

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.

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:

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.'

POETRY BY HEART

Recitation Competition

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.