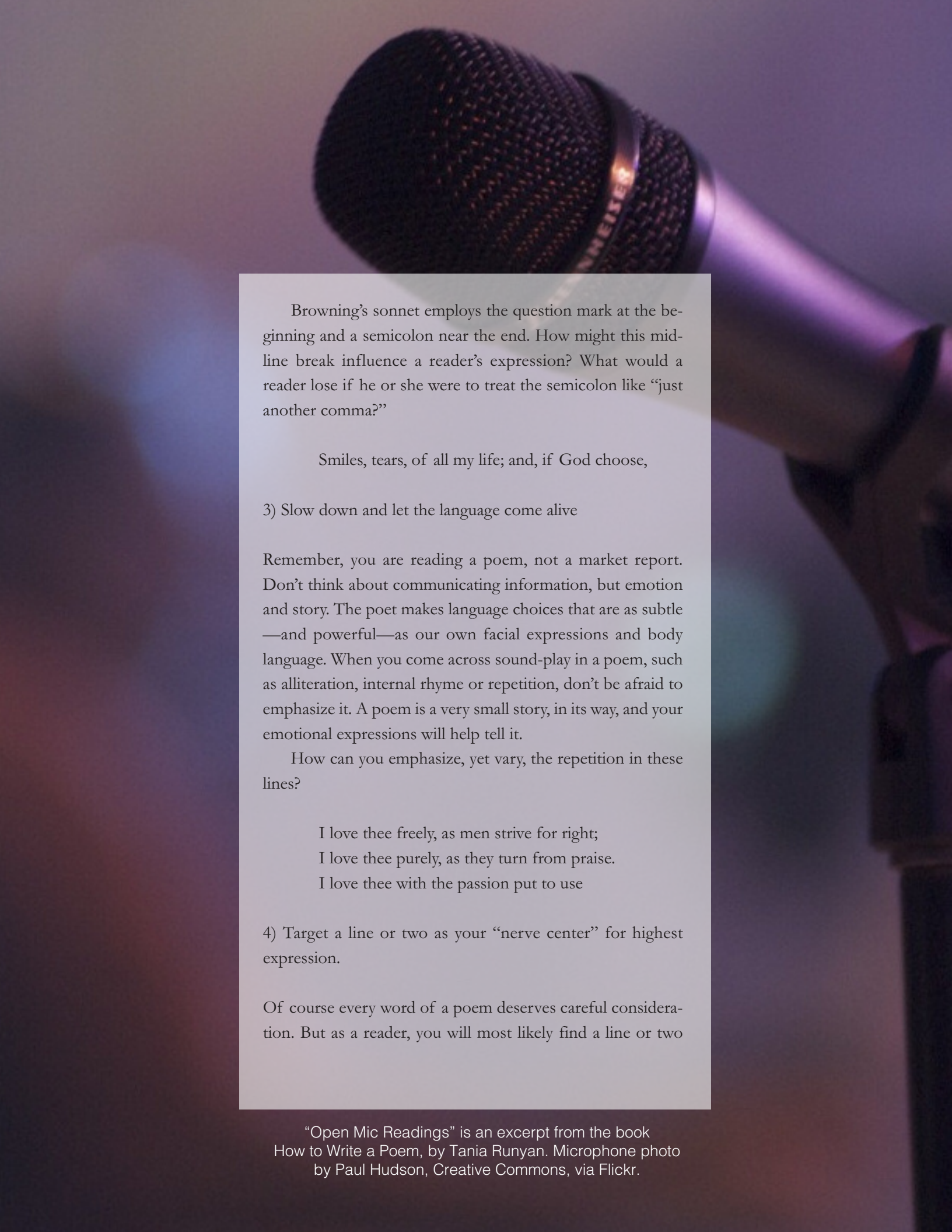
When reading a poem aloud, think of the end of a line as signaling a slight pause, even if the line ends without punctuation. On the other hand, if you linger too long, you end up with a kind of marching song or limerick effect. Remember, *lingering isn't loitering*. What is the impact of letting these lines from Browning's sonnet linger for just a moment (but not too long)?

I love thee to the depth and breadth and height
I love thee with a love I seemed to lose

2) Pay attention to sentences

One of the top complaints poetry readers receive regards their use of Poet Voice. What is the trademark characteristic of Poet Voice? Reading every sentence, including declaratives, like a question? Perhaps that habit removes emotional depth and variety from a poem?

Paying attention to sentences means paying attention to punctuation. Often, beginning readers of poetry gloss over punctuation, not only employing Poet Voice but ignoring the subtle differences between commas, semicolons, colons, exclamation points, and dashes.



Browning's sonnet employs the question mark at the beginning and a semicolon near the end. How might this mid-line break influence a reader's expression? What would a reader lose if he or she were to treat the semicolon like "just another comma?"

Smiles, tears, of all my life; and, if God choose,

3) Slow down and let the language come alive


Remember, you are reading a poem, not a market report. Don't think about communicating information, but emotion and story. The poet makes language choices that are as subtle—and powerful—as our own facial expressions and body language. When you come across sound-play in a poem, such as alliteration, internal rhyme or repetition, don't be afraid to emphasize it. A poem is a very small story, in its way, and your emotional expressions will help tell it.

How can you emphasize, yet vary, the repetition in these lines?

I love thee freely, as men strive for right;
I love thee purely, as they turn from praise.
I love thee with the passion put to use

4) Target a line or two as your "nerve center" for highest expression.

Of course every word of a poem deserves careful consideration. But as a reader, you will most likely find a line or two



that really resonate with you. Luxuriate over those lines. Slow them down; adjust the volume high or low; pause between words. Don't hold back.

Consider two of my favorites:

I love thee to the level of every day's
Most quiet need, by sun and candle-light.

I connect with these two lines because they seem to speak to a long-term, deep relationship. As one who has been married for twenty-one years (and married at twenty-one), I find a gentle, but strong, beauty here. Even without punctuation, I feel the need to focus on *thee* with a slight pause after the word and draw out *every*. I can practically whisper *sun and candle-light*, mirroring the light's peaceful flickers.

5) Be human

Remember, you are speaking to people. Even when reading to yourself alone in a room, you're sharing poetry with a person worthy of your attention. Keep good public speaking practices in mind, such as confident posture and eye contact. If you can prepare beforehand by memorizing an entire poem or at least the beginning of its lines, do so. If you are reading in the moment, still look up from time to time, and don't worry if it takes you a moment to find your place. If anything, it will help you slow down the language. Enjoy the moment; it is what the poem was written for.

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How to Write a Poem

based on the
BILLY COLLINS
poem "introduction
to poetry"

includes anthology
& prompts!

:FG field guide series