

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 Sultana, 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!