

Memorizing poems

Objectives

- To learn about a variety of ways of learning a poem by heart
- To experiment with some of them!

Introduction

There is no definitive way to learn a poem by heart. In this section, Poetry By Heart Regional Development Coordinator, Alison Powell, outlines some tips and activities to help students find their own best ways of memorizing a poem.

Take your time

Most of us are unable to simply look at a poem and upload it instantly to our memories. So allow yourself time to get to know your poem: take it out for walks, learn to understand the words and love them. Take the time spent in queues, when walking, eating breakfast, sitting on the bus, waiting for the lift, and use them to learn your poem. Keep a copy of it with you at all times. Get to know your poem by taking time to read it.

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 activities:

- Read it aloud several times using different voices – a high pitched squeaky voice; a low deep voice; a strained voice.
- Read each line several times and try emphasising different words each time.
- Write your poem out by hand, decorate it and display it in your room - then picture it when you recite it.
- Record yourself reading the poem or find a recording of the poem that you like. Play it on a loop and read along with it.
- Highlight any interesting patterns of sound or words. Use these to help you remember the structure and shape of the poem.
- Make up movements and gestures to help you memorize your poem - just remember you can't use these in your competition performance!

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.

POETRY BY HEART

Recitation competition

The more entertaining, absurd, beautiful, emotional, unexpected 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 could work, using the first two lines of poet Chidiack 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 a younger version of myself. I notice that I am wearing a bright t-shirt that has a number one on the front. Underneath the number I can read the words "My prime of youth". I say the words out loud 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 I 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 favourite foods there. I can smell the wonderful dishes and notice my mouth begin to water as I savour the enticing aromas. On the tablecloth I imagine writing the words "My feast of joy" and as I do, 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. Take the first two lines of your poem and spend time creating a powerful imagined version of them.

The Memory Temple

The Memory Temple is an ancient technique for memorization in which you associate the things you want to remember with a sequence of images located in a familiar building, such as your house. To recall the information, you mentally walk through the building, see the images and recall what is associated with them.

Pick a poem you want to learn and then visualize a favourite place and its rooms. Do any rooms or corners provide a starting place? Take Shelley's 'Ozymandias' as an example: perhaps there is an antique map hanging in the hall or a postcard or souvenir from someone's travels? Start there, visualise the image and learn the line. Then, notice the big pair of shoes by the door and fix them to the "trunkless legs of stone" line, and so on.

The quirkier the connections, the more likely they might be to stick in the mind. Make sure the images connect together in a journey around the building, so that there is a movement that will carry the memory from beginning to end of the poem.