Poetry Recitation – Developing a Strategy

How do you learn a poem by heart? As with many things in life, there is no definitive way to learn a poem. The way you remember things will be different to the way other people remember things. Your memories might be full of colour, while someone else will vividly recall sounds. You might like lists while someone else prefers pictures. One thing the best memorizers agree on though is that the more pathways you make for your memory, the better your recall will be.

Learning a poem by heart should definitely not be a tedious thing. The livelier and more enjoyable you make your memorization experience, the more likely you are to remember your poem by heart.

Take your time

"There is a secret bond between slowness and memory, between speed and forgetting." (Milan Kundera)

The first thing to appreciate is that most of us are unable to simply look at a poem and upload it instantly to our memories. We are not computers and neither would we want to be. When we add a human voice to a poem we bring understanding and emotion. And that, after all, is the point of reading it out loud!

So allow yourself time. Get to know your poem, take it out for walks, learn to understand and love the words as you take them to your heart.

"But I haven't got time!" you shout. "I've got exams to revise for, essays to write, people to meet, clothes to buy."

In this case take advantage of the snippets of time in your day. Kaiti Soultana, winner of 2013's Poetry by Heart competition used her walk to and from the bus stop each day to learn two lines of the Gawain Knight poem at a time.

"I'd repeat two lines on the way to college," she says, "and the challenge was to remember them again on the way home. Then the next day I'd take the next two lines and do the same. By the end of the week I had ten lines."

Take the opportunity of time spent in queues, when walking, eating your breakfast, sitting on the bus, waiting for the lift and use them to learn your poem. Keep a paper copy of it with you at all times!

Get to know your poem

In many ways a poem is like a person. It has a shape, a personality, an emotion, a tone of voice. It is likely to have secrets and hidden layers that will reveal themselves over time. You would not expect to know and understand a person after spending just a few minutes with them. Similarly you'll get to know your poem better once you've spent quality time with it.

Get to know your poem initially by taking time to read it over. Dedicate an hour or so to hang out with your poem, learning how it is structured and what it is saying. Try some or all of the following:

- Read it aloud several times using different voices – a high pitched squeaky voice, a low deep voice, a strained, shouting voice.

- Read each line over several times and try emphasising different words each time. E.g. *My* prime of youth is but a frost of cares; My *prime* of youth is but a frost of cares; My prime of *youth* is but a frost of cares ...

- Write your poem out by hand. Make your writing as lovely as you can and display your written poem in your room. The process of handwriting is itself linked to memory and the action of putting pen to paper will improve your chances of recalling the poem later. Take a mental snapshot of your handiwork and picture it when you recite it.

- Decorate your poem. Again, you might like to write it out by hand. Draw pictures around it and make it into a piece of art. Make it into a collage or a patchwork of images. Display it somewhere you'll see it every day.

- Record yourself reading the poem or find a recording of the poem that you like. Listen to the recording repeatedly and read along with it. You could leave space between recording each line for you to repeat it aloud as you listen.

- Sing and chant your poem. Make it fit the tune of a song you know or make up your own melody. Drum it out.

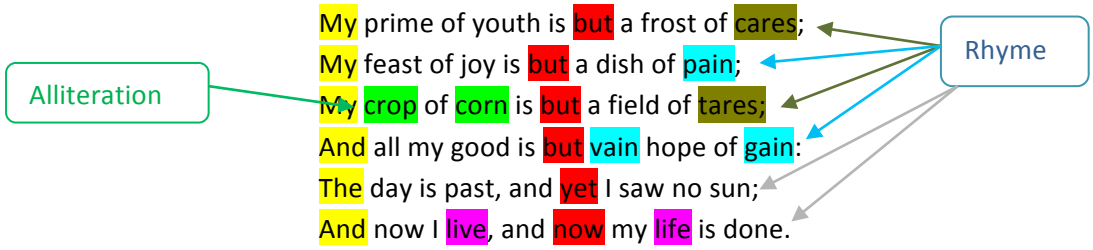
- Make up movements and gestures to go along with your poem – act it out. Turn it into a dance. Movement is a powerful memory trigger. *Remember though, you cannot use dance or movement in your competition performance.*

- Identify patterns in your poem. Take a set of highlighters to your poem and colour in any interesting patterns of rhyme or structure. Use these to help you remember the whole piece.

For example, in the first stanza of **Tichborne's elegy** the first three lines begin with the word 'My', the fourth and final line begin with 'And' and the fifth starts with 'The'. Simply being aware of this pattern can be an excellent aid to memory.

Notice also the way each line has two halves. The first four lines are separated by 'buts' and the final two lines use 'yet' and 'now'. Learn the pattern 'but, but, but, but, yet, now'.

Rhyme, alliteration, and repetition can also help you visualise the poem on the page.



- Imagine the poem is typed out on an immense white board, or imagine writing it out yourself in paints or chalk.

Understand your memory

Most of us are fortunate to have beautifully functioning memories. Even people who say 'Oh, I'm no good at remembering things' are in fact capable of remembering plenty of things on a daily basis. Look at the things you recollect each day: how to use your phone, where you live, what your name is. You might also remember things such as whether you're right or left handed, whether or not you like cheese, who your friends are (and who you're less keen on). You probably remember other things too: the classroom in your first school (maybe even the smell of it!), the time you learned to ride a bike, your most embarrassing moment.

Most people don't necessarily remember every tiny detail of every single thing they've ever done, of course. That might make life overwhelming. Instead our brains have a highly developed filter system that condenses memory to something more manageable. Figuring out how this filter system works is the key to learning how to make even more effective use of your memory. When you know how to make your memory work at full capacity, you can then teach it to remember things you want it to.

Start by taking a peek into your own personal filing cabinet/library/scattered pile of memories in your brain and pick out a couple of significant ones. Which events from your past do you remember vividly? What do you remember about them? Why do you remember them?

Chances are the things you remember most clearly are times of high emotion – the time I fell off my bike, the day my sister was born, the time me and my friend hid from our teacher in the classroom cupboard. When you think back on these times, it's likely that you'll see images in your mind, recall sounds, smells, tastes and maybe re-experience some of the emotions in your physical body. If you remember a time when you were particularly embarrassed, even years after the event, it's fairly common to blush, squirm or even feel your pulse begin to quicken. Our most intense memories take us back to a time and place as if we were there again right now.

Knowing this is very useful when it comes to creating new memories. We know that old memories use all of our senses. So if we want to store something new in our memory files, we need to draw on our senses as much as possible to create a vivid experience for our memory to store. Create plenty of paths to your memory and you'll find it easier to retrieve what's in there. By using movement, images, sound, silliness and all the other strategies listed in 'Get to know your poem' you stand an excellent chance of being able to recall your poem with ease.

Images and memory temples

Imagine your poem

Using your imagination is a powerful strategy for memorization that has been used by memorizers from the Ancient Greeks to today. With this technique you create vivid mental experiences, with full colour, sound, smell and feeling for your memory to enjoy. The more entertaining, absurd, beautiful, emotional, rude or funny you can make these imagined experiences, the more likely you are to remember them, so really go for it!

Here's an example of how this process could work, using the first two lines of Chidiock Tichborne's poem:

Tichborne's elegy

My prime of youth is but a frost of cares;
 My feast of joy is but a dish of pain;

I imagine I can see a younger version of myself. I notice that I am wearing a bright t-shirt that has a number one on the front: a prime number. Underneath the number I can read the words 'My prime of youth'. I say the words out loud 'My prime of youth' as I look at the young version of myself.

I notice that the younger me is becoming very cold and starting to shiver. I realize that there is suddenly frost everywhere and we are both shivering as icicles drip around us. I write the words 'is but a frost of cares' in the ice.

I imagine the scene vividly and recite the first line of the poem 'My prime of youth is but a frost of cares.'

Now I notice a delicious feast in front of me. I see all of my favourite foods there. I can smell the wonderful dishes and notice my mouth begin to water as I savour the enticing aromas. On the table cloth I imagine writing the words 'My feast of joy' and as I do, the food immediately crumbles to dust. The main dish that I had been eating becomes shards of glass and splinters. My mouth is cut open by the glass (I make this as vivid and gory as I can!) and I recite the line 'My feast of joy is but a dish of pain'.

By repeating this process two or three times, making the pictures, sounds, smells and words bigger, brighter and bolder, we give our memory something other than words to latch onto.

This way of creating memories is even more powerful when you do it yourself. Take the first two lines of your poem and spend time creating a powerful imagined version of them.

Make a memory temple

Think of a building you know well. Maybe it's your home now, or a house you used to live in. Perhaps it's your school, or a museum you're very familiar with. Imagine walking around the building. Visualise the main door and imagine yourself opening that door and taking a stroll through the building. Notice the rooms and whether anyone is in them in your imagined version of the place.

With the memory temple technique, you use the building as a scaffold on which to hang your lines of poetry. **Tichborne's elegy** is three stanzas long, so use one room of your memory temple for each stanza. Read over the poem before you begin and decide whether there are any lines or images that suit particular rooms in your memory temple.

For example, if I use my childhood home as my memory temple, I will use the dining room for the first stanza because of the reference to a feast. I'll set the second stanza in the lounge because it refers to a tale that 'was not told' and we had a full bookshelf in there. The third stanza can go in the kitchen because of the 'full glass' line. Then I use the imagining process described in the previous section and attach it to the rooms of my memory temple like this:

The version of my younger self, wearing the number 1 t-shirt will now be in the corner of the dining room, and the whole of that part of the room will become frosty. 'My prime of youth is but a frost of cares'.

I imagine moving to the dining table for the feast with its dish of glass and splinters 'My feast of joy is but a dish of pain'.

I then imagine that my mouth magically heals as I push away from the table and move to the window. Through it I see a vibrant crop of corn. I notice how it moves in the sunlight. I see a giant hand reach in and tear it all up (this is of course, not the literal meaning of tares, but homophones can be helpful when memorising!) I see the golden crop replaced with grass. This is the third line 'My crop of corn is but a field of tares.'

For the next line 'And all my good is but vain hope of gain' I move to the left hand corner of the room and imagine a huge stack of certificates and trophies on a cabinet. This is 'And all my good'. In this part of my dining room there is a mirror, so I imagine looking into it and seeing myself acting vain, maybe doing my hair, admiring my reflection saying 'is but vain hope of gain.'

I imagine the room becoming suddenly very dark, and the moon shining in through the window. A clock strikes midnight. 'The day is past, and yet I saw no sun.' Finally I imagine skipping towards the doorway and singing 'And now I live' and then I imagine collapsing in a melodramatic death in the doorway with 'and now my life is done.'

Walk through your memory temple over and over, making it bigger, brighter, tastier, louder until it feels real. Then imagine walking to the next room ready for the next verse.

Bring it all together

And finally, at every opportunity, recite your poem out loud. Perform it to your family, your friends, your bus driver, your pet goldfish – anyone who is willing to listen. The more you practice reciting out loud, the easier you will find it, not only to memorise the poem, but also to present it in performance at your competition.

Have fun!

NB You can read a full version of **Tichborne's elegy**, the poem used in this document, on the **Poetry By Heart** website.