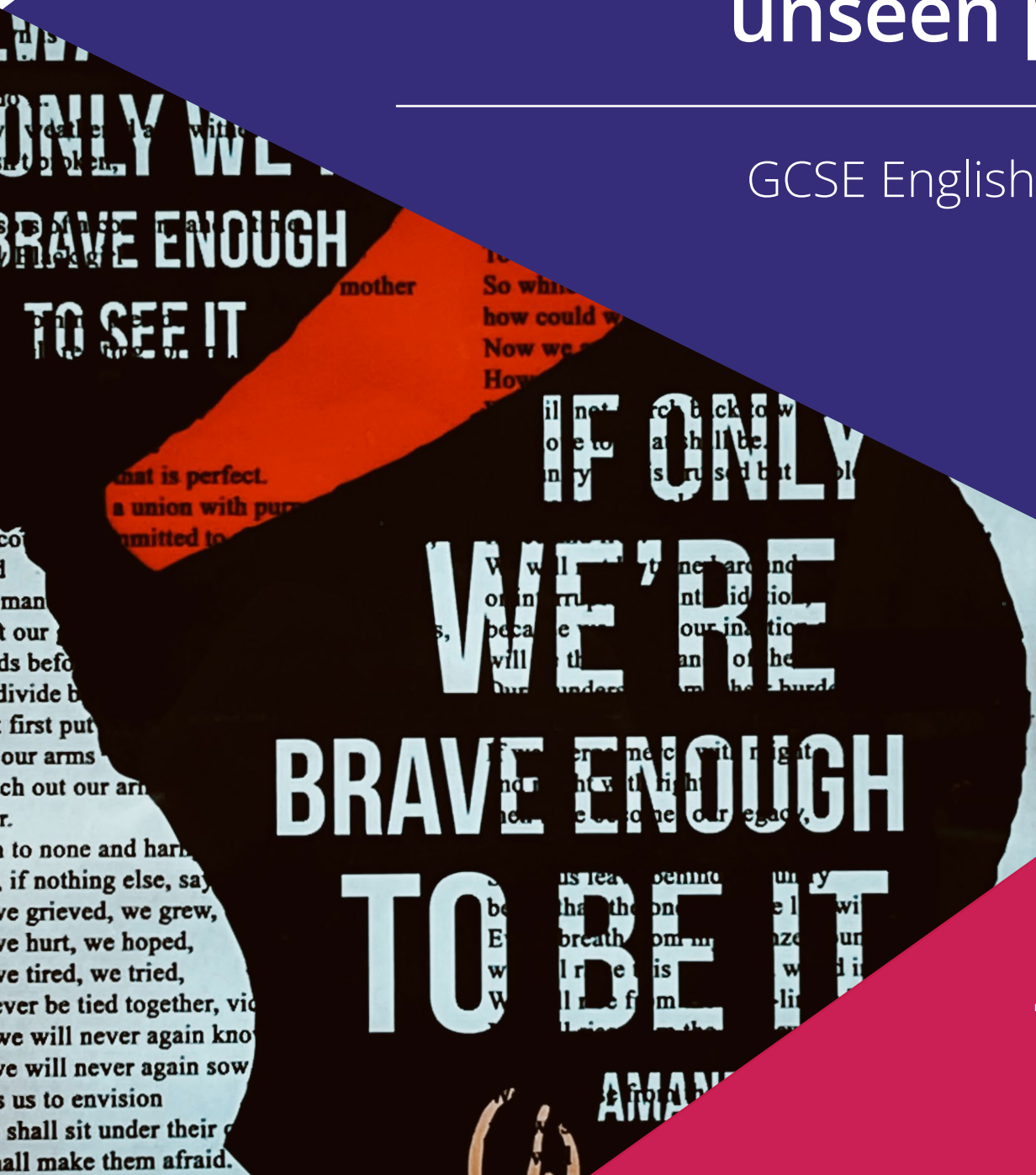
AQA
Questions matter

Building skills and confidence with unseen poetry

GCSE English Literature



Teaching guide

Contents

You can use the title links to jump directly to the different sections of this teaching guide.

Introduction

GCSE English Literature assesses a student's personal and critical response to a text and their consideration of the ways in which the writer has presented their ideas. In addition, aspects of the literature exam assesses the ability to make comparisons and links across texts; and the relevance of contextual factors.

This guide is designed to support your teaching of poetry, specifically in preparation for the unseen poetry part of the exam. However, these activities and strategies can also be adapted for teaching the poetry anthology and, potentially, other texts studied throughout the course.

Before going any further, it is worth being reminded of the **Statement of importance** which can be found at the front of every mark scheme and is provided for you here (see appendix 1). The Statement of importance defines the purpose of the literature qualification; it describes and defines what we believe is vital about the study of literary texts at GCSE level – the inter-relationship between reader and writer. The balance of Assessment Objectives and mark schemes are an extension of this statement.

Using the Teaching guide

The activities and approaches suggested in this guide are designed to provide opportunities for students to develop a skillset that will enable them to read and respond to unseen poetry. The activities will reference some of the poems and poets in the accompanying unseen poetry collection; you are also free to use the same activities with poems of your choosing. Knowing teachers welcome the opportunity to select their own texts, at the end of this resource, we signpost links to websites worth exploring to find further teaching resources or poems (see appendix 3).

Each section of suggested activities and strategies looks at a particular skillset or theme aiming to develop students' knowledge of how to read, explore and respond to a poem. You don't necessarily need to follow these in the sequence provided, nor are the activities and strategies either exhaustive or to be treated as prescriptive. Taken holistically, the overall aim is: to build confidence in approaching unseen poetry; to support progression in AO1 and AO2; and to develop the skill of comparison.

Collection to support teaching unseen poetry

We have curated a small selection of poems to use with the teaching activities and strategies in this guide. Building learning towards the unseen poetry part of the exam is an opportunity for teachers to engage students with a diverse range of writers, styles and ideas. We encourage you to bolster this collection with poems you enjoy teaching or make connections with the AQA poetry anthologies, past and present.

The poems selected include some old favourites (such as Christina Rossetti and Thomas Hardy) as well as fresh, contemporary voices (for example Nikita Gill and Kayo Chingonyi). They also cover a range of universal themes from identity, relationships and exploring human nature, to love, loss and conflict.

'A Poison Tree' by William Blake (1789)

I was angry with my friend;
I told my wrath, my wrath did end.
I was angry with my foe:
I told it not, my wrath did grow.

And I waterd it in fears,
Night & morning with my tears:
And I sunned it with smiles,
And with soft deceitful wiles.

And it grew both day and night.
Till it bore an apple bright.
And my foe beheld it shine,
And he knew that it was mine.

And into my garden stole,
When the night had veild the pole;
In the morning glad I see;
My foe outstretched beneath the tree.

You can listen to a reading of this poem courtesy of The Poetry Station.
Read by Dannie Abse and illustrated with paintings by children at Coleridge Primary School, North London.

‘Grief’ by Kayo Chingonyi (2017)

What became of the boy who called himself Grief?
The boy who, the story ran, harboured a gun
through the back-roads and alleyways of his teens
the boy who turned up as a footnote the night
we played *my ends are rougher than your ends*
in a flat overlooking London Road —frontline
of a post-code war from which we were
so far removed we chuckled when someone said
kebabs from the shop that wore a fresh batch
of memorial flowers were *to die for*.
Grief was grit to lend the fable texture.
We never knew the name his mum called him,
or what reduced him to plying the night trade
so white kids could say they *bun high grade**.
He is a boy caught between commas
in a news reports about youth crime, an image
fixed in place by someone else’s language.

*bun high grade** - Jamaican slang for smoking strong cannabis

You can listen to Kayo Chingonyi talking about the influence of music on poetry on YouTube.
You can also visit his website versopolis-poetry.com.

‘Poem Resisting Arrest’ by Kyle Dargan (2018)

This poem is guilty. It assumed it retained
the right to ask its question after the page

came up flush against its face. The purpose
this poem serves is obvious, even to this poem,

and that cannot stop the pen or the fist
choking it. How the page tastes at times–unsalted

powerlessness in this poem's mouth, a blend
of that and what it has inhaled of the news. It spits

blood–inking. It is its own doing and undoing.
This poem is trying to hold itself together. It has

the right to remain either bruised or silent,
but it is a poem, so it hears *you'd be safer*

if you stopped acting like a poem, stopped resisting.
Where is the daylight (this poem asks and is

thus crushed) between existence and resistance,
between the now-bloodied page and the poem?

Another poem will record the arrest of this poem,
decide what to excerpt. That poem will fail–

it won't find the right metaphor for the pain
of having to lift epigraphs from the closing

words of poems that were accused of resisting.
That poem is numb. This poem is becoming

numb, already losing feeling in its cuffed phrasing.
No one will remember the nothing of which

this poem was accused–just that it was another
poem that bled. This poem never expected to be

this poem, yet it must be–for you who will not
acknowledge the question. This poem knew

it was dangerous to ask *why*?

‘Poem Resisting Arrest’ by Kyle Dargan, in *Anagnorisis* (TriQuarterly Books, 2018).

You can listen to Kyle Dargan reading his poem on YouTube.

‘The Truth about Monsters’ by Nikita Gill (2017)

The truth is this,
every monster
you have met
or will ever meet,
was once a human being
with a soul
that was as soft
and light
as silk.

Someone stole
that silk from their soul
and turned them
into this

So when you see
a monster next,
always remember this.
Do not fear
the thing before you.
Fear the thing
that created it
instead.

‘The Voice’ by Thomas Hardy (1912)

Woman much missed, how you call to me, call to me,
Saying that now you are not as you were
When you had changed from the one who was all to me,
But as at first, when our day was fair.

Can it be you that I hear? Let me view you, then,
Standing as when I drew near to the town
Where you would wait for me: yes, as I knew you then,
Even to the original air-blue gown!

Or is it only the breeze in its listlessness
Traveling across the wet mead to me here,
You being ever dissolved to wan wistlessness,
Heard no more again far or near?

Thus I; faltering forward,
Leaves around me falling,
Wind oozing thin through the thorn from norward,
And the woman calling.

A recording of this poem, read by Anthony Thwaite, is available on The Poetry Archive website.

‘In My Country’ by Jackie Kay (1993)

walking by the waters
down where an honest river
shakes hands with the sea,
a woman passed round me
in a slow, watchful circle,
as if I were a superstition;

or the worst dregs of her imagination,
so when she finally spoke
her words spliced into bars
of an old wheel. A segment of air.
Where do you come from?
"Here", I said, "Here. These parts.”

Jackie Kay describes this as a poem about being black and Scottish.
A recording of this poem, read by Jackie Kay, is available on The Poetry Archive website.

‘Hadrian’s Wall’ by Daljit Nagra (2016)

Around the old blown names
Birdoswald, Cawfields or Vindolanda,
each fortress and straight line of stone
partition was built by a zealous emperor
to keep out the barbarous.

I’ve come to this wall crowning England,
this symbol of divided man,
to honour the lineage of our tall ideals;
to ask, the more stacked, the more shielded
a haven, the cleaner the blood?

Where will our walls finally end? In
the gigabytes of our biometric online
lives, in our passports? To keep us
from trespass, will our walls be raised
watchful as the Great Firewall of China?

‘Hadrian’s Wall’ by Daljit Nagra, Faber and Faber Ltd.

‘Anthem for Doomed Youth’ by Wilfred Owen (1920)

What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?
Only the monstrous anger of the guns.
Only the stuttering rifles’ rapid rattle
Can patter out their hasty orisons.
No mockeries now for them; no prayers nor bells,
Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs, —
The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells;
And bugles calling for them from sad shires.
What candles may be held to speed them all?
Not in the hands of boys, but in their eyes
Shall shine the holy glimmers of goodbyes.
The pallor of girls’ brows shall be their pall;
Their flowers the tenderness of patient minds,
And each slow dusk a drawing down of blinds.

A recording of this poem, read by Andrew Motion, is available on The Poetry Archive website.

‘A Birthday’ by Christina Rossetti (1862)

My heart is like a singing bird
Whose nest is in a watered shoot;
My heart is like an apple-tree
Whose boughs are bent with thickset fruit;
My heart is like a rainbow shell
That paddles in a halcyon sea;
My heart is gladder than all these
Because my love is come to me.

Raise me a dais of silk and down;
Hang it with vair and purple dyes;
Carve it in doves and pomegranates,
And peacocks with a hundred eyes;
Work it in gold and silver grapes,
In leaves and silver fleurs-de-lys;
Because the birthday of my life
Is come, my love is come to me.

A recording of this poem, read by James Earl Jones, is available on The Poetry Archive website.

‘Mother to Son’ by Langston Hughes (1922)

Well, son, I’ll tell you:
Life for me ain’t been no crystal stair.
It’s had tacks in it,
And splinters,
And boards torn up,
And places with no carpet on the floor—
Bare.
But all the time
I’se been a-climbin’ on,
And reachin’ landin’s,
And turnin’ corners,
And sometimes goin’ in the dark
Where there ain’t been no light.
So boy, don’t you turn back.
Don’t you set down on the steps
’Cause you finds it’s kinder hard.
Don’t you fall now—
For I’se still goin’, honey,
I’se still climbin’,
And life for me ain’t been no crystal stair.

Section 1: Approaches to reading poems

Poems are distilled and concentrated expressions of meaning. Often that meaning is not unlocked on a first reading. Students need to be able to read, pause, reflect and re-read poems to uncover their meanings.

The following activities offer opportunities to framework a structured exploration and discussion of a text. They are designed to develop an active reading process for poetry (or indeed for reading more generally). It is through this reflective reading strategy (that has to be built over time) that students are supported to develop a personal response to a text – exactly what is needed for the unseen poetry question.

Activity 1: Reading boxes

Resources required

- Handout 1: Reading boxes
- Suggested poem from the collection: 'Poem Resisting Arrest' by Kyle Dargan

The reading boxes template is a useful framework to support a layered reading of a poem. This template (see appendix Handout 1) can be photocopied or students can simply draw three boxes (one inside another) and, starting in the middle, label each box '**First**', '**Second**', '**Third**'. The intention is that by making explicit how repeated readings can be used to explore and analyse a poem, students can further develop skills and confidence with reading the unseen poem(s) prior to writing their response.

How to use the reading boxes grid

In the appendix (Handout 1) you will find suggested questions which could be used to guide students though this layered reading approach. Feel free to add to or adapt for your teaching groups accordingly.

1. **First reading**: This is all about initial impressions. Ask students to read the title, scan over the poem on the page and take in its shape and the white spaces; then read the poem aloud (or students read the poem in their heads). In the central box, capture initial reactions, likes/dislikes, including notes on what the poem is *literally* about. There are no right or wrong responses, it's simply what they are thinking after a first read.
2. **Second reading**: This is about looking closer and interrogating what has been read. Read the poem for a second time. This second read is about noticing and questioning. Encourage students to make further notes on this in the second box. Useful questions to ask students might be: *What questions do you have or what is puzzling you? What do you notice as you read? What patterns or repeats do you notice? (in words/phrases/images/rhyme and rhythm)*

3. **Third reading**: Exploring meaning. After a third reading of the poem, ask students to consider what they think the poet is saying and why the poem was written. Students jot these thoughts down in the outer box. Useful questions to ask: *What is the message of the poem? What does the poem make you think or see something differently? How does the text relate to yourself, other texts you have read or the world/big ideas?*

The reading boxes approach helps to structure a reading process until students are familiar with engaging with an unseen text confidently and without a scaffold.

Activity 2: Flash readings

Resources required

- Interactive whiteboard
- 'Anthem For Doomed Youth' by Wilfred Owen

This is a useful strategy to develop the skill of noticing things in a text thereby reducing the anxiety of needing to labour through the poem to understand all of it. This activity also encourages students to move beyond a linear read of a poem.

This activity is structured by showing the poem on the whiteboard in 10 to 15 second bursts; during each showing students jot down what is noticed each time.

The teacher can either direct students to aspects of the poem to focus on eg the shape of the poem, the title, the opening and ending; or simply leave students to notice aspects of the poem for themselves.

- **First burst** – ask students to look at the shape of the poem and the title. Jot down what they notice and think.
- **Second burst** – consider the opening and ending of the poem; what do they think?
- **Third burst** – scan the poem, what words/phrases/patterns do they notice?

During or after this process, students can share and discuss what was noticed, why they noticed it and what they think it means.

After this flash reading of a poem, move on to read the poem as a whole.

This activity could be augmented by then completing a simple reading grid (see below). Draw a grid and ask students to make notes on what they **like/dislike/questions and puzzles/patterns** (this simple grid - based on an approach pioneered by Aidan Chambers - encourages students to think about a poem, have an opinion and start to justify it in a structured way). This could be completed individually by students and/or collectively with the teacher pooling students' ideas into a grid on the board. This grid can also be used by itself as a way-in to starting to respond to and interrogate a poem.

Like: Simply note down what you like about the text and why.	**Dislike**: Simply note what you dislike about the text and why.
Puzzles: What questions do the students have; what don't they understand; what causes them to puzzle? This also helps to normalise the idea that you don't have to understand everything and that it's okay to have questions or puzzles.	**Patterns**: Scan the text and look for repeated words, linked words/phrases/images, any connections that the students can make – it's simply 'what patterns can you see'?

Activity 3: Metacognition and modelling the reading process

Resources required

- Interactive whiteboard/visualiser.

The process of reading comprehension is largely unseen. During the reading of a text, good readers do many things: they monitor their own thinking; ask questions and generalise; reflect and think critically about what they have read; and link the text they are reading to other texts or experiences. By the teacher verbalising the *reading process* out loud (which is not the same as reading out loud) students can be shown, quite simply, *how* to read and make meanings. In this way students can be supported with developing their own reading skills.

To do this, grab the visualiser or show on the whiteboard how you approach the reading of an unseen poem, articulating your thoughts, questions and struggles to work meaning out aloud. If you are feeling especially bold, don't rehearse this in advance and begin by randomly selecting a poem from an online collection (some suggested websites can be found at the end of this resource). Remember, the emphasis here is to **show how to work meanings out**, not to simply tell what a poem means.

You could also model the 'reading boxes' approach (Activity 1) talking aloud the process of first, second and third reading to show students how you arrived at an understanding of the poem.

Activity 4: Active reading strategies

Suggested poems to use

- 'Grief' by Kayo Chingonyi (if you want to, after this activity, pair this poem with 'The Truth About Monsters' by Nikita Gill and try some of the activities from the section 'comparing/connecting poems').
- 'In My Country' by Jackie Kay (this poem could be paired with 'Hadrian's Wall' by Daljit Nagra, exploring the experience of the outsider and society).

The following reading strategies invite students to start to look more closely at how a poem has been put together. Students might start to look more deeply into a poem by identifying and thinking about interesting instances of language or structural features when reading a poem.

One strategy is for the teacher to read the poem repeatedly, instructing students to look for and highlight different aspects of the poem during each repeat reading. You could ask students to look for some of the following:

- consider the meaning(s) of the title
- think about first and last lines
- pick out three vivid/'stand out' words/phrases
- highlight emotive words
- find examples of imagery
- highlight verbs
- circle punctuation
- highlight structural features
- highlight alliteration, assonance, onomatopoeia.

At this stage, it's very much about noticing things and considering **why** it stands out. Perhaps students will start to see patterns emerging, or make connections between a phrase and use of alliteration (for example) and start to see how language and structure are working together to make meanings.

Take it further

The poem 'Grief' by Kayo Chingonyi can also be approached by blocking out the noun 'poem' throughout the text, and asking students to consider and justify what noun they would use. Once the teacher reveals the poet used the word 'poem', the discussion to follow can explore why the author did this.

Section 2: Unlocking meanings

It's important for students to develop an understanding of the difference between the surface reading of poem and the inferential reading – essentially, the distinction between what the poem says and what the poem means. The teaching of reading comprehension is complex, and no one strategy is going to provide a way into a text that enables students to always unlock the meaning of a poem.

We can support students in developing essential skills for unlocking what a poem means if we show how to read and share the 'struggle' of exploring a poem, demonstrating how understanding meaning is **worked at** rather than just **known**. We do this by offering strategies to support, and make explicit, how to piece together the reading jigsaw.

Activity 1: Exploring titles 1

Resources required

- Interactive whiteboard.
- Handout 2: TATE gallery pictures (see appendix). We've provided a couple but you can source your own images via the TATE gallery website. *The Scream* (Munch) and *Weeping Woman* (Picasso) would also work well.

At times, titles can get overlooked and neglected and yet they are often a key to understanding the poem's meaning or reflecting on the content. The title can even become a source of exploration in itself. Teaching students to reflect on the title can be a useful skill in the toolbox of understanding poems.

Using abstract pictures/paintings is an effective way to get students to open up exploring the meanings/messages of a text and supporting their response with evidence. Practising this skill using an image could be less daunting for students. Your students might be encouraged to be more open and forthcoming with their interpretations because they're engaging with a visual stimulus, rather than words.

1. You can begin by showing students a selection of abstract or thought-provoking images. Ask students to scan over them. What might they be saying to you? Which do you prefer? Choose one.
2. Then direct students to look at your chosen picture – jot down how the picture is organised on the page. What do you notice first? Where does your gaze go next, and where might it linger? How is colour used? Why are those colours used in that way? What contrasts or patterns can you see? What do you like/dislike about the picture? What might the picture mean? What makes you think that? Ask students to suggest a title for the picture.

3. Next, if you have them, share the titles of the images. Students can compare the artist's title to their own. How does the title help to frame/anchor what the picture could be about? How do the titles help to reflect upon or shape/alter your initial response?

Activity 2: Exploring titles 2

Resources required

- Interactive whiteboard.
- Any three poems, presented without their titles.
- Suggestions to use from this collection are:
  - 'In My Country' – Jackie Kay
  - 'The Voice' – Thomas Hardy
  - 'A Poison Tree' – William Blake

Being responsive to why a title is important is an important aspect of learning about poetry. This activity can work in a number of ways.

- You could share the three poems with their titles removed and display the three titles on the board. Ask students to read the poems and match the title to the poem, giving reasons for their thinking.

Or

- You might prefer to explore the titles on their own without revealing the poem. Ask students to make predictions about what poem will be about simply from the title.

Or

- Read the poems with the titles removed. Ask students to generate a title for each poem after reading and explain their choice of title.

Activity 3: Unlocking implied meanings

Resources required

- Copies of 'A Poison Tree' by William Blake.
- Image of a tree.

1. Show an image of a tree. Ask pupils what they can see – share descriptions of literally what the tree looks like. Then ask what might a tree represent or be a metaphor for (eg life/growth, survival, power etc.) Encourage students to give a reason for their ideas, but any idea is valid.
2. Read 'A Poison Tree' by William Blake. Ask students to quickly write down a summary of the literal, surface content of the poem – 'this poem is about a man who plants a tree…' (Students should hopefully recognise that this is not what the poem is 'about'.)
3. Ask students to imagine they are the speaker of the poem. Working in pairs, either write down or explain to each other the story of the poem. Focus on the feelings and the overall message of the poem. What do they think the point being made might be?
4. What might happen if you dwell on a negative emotion rather than dealing with it? Discuss this idea with the class. Students could be asked to think of as many synonyms for 'anger' as they can, in order to deepen their exploration of the ideas being expressed. They could simply note 'anger' in the middle of a page and note down as many synonyms around it (note – having a vocabulary for discussing the intent and tone of a poem is important, so taking opportunities to explore the nuances of different words for emotions is a useful strategy to repeat at other times when teaching).
5. 'A Poison Tree' is from Songs of Experience, a collection which tends to focus on ideas about humanity after the fall of man. Which of the seven deadly sins might Blake be using 'A Poison Tree' to explore? Students might want to also read 'London' which is also from the same collection.
6. Go back to their ideas about a tree. Why might Blake have used the image of a tree to develop his ideas about anger?

If you want to pair this poem with a second poem, try 'The Truth About Monsters' by Nikita Gill and compare the poet's portrayal of negative emotions.

Activity 4: Exploring images and meanings

Resources required

- Image of a rose.
- 'A Birthday' – Christina Rosetti.
- 'The Rose That Grew Out of Concrete' – Tupac Shakur (due to third-party copyright restrictions, we're unable to reproduce the poem in this booklet, but it can be easily found on the internet).

1. Show an image of a rose growing out of concrete (a search engine will generate several images that can be shown in the classroom). Ask students what they can see. Then ask students what this image could mean and share ideas. Why is a rose growing out of concrete surprising and positive as an image? (as a general point, using visuals as a way in to exploring imagery can make understanding imagery more accessible for students).
2. Explain how imagery is not only visual but can be used figuratively. Ask students to think about another image: 'watered shoot'. How much can they say about this image? What happens to a shoot when it is watered? Why does a shoot need water? What does watering a shoot suggest about the person doing the watering?
3. Give students a copy of 'A Birthday' by Christina Rossetti and ask them to highlight all the positive images. What connects these images? Aim to guide students towards the idea that the majority of the images focus on the idea of nature/growth.
4. Ask students to look at the first and last line of the poem; together, these summarise the overall point being made. Working either on their own or in pairs, write for five minutes about the image 'watered shoot', aiming to link it to the overall meaning of the poem.
5. Read 'A Birthday' and the 'Rose That Grew Out of Concrete'. Ask students to highlight the positive words/phrases in both. Choose one word or phrase from each poem that sums up the positivity in the poem. Place these side by side on a blank page. Draw a circle around each (see the Venn diagram in section 6 of this guide). Begin by annotating both phrases separately. Then, in the middle of the Venn diagram, note where there are similarities between both images. Ask students to write a paragraph comparing the two quotes (Note: This process may need to be modelled in advance by the teacher; some students may need a writing frame or useful phrases to help structure their writing – the modelled paragraph may provide this as well).
6. Learning plenary: students write a sentence explaining what they have learned from this lesson. They may consider:
   - why poets might choose to use imagery in their poems
   - how images help the reader to understand ideas in the poem.

Take it further

Creative writing opportunity

Ask students to write similes which suggest strong love/joyful feelings, beginning with 'My heart is like…' Share these and invite students to develop their reasons for choosing this image.

Taking extended metaphors further

Extended or sustained metaphors are stretched throughout a text to help deepen the exploration of an issue or idea. We find examples of extended metaphors in many texts. Shakespeare, for example, uses this literary device many times (eg Romeo comparing Juliet with the sun in Act 2 Scene 2, or Jaques' famous monologue 'All The World's a Stage' from *As You Like It*, Act 2 Scene 7); Emily Dickinson compares hope with a tiny bird in 'Hope is the Thing With Feathers'; you could explore 'A Poison Tree' by William Blake; or more modern examples such as 'The Rose That Grew From Concrete' by Tupac Shakur and (from the AQA poetry anthology) 'Mother Any Distance' by Simon Armitage.

Extended metaphors are not confined to poetry and plenty of examples can be found in many different forms of writing, from articles and famous speeches, to hip-hop, rap and pop songs. Teaching students how an extended metaphor works, sharing a wide range of examples and then encouraging students to experiment with using extended metaphors in their own writing (poetry, prose and non-fiction writing), will enhance a student's understanding of this literary device.

For example, you could set students the task of describing a relationship using an extended metaphor in their own writing.

Section 3: Words, words, words

Any poem is a treasure trove of vocabulary affording an opportunity to expand a student's vocabulary through exposure to a rich lexicon and inviting an exploration of word choice. Coleridge famously said 'prose is words in their best order, whilst poetry is the best words in the best order'. Exploring a writer's choice of words, and how a poem's effects are communicated through them, is a responsive skill to foster in students.

Best words

We could extend Coleridge's adage here, in that one of the key skills for students is in selecting the **best** words for analysis and extrapolating meanings from those words that are relevant to the wider meaning of the poem.

Most students, including those operating at the lower end of the mark scheme, know to comment on the meanings of particular words, and their connotations. However, where some students go wrong is doing this in a disconnected way (this is especially common when students comment on the significance of colour eg 'white symbolises purity' etc). Students can develop this skill by applying a mental filter: firstly generating *all* possible meanings attached to a word and then considering which of those actually relate to the poem as a whole, and those which can be discarded. Again, this is another 'invisible' process which is worth explicitly modelling for the benefit of students who are prone to falling into this trap.

One way you can practise this skill with students is with a poem you are studying (whether it is unseen or one from the poetry anthology). After an initial read of the poem, offer students the main point/message/ meaning of the poem – the big idea. Then task them with selecting one word/phrase/line that best sums up that big idea. Students can volunteer their suggestions and as a class evaluate their selections, ensuring students can verbally articulate why they chose particular words/phrases. It is the filtering down of thinking in relation to words and ideas that is the skill to be acquired.

Many of the activities in most sections develop students' responsiveness to word choices. Other activities focus on the imagery or visual aspect of words, patterns noticed or the connotations or associations of the words themselves.

Reading aloud – hearing the words

Asking students to read poetry aloud and/or listen to poetry read aloud provides opportunities to explore the effects and impact of the sounds of words on the reader (and through this, an opportunity to highlight the terminology to talk about these effects eg alliteration, assonance, consonance, onomatopoeia, rhyme, sibilance).

The sound effects in poems can also be created through punctuation eg end stopped lines, enjambment, fragments and phrases etc. Such sound effects will have a link to meaning and encouraging pupils to think of *what, how* and *why* in relation to exploring the effects of writer's choices is critical.

Over time and with practice, students will develop an 'inner-ear' – ability to hear the poem in their heads as they read in silence, which is one of the constraints of an exam.

From the poetry collection, you could select any poem to use, as all will make use of sound. The following poems from the collection give particular opportunities for teaching about sound:

- ‘Anthem for Doomed Youth’ by Wilfred Owen.
- ‘The Voice’ by Thomas Hardy.

Section 4: Exploring structure and patterns

Structure is about the small and big building blocks of the poem – how it's put together and the impact this has on the reader to make meaning. Anything in a poem is a deliberate choice by the poet.

Getting students to consider what they notice about the way a poem has been put together and how the poem is structured is part of being able to explore what is said, how it is written and what it might mean.

Activity 1: Titles, beginnings and endings

Resources required:

A poem of your choice. From the collection, the following poems work well:

'A Poison Tree' by William Blake
First line: 'I was angry with my friend'.
Final line: 'My foe outstretched beneath the tree'.

'Anthem for Doomed Youth' by Wilfred Owen
First line: 'What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?'
Final line: 'And each slow dusk a drawing down of blinds'.

'The Rose that Grew from Concrete' by Tupac Shakur
First line: 'Did you hear about the rose that grew?'
Final line: 'when no one else ever cared'.

1. Share the title only and ask students what they predict the poem may be about.

2. Then share the opening line and the final line. Ask students to reflect on i) how these lines could link to the title; ii) how the opening and the ending lines link to each other and iii) what may have taken place in the space between these lines (alternatively, you could do this reverse – consider the lines first and then bring in the title to see whether their initial impression changes).

3. Finally, read the poem in full and explore how the title, opening and ending help to frame and structure the content of the poem. What other aspects of structure do students 'notice' as they read the poem?

Activity 2: Exploring structural choices

Resources required

- Copy of the poem 'The Truth About Monsters' by Nikita Gill.
- Prose versions of the poem (these can be found below within this activity).

Display the word 'structure' on the board. Ask for examples of choices a poet makes in terms of 'structure'. Students could be asked to go through any collection of poems studied already (eg their poetry anthology) to make a quick list of as many structural elements and features that they have noticed already as important in a poem (if needed, during the activity the teacher can prompt aspects of structure that may be overlooked). This list might include:

- beginnings/endings
- repetition
- use of white space
- pace created by punctuation
- enjambment
- caesura
- rhythm.

Next, share the prose version of the poem 'The Truth About Monsters' by Nikita Gill. Two alternatives for managing this are given below (if your students have already met this poem, a different poem could be written in continuous prose for the purpose of this exercise). Leave students to read the prose version of the poem themselves (the teacher reading aloud could draw attention to how the poem is structured).

Ask students to read the prose version of 'The Truth About Monsters' and to complete the activities that follow:

A. Prose version (with punctuation and capitalisation). Ask students to decide how many verses and where the line breaks are and to give a rationale for this.

The truth is this, every monster you have met or will ever meet, was once a human being with a soul that was as soft and light as silk. Someone stole that silk from their soul and turned them into this. So when you see a monster next, always remember this. Do not fear the thing before you. Fear the thing that created it instead.

Or

B. Prose version without punctuation and capitalisation. Students would be asked to decide:

- what punctuation (and the accompanying capitalisation) where, and the rationale for using that punctuation
- how many verses and the rationale for this
- where the line breaks are and the rationale for this.

Prose version (without punctuation and capitalisation):
the truth is this every monster you have met or will ever meet was once a human being with a soul that was as soft and light as silk someone stole that silk from their soul and turned them into this so when you see a monster next always remember this do not fear the thing before you fear the thing that created it instead

Finally, share the poem in its original form. Students can initially see how their adaptation compares to the poet's original work. Afterwards students can consider how and why Gill has structured the poem in the way she did exploring the impact/effect of this on the reader.

Discuss the aspects noticed that informed decisions about how to re-present the text as a poem – use these to explore the impact of structural devices on meaning.

To take this further still, students could select any of these structural features to explore in a little more detail. Remind students to link their point to the message of the poem and the impact on the reader.

Other poems you could use this same activity with (from the AQA poetry anthology clusters):

- 'Remains' by Simon Armitage
- 'Bayonet Charge' by Ted Hughes
- 'Winter Swans' by Owen Sheers
- 'Eden Rock' by Charles Causely
- 'Pot' by Shamshad Khan
- 'A century later' by Imtiaz Dhaker.

Note: if you are studying *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* for your choice of 19th century prose text, this poem ('The Truth About Monsters') offers further insight into the theme of this text and could be studied beforehand or during the reading of the set text.

Section 5: Speakers and voices

Like fiction, poems have a distinct voice that speaks the poem. This can be the voice of the poet or a created voice (a character/persona). Students need to learn to analyse how voice is part of a deliberate construct by the poet and both voice and perspective is an important aspect of understanding poetry for students to understand.

There are many ways into exploring voice in a poem. Key questions for students to consider when exploring voice are:

- who is speaking the poem?
- what is the speaker's perspective?
- what access does the speaker give the reader?

Perspective and tense

The voice can be in the **first, second or third person** and the choice of these will influence how the reader is involved in the poem and how closely the perspective in the poem is to the poet themselves (eg the experience related in 'In My Country' by Jackie Kay is the poet speaking about her own experience; in contrast, any of Browning's monologues are clearly dramatic creations that are not the poet's own voice).

The 'I' could be the poet, a character that is created, or an object or idea. Being able to identify the persona and their perspective, and articulate why it has been chosen and the viewpoint it brings, is key learning for students.

Considering the **tense** of the poem also contributes to the speaker's perspective – is the speaker looking back (past tense), speaking about now (present tense) or looking forward (future tense)? Different tenses will create a different tone and perspective, and the poet will have made a deliberate choice over which tense and why.

Tone

The speaker's **tone** can be created by many different elements working simultaneously (eg vocabulary, syntax, rhyme and rhythm, use of figurative language etc).

Being able to discuss the tone or mood of a poem and the attitude that is discovered and created demands drawing upon a more nuanced vocabulary. This vocabulary will be built over time, and so systematically taking opportunities to share, expand and build the store of words to discuss different emotions is recommended. For example, if the poem is 'sad', what other words do we have which may suggest a more nuanced idea of that emotion? Eg 'wistful', 'melancholy', 'regretful', 'anguish', etc. Discussing the shades of meaning each word brings will help build a vocabulary to describe tone.

Formality

Fundamental learning is to be able to identify the difference between **formal** and **free** verse styles. Having a secure working definition of what is meant by this and taking time to consider whether a poem is formal or informal in style or tone and being able to identify if a verse is formal or free needs to form part of every conversation about a poem.

Here are some poems from the poetry anthology clusters which can be used or referenced when exploring created personas or speaker's voice:

- 'Checking Out Me History' by John Agard
- 'Singh Song' by Daljit Nagra
- 'And Still I Rise' by Maya Angelou
- 'My Last Duchess' by Robert Browning
- 'On an Afternoon Train from Purely to Victoria, 1955' by James Berry
- 'Name Journeys' by Raman Mundair
- 'Pot' by Shamshad Khan
- 'Thirteen' by Caleb Femi.

Section 6: Comparing/connecting poems

Whilst the skill of comparison is not a discrete Assessment Objective for GCSE English Literature[1], it is still important that students are able to make connections within and between the texts they read. Indeed, a rich curriculum builds a web of reading and integrates this with thinking about how texts relate to self, other texts and the wider world. Through practising making connections in this broader sense, a richer understanding of the meaning of any text is gained (see appendix 2 for further discussion of text to self, text to text and text to world).

Comparison is a cognitive skill; it is more a way of thinking about texts, rather than a formulaic way of structuring a response. Furthermore, these comparisons operate at a macro and a micro level – from big themes, ideas and concepts to analysis and exploration of textual details. In all instances, the connections made always have to link to meaning – to what the writer is communicating.

For the purpose of unseen poetry, the question focus identifies the connection between the two poems. The task requires students to focus on methods (what the two poets have done to make meaning) and to explore the similarities and differences between these. It's important to develop in students a thinking methodology, enabling them to explore what the writers are saying and **how** they are saying it, thinking about methods in relation to the writer's message.

The activities that follow are about building up skills in making connections between texts and can be applied to other areas of the course. **In building learning towards the exam, it is essential that teachers build the disciplinary muscle of comparison in students over time.** This means maximising opportunities to consider how texts relate to other texts, the world and the self and creating opportunities to compare meanings, methods and big ideas of different authors. For example, taking Wilfred Owen's *Dulce et Decorum Est* and comparing it with Carol Ann Duffy's *Last Post* offer rich opportunities for comparison which take students beyond big ideas and into exploring context and inter-textuality as well as poetic method.

For further guidance about how the skill of comparison is assessed in GCSE English Literature, please refer to the *Reports on the exam* available to download from Centre Services and our summer 2018 GCSE English hub network meeting materials which focus on skills common to GCSE English Language and Literature, including comparison.

[1] Comparison is a discrete Assessment Objective for GCSE English Language: AO3, assessed on Paper 2, Question 4.

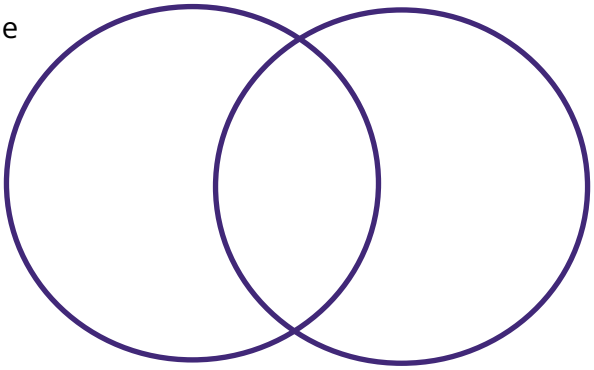
Activity 1: Venn diagrams

Resources required

- Two poems of choice that are thematically linked/explore a shared idea.
- Here are some suggestions from the collection paired with other poems which are freely available on the internet:
  - 'Hadrian's Wall' by Daljit Nagra and 'September 2014' by Carol Ann Duffy
  - 'A Poison Tree' by William Blake and 'Time's Lesson' by Emily Dickinson
  - 'The Voice' by Thomas Hardy and 'Do Not Stand at My Grave and Weep' by Mary Elizabeth Frye.

Using a Venn diagram is a simple and effective way of thinking through the ways in which two poems are similar/different.

After reading two poems, students can drop onto the diagram everything that is different in the outer segments, and where there are similarities, noting this in the central overlapping segment. The use of Venn diagrams supports thinking about the poems meaning separately and together, looking for what makes them different and what connects.



After the initial 'brain dump' of ideas, ask them to select the best similarity and the best difference to explore further in writing.

Once they have identified a similarity to explore, challenge them to find a difference in the similarity and vice versa.

They might use the following sentence starters to help explore their ideas:

- 'Both poems are about…however…'
- 'Both poets explore…however…'
- 'Both poems contain vivid images…'
- 'However, the poems are different in the way they present…'

Feel free to add to these sentence starters or develop a writing frame to support writing about similarities and differences. Remember, whilst you may plan to use a writing frame to support students, it's equally important to model alternative ways of writing, and plan to remove the scaffold when students are more confident, releasing them to use their preferred structure or to develop their own (see appendix 3).

Whilst this process is a strategy for thinking about whole poems, the same process can be used for thinking about writer's methods and so is transferable to the second unseen poetry question. However, it may be worthwhile building up the ability to 'think big' before focussing in on methods.

Activity 2: Exploding paired quotations

Resources required

- two poems on a similar theme eg 'The Truth About Monsters' by Nikita Gill and 'Grief' by Kayo Chingonyi from the collection.

We often encourage students to annotate around a quotation to explore the associations, connotations and features of words and phrases. Encouraging students to look at paired quotations in this way can be a fruitful way of developing skills in being able to say a lot about a little.

Simple steps are:

For an ideas-led approach

1. Choose two poems on a similar theme. Read the first poem. Discuss what it is about, what it means – select a word or phrase that best sums up the meaning of the poem and write it on the left-hand side of a page (in the middle so as to leave space around for annotations). Ensure students can articulate why they have chosen that word or phrase.

2. Read the second poem. Discuss how it's the same and different to poem one. Then select a word or phrase that best sums up the meaning of the poem and write it on the right-hand side of a page (in the middle, so as to leave space around for annotations).

For a methods-led approach

Alternatively, this same activity could be approached by asking students to select a similar poetic feature from both poems eg instances of alliteration and then using this structured approach to analyse and interrogate how these methods are working within each poem.

See below for what this needs to look like, based on readings of 'The Truth About Monsters' by Nikita Gill (left) and 'Grief' by Kayo Chingonyi (right). Here is an example of both a methods and ideas-led approach

Someone stole That silk from their soul	Grief was grit to lend the fable texture

1. Students then explode the quotation, annotating around the phrases chosen to explore the methods the writer uses to communicate their ideas. Ask students then to look for points of comparison and difference.

2. To bring it together, students could write a paragraph exploring the similarities/differences between the messages in the poems, using only the two quotes you have chosen.

3. As always, once the similarity is found, prompt students to progress their thinking to look for the difference in the similarity and vice versa.

Activity 3: Poem pairs

Resources required

- Pair cards (as described below).

This activity works well using a collection of poems (Power and Conflict/Love and Relationships/Worlds and Lives poetry clusters, for example) as a revision exercise. It requires students to be familiar/have a good working memory of their studied cluster.

Have the title of poem on a separate card. The cards are faced down. Turn a pair of cards over at a time and try to draw a connection between the two poems. Overturn the cards and choose a different pair, and so on.

This simple exercise is designed to help students talk about a poem in terms of being part of a collection and practise making connections between poems. It might help build their confidence in making quick decisions over which poem to select from their chosen cluster to pair with the named poem in the exam (Paper 2, Section B).

Exam preparation

Students need to have a simple strategy for approaching the unseen poetry questions in the exam. Over time, if students have developed the skills and confidence to tackle unfamiliar poems in the classroom, and have developed some core knowledge about poems, they will be able to apply this to the unseen poetry in the exam. (A useful department or teacher activity could be to identify the top five key bits of learning every student ought to know by the end of KS3 – or by the time they take their GCSE exam. What fundamental learning would you want students to have about poems and the way they work?).

In approaching unseen poems, students need to lean into the discomfort and difficulty of perhaps not understanding what the text means on the first reading; they need confidence in the repertoire of tools and strategies they have to help them unlock what the writer is saying. Even when they write, they may not understand every word or phrase but they will know how to select the words or phrases they can write about in depth. What they think about a text may be different to another student or even the examiner (indeed this is one of the pleasures of marking the unseen poetry that's commonly cited by our examiners). Because they are able to explain, explore and support their response with evidence, what they think it means will be okay. If we can get students to work in this way and believe in themselves and their own reading skills, then we equip them to tackle the unseen poetry questions with confidence.

Many of the strategies in this resource pack (eg reading boxes, Venn diagrams, exploding quotations, exploring imagery etc) will help develop skills to tackle the unseen poetry element of the assessment. Underpinning all of these are two pedagogical concepts:

- there are two layers to any poem – what is *literally* said and what is *implied* – the deeper layer to be explored in terms of what the text means;
- all poems have a big idea and taking time to identify this message and think about what it means in relation to the self, other texts and the world can be a rich source of discussion.

The assessment

The key skills for unseen poetry are:

- **AO1 –** read, understand and respond to texts, maintaining a critical style and developing an informed **personal response**, **using textual references** including quotations **to support and illustrate interpretations**
- **AO2 – analyse** the language, form and structure used by a writer to create **meanings and effects**, using relevant subject terminology where appropriate.

In addition, students are also asked to identify the similarities and/or differences between the two previously unseen poems.

Unpicking the Assessment Objectives

Assessment Objective 1

A 'response' in its broadest sense refers to the students' ability to understand what the text might mean – to them, and possibly other readers. A response refers to:

- what is this text trying to say?
- why might it have been written?
- what is it encouraging the reader to think/feel?
- what ideas is it presenting/exploring?
- in other words, what do you think it means?

The ability to select 'textual references' could mean an apt quotation – an element of the text that provides a really good example of the point the student is making. However, it is the skill of precisely unpicking and selecting textual **references**, rather than using **quotations**, that's important.

Assessment Objective 2

Whilst the Assessment Objective wording refers to language, structure and form, students are not required to explicitly and separately refer to each of these in their response. In the mark scheme, we prefer to use the term 'methods', as this enables students to approach their analysis in a more flexible way. It gives them scope to comment on the methods that are salient and significant to them, and most relevant to the poem and task set. Examiners are looking to reward students for their analysis of anything the writer has done on purpose to make meaning.

Identifying similarities and/or differences

The selection of the two unseen poems will be driven by the fact that students are invited to identify similarities/differences between them. Therefore, the link(s) between them will be clear. As students work through the two discrete responses, they will be forming ideas which can be used in their response to this short, synoptic task.

Closer to the exam, you could work with students to come up with their own strategy for responding to the exam questions. An approach may include the following:

- read and think about the question, underlining/highlighting any key words
- read the title of the poem
- read the poem at least twice
- think about the title again.

Advice for students from the Chief Examiner

All examiner reports are essential reading for anyone teaching the subject. The GCSE English Literature exam reports also contain key advice for students to help them understand the exam and how it works. Below we have collated guiding comments from the Chief Examiner for students:

- you can approach the paper in any order you choose, but generally it is more beneficial if you start with Section A and work your way through the paper that way, leaving Section C until the end. Writing about something you are familiar with often helps you to get started and, by the time you get to Section C, your brain will be working much more efficiently and you'll be ready to tackle the unseen texts.
- for Section B (poetry anthology question), perhaps **start your response with an opening statement that thematically connects the two poems** you are going to use to answer the question. *(*The principle would apply to the unseen poetry comparison task too Q27.2*).*
- in Section C, read the unseen poem and make sure you get a sense of the overall point first. **Select three or four key methods** to focus your attention on **that stand out for you**. **You don't have to write about everything.**
- when you get to the final question (Q27.2), **the question will tell you what the main link is between the two poems**. Read it carefully first of all in order to start your thinking. Then spend a few minutes reading the second poem and holding it in your head against the first unseen one that you have already written a response on. Then maybe select one or two things that the writers are doing to present this shared idea to us.
- manage your time effectively. Don't spend too much time on **the final question** as it is only worth 8 marks.
- remember that this task asks you to **compare methods**, so make sure you focus your attention on the similarities/differences between what the two poets have done to make meaning.
- using the writer's name can help you to **think about the text as a conscious construct** and will keep reminding you that the author deliberately put the text together.
- the best way of approaching the study of a literary text is: **what** (is the writer writing about), **how** (has the writer presented their ideas, and **why** (has the writer written this text; what ideas are they exploring). If you remember these three words you are addressing all of the assessment objectives for this qualification and learning to think about the text in a way that is going to benefit your ability to write about it. This isn't a formula for a response, but a way of thinking about each of the texts you study.

Professional development

In preparing your students for the exam, the next step is familiarisation with the exam assessment structure, the marking criteria and understanding what makes a good answer. We provide a range of professional development courses to support you with this, including our Mark scheme guidance and application e-learning course and Inside Assessment videos. Our *Building skills and confidence for unseen poetry* and *Reignite your teaching of poetry* course materials are also available to download from Centre Services.

Appendix

1. GCSE English Literature Statement of importance

This statement is found at the start of every mark scheme. Its importance underpins both how literature is to be studied and assessed.

GCSE English Literature is the study of how writers communicate their ideas about the world, and how readers might respond to these ideas. It aims to develop a critical understanding of the ways in which literary texts are a reflection of, and exploration of, the human condition, the study of which develops empathic understanding of human nature. High-quality English literature is writing which displays recognisable literary qualities and, although shaped by particular contexts, transcends them and speaks about the universality of the human condition. GCSE English Literature aims to enable students to appreciate these qualities, developing and presenting informed, critical responses to the ideas in literary texts and the ways writers present these ideas. It aims to enable students to make links between a variety of written texts and between the text and the context within which it was shaped.

2. Text to self, text to text, text to world

Reading is about building understanding, and students comprehend better when they make different types of connections – this is what developing 'schema' and 'sticky knowledge' is about.

Nurturing students to be able to relate the text to their personal experiences, other texts they've read and the world at large, simultaneously strengthens their engagement with the text whilst building understanding.

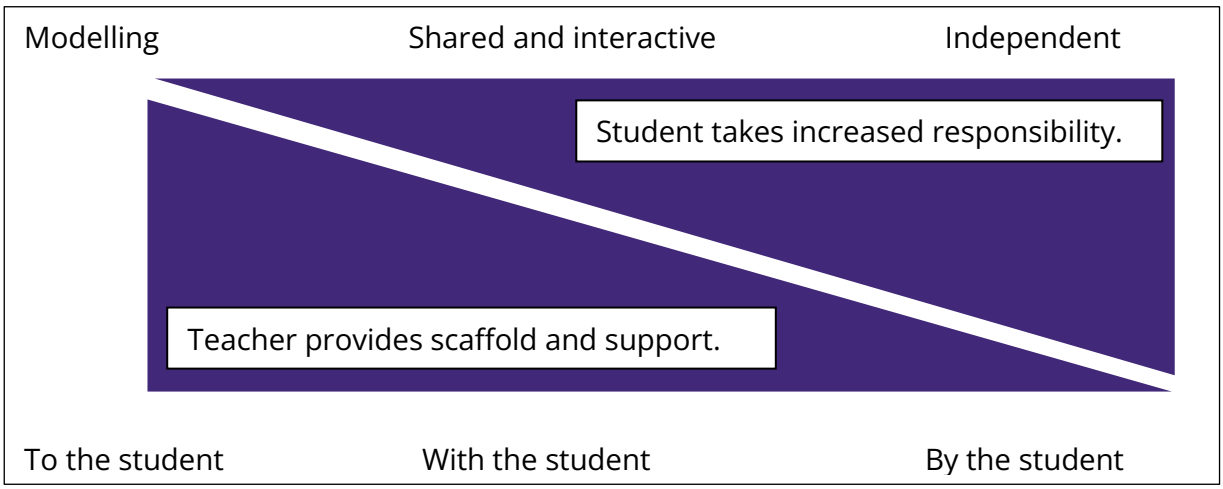
This aligns with our statement of importance for GCSE English Literature and also supports our interpretation of AO3.

Organisation	Resource
Text to self 'Personal response'	This refers to the personal connections a student makes between what they read and their own emotions and experiences. Note that AO1 rewards students in developing a 'personal response'.
Text to text 'Sticky schema'	Better readers make connections between the text they're reading and texts they've previously read. Making links to prior reading and exploring these connections deepens and enriches their understanding. 'Text to text' is vital for the poetry anthology component as students study a cluster of thematically-linked poems and are required to make connections across two poems in the exam.
Text to world 'Big ideas'	Text to world is about exploring connections between (the fictional world of) the text and events/people in the real world. This is where students are able to think about the text as a construct – with a writer behind it potentially trying to communicate something to readers about the world.

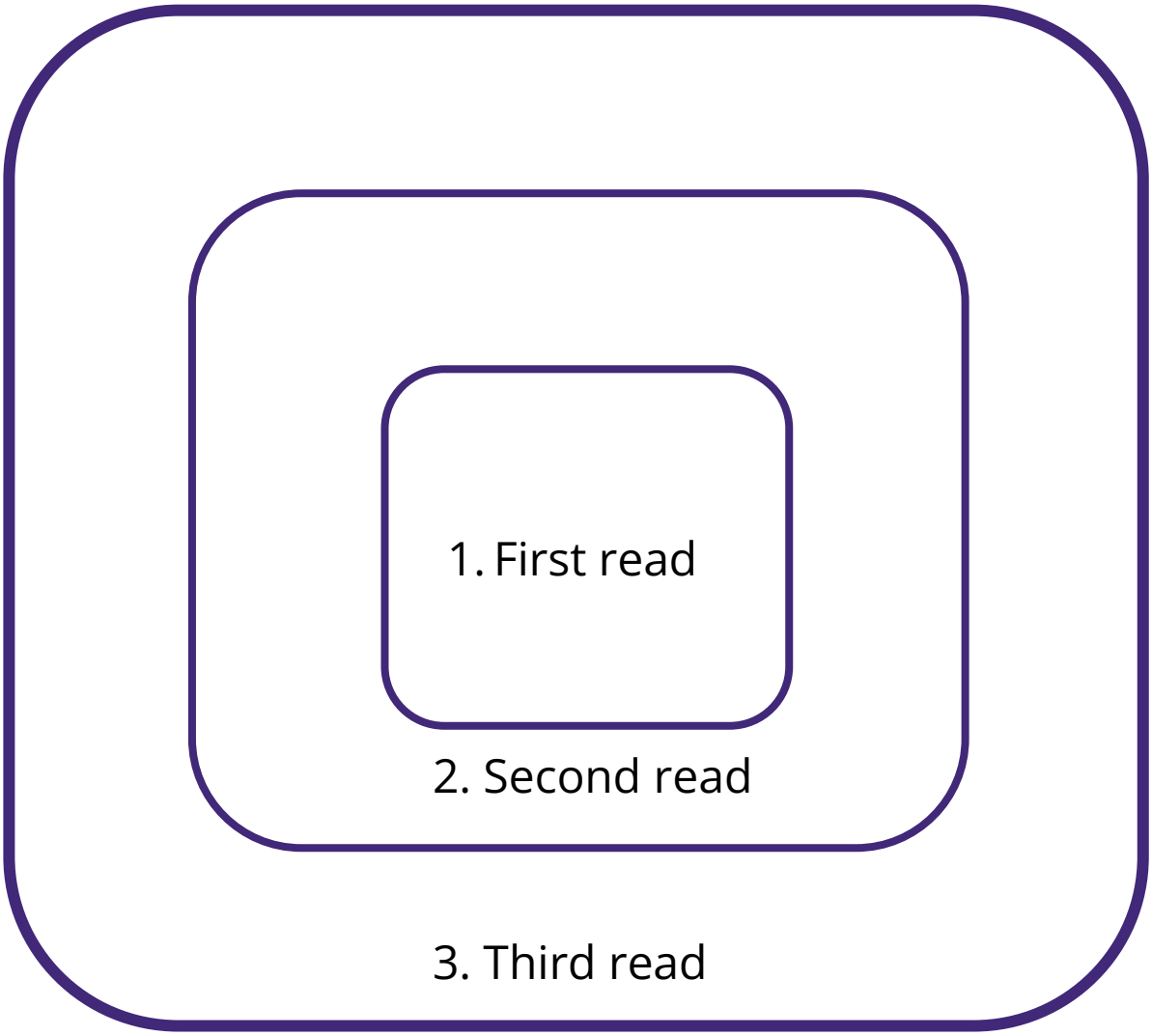
3. Gradual release of responsibility

In teaching, if we plan to use a scaffold, framework or support, then we also need to plan its gradual removal. Pearson and Gallagher (1983) developed a theoretical model to illustrate how planning to support, and then planning to remove that support, was essential for good learning. This gradual release of responsibility instructional framework purposefully shifts the cognitive load from teacher-as-model, to joint responsibility of teacher and learner, to independent practice and application by the learner. To this end, any framework needs to be seen as part of a process rather than an end in itself.

Pearson and Gallagher Gradual release of responsibility model (1983)



Handout 1: Reading boxes



Working from the centre outwards:

First read: Initial impressions/visualisation – what does the poem look like on the page? Look for the shape of the verse, the white space, the length of lines. Take in the title – what might it be about? What is your initial reaction? What are you thinking? Jot down what you think it's about/likes/dislikes.

Second read: Interrogate – what questions do you have or what is puzzling you? What do you notice as you read? Start to look for patterns (in words/phrases/images/ rhyme and rhythm)

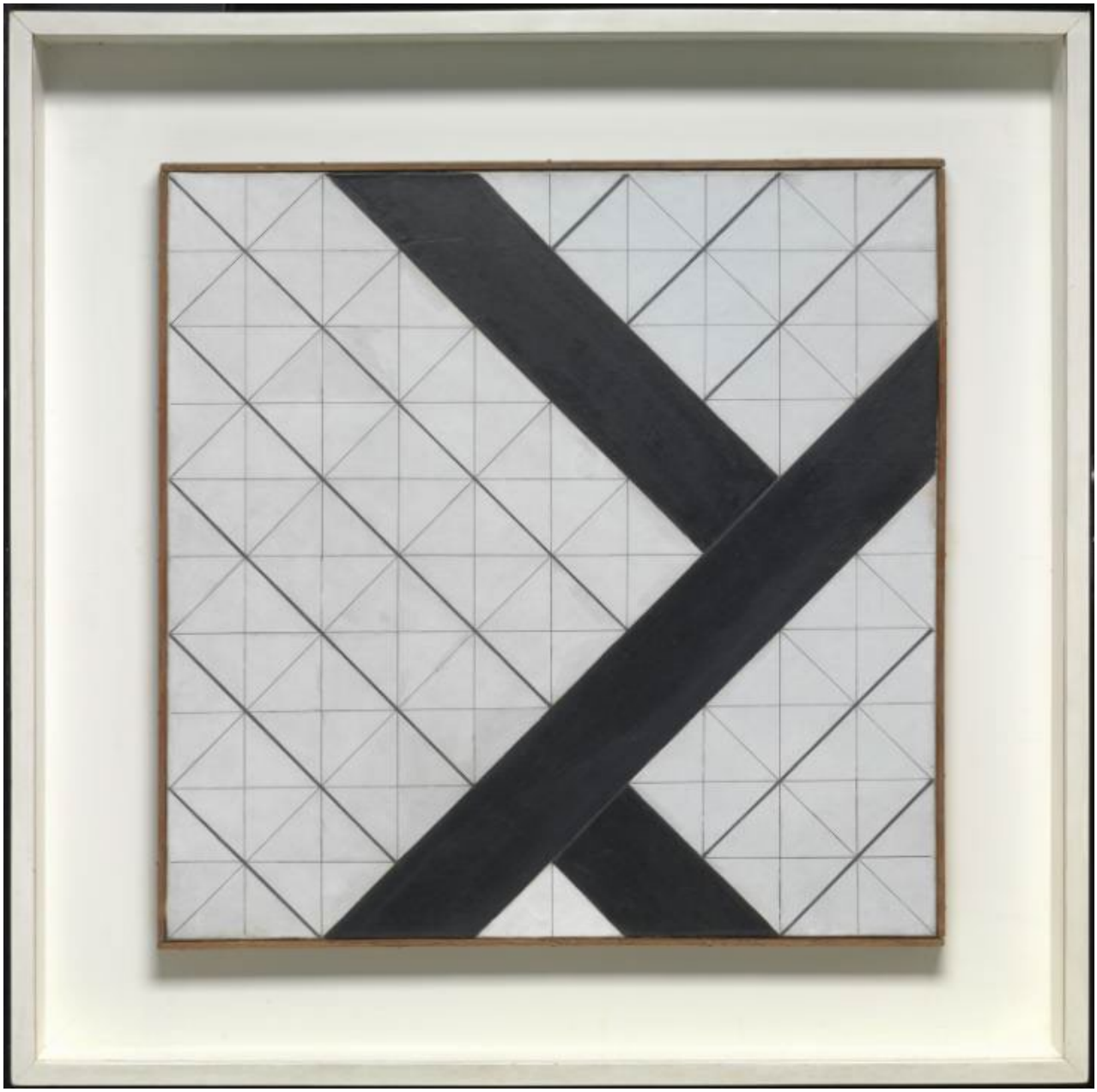
Third reading: Meanings – what is the writer saying? How does the text relate to yourself, other texts you have read or the world/big ideas?

Handout 2 – Tate gallery pictures

‘Bottle of Rum and Newspaper’ by Juan Gris

‘Bottle of Rum and Newspaper’, 1913-14, Juan Gris, Presented by Gustav and Elly Kahnweiler 1974, accessioned 1994. Photo © Tate

Counter-Composition VI by Theo van Doesburg



Counter-Composition VI, 1925, Theo van Doesburg, Purchased 1982. Photo © Tate.

Further resources

Here are some other places you might look for poems, inspiration and teaching ideas.

English & Media Centre's (EMC) Poetry Station

The English & Media centre created a freely accessible web-based video channel and portal for poetry, funded by a grant from the Arts Council for England.

Designed to appeal to a really wide audience, The Poetry Station provides a rich multi-sensory experience of poetry for everyone (from committed poetry readers to those who have felt excluded or haven't thought poetry is for them), including music, film, and animation, as well as readings by actors and authors. It brings together diverse and eclectic poetry worlds – from the unpublished world of slams, live events and song writing, to the published, literary and classic traditions of poetry.

Search content by topic or poet. (For example, you'll find a reading of William Blake's 'A Poison Tree' which features in our collection in this booklet).

You will find poems collated by themes in association with National Poetry Day.

- Change (2018)
- Freedom (2017) See also the corresponding English & Media Centre blog post for suggested practical ways students can engage and respond to the poems on their Poetry Station site.)

The Poetry Station is also available as an app downloadable for free (for iPhone and iPad).

You can find other blog posts on the English & Media Centre's website.

Here are a few we've selected on the subject of poetry:

- 'Ideas for teaching a poetry cluster at GCSE' (July 2021)
  Guest blog post by Kate Oliver, EMC consultant, suggesting some refreshing approaches teachers could try, to support students in getting to grips with their poetry cluster (which echoes the approaches offered in this guide).

- 'Anthology making: reading more, deepening engagement' (Nov 2019)
  Guest blog post by Sue Dymoke (an ex-English teacher who is a published poet, university lecturer in Education and international expert on the teaching of poetry).

  She advocates that young people's exploration of poetry should go beyond the texts in a school anthology and experience of a wide range of poems is crucial in order for them to develop into critical readers. She urges teachers to allow their students 'a precious, quiet moment' to think whenever they see or hear a new poem for the first time.

  Sue Dymoke has her own website and poetry teaching materials she's produced for fellow teachers.

- The English Teacher – a poem (July 2019)
  A poem from a student to her English teacher that will lift the hearts of English teachers everywhere

- Teaching Poetry: Recognising What Makes It Special (June 2018)
  By Barbara Bleiman
  Explores the complex nature of poetry teaching.

- Why Are Students Struggling to Write Well About Poetry? (Jan 2016)
  By Barbara Bleiman
  Explores ways of improving the teaching of critical writing about poetry at A-level.

- Five Brilliant Ideas For Teaching Poetry (May 2014)
  By Kate Oliver

English Association

The English Association has an area dedicated to the teaching of poetry with articles grouped according to themes including poetry and language; tracing patterns; close reading and plenty more.

Under 'Poetry and language' you will find a contribution about William Blake's 'A Poison Tree' (for example).

There is also a Poetry Portal which provides an extensive list of links and resources for teaching poetry.

Lit in Colour

Lit in Colour is a collaboration between Penguin Books and the Runymede Trust. The aim is to support schools in making the teaching and learning of English Literature more inclusive by promoting great works of literature by writers of colour.

On the Lit in Colour website you will find a treasure trove of free resources aimed at both the literature and language curriculum along with ideas for supporting independent reading. *Penguin Talks* is an opportunity to bring diverse writer's voices into the classroom or the home.

Take a listen to *Why Poetry Belongs to Everyone* with Caleb Femi and Zawe Ashton.

The Poetry Archive

Funded by the Arts Council for England, The Poetry Archive offers a collection of poetry recordings in the poet's own voice (including Jackie Kay's 'In My Country', which features in our collection here) and classic poems read by contemporary voices (including Thomas Hardy, Christina Rossetti and Wilfred Owen who also feature in our collection).

Each poet in the archive has a dedicated page with information about their writing life, biography, awards and more. You will also find interviews with poets and curated collections of poems by theme. There is a designated space for teachers where you can download resources which can be filtered by age group or resource type.

Poetry Foundation

Established in 2003, The Poetry Foundation (and publisher of *Poetry* magazine) is an independent literary organisation committed to a raising the presence for poetry in our culture.

It offers free live events and exhibitions that bring together visual arts and the written word; a library of audio and video recordings; and a dedicated site for educators with articles for teachers and poem guides.

Simply use the site's search function to look up poets or poems (also available as a free app).

Poetry by Heart

Poetry By Heart is a free web-based resource for learning about the richness and variety in poetry. It's a free-to-enter national poetry reciting competition for young people from ages 8 to 18. It's a free resource for preparing students for unseen poetry.

On the website, you can discover a large collection of poetry chosen to engage young people. Poets Andrew Motion and Jean Sprackland and poetry educators Julie Blake, David Whitley and Morag Styles made the selection with attention to an ethical representation of gender, heritage and linguistic variety and with permissions from copyright holders.

You can find the following:

- **Three timeline anthologies** – hundreds of classic and contemporary poets and poems to explore on visual timelines that you can scroll through and search, and scroll down to see each poem and its mediation, and print out.
- **Four special curated collections** – First World War poetry, Shakespeare's sonnets, romantic poetry and an all-ages poetry mix-it-up selection.
- **Student-friendly introductions to poems and poets**, plus word links to the online Oxford English Dictionary.
- **A Random Poem Selector,** plus filters and keyword-in-context searches in all collections.
- **Audio recordings of the poems** read by poets and videos of Poetry By Heart's student contestants speaking their chosen poems at national competition finals events.
- **A blog about poetry education** with a special focus on memory and performance.
- **A Teacher Zone** with ideas and resources for teaching poetry, including the unseen.

The Poetry Society

Funded by Arts Council England, The Poetry Society is the UK's leading poetry organisation, with education at the heart of its practice. Their work ranges from publishing The Poetry Review and hosting prestigious prizes such as the Foyle Young Poets of the Year Award, to commissioning a packed calendar of performances, readings, and educational activities and free educational resources.
They have a dedicated education area that provides free poetry lesson plans on their platform PoetryClass (including ideas for remote learning) and the opportunity to book Poets in Schools visits. They showcase Teacher Trailblazers, who share their tips and write lesson plans based on poems by young people.

National Poetry Day

National Poetry Day is the annual mass celebration on the first Thursday of October that encourages all to enjoy, discover and share poetry.

Download teaching resources according to Key Stage, including lessons plans and a toolkit for schools.

Out of Bounds Poetry

The Out of Bounds website, inspired by the critically-acclaimed anthology *Out of Bounds* (edited by Jackie Kay, James Procter and Gemma Robinson) allows you to explore the links between poetry, ethnicity and place.

The UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council funded Out of Bounds Activity Pack (co-produced with secondary schools across the UK) is aimed at all young people aged 11-18. (Available on request by completing the webform).

Out of Bounds presents a map of Britain from the perspective of black and Asian poets. A selection of the poems that appear in the anthology are also available online, including Jackie Kay's 'In My Country', Bloodaxe Books. (Film; starts at 3 mins, 28 secs).

NATE's Poetry Portal

NATE's Poetry portal provides resources, publications, CPD, further reading and links to other websites/ poetry organisations for the English teaching community.

Soundcloud

Listen to professional audio recordings of poems from the AQA poetry anthology (for free) produced and read by Anton Jarvis, English Teacher and former BBC Radio Producer/Presenter.

- 'Power and Conflict'
- 'Love and Relationships'
- 'Worlds and Lives'

Living poets

Poets who feature in this unseen poetry Teaching guide:

Kayo Chingonyi

Poet, writer, academic (Assistant Professor at Durham University).
You can read Kayo Chingonyi's bio in his own words on his website.
Poems by Kayo Chingonyi - The Poetry Archive
@KayoChingonyi

Nikita Gill

Poet and writer, uses various social media platforms to engage her audience (often cited as an Instapoet).
Instagram **@Nikita_Gill**
X **@nktgill**
(also Facebook and Tumblr)

Jackie Kay

Poet, playwright and novelist.
Scottish Poetry Library - Jackie Kay
You can listen to a reading of 'In My Country', and other poems, read by the poet at The Poetry Archive.
X **@JackieKayPoet**

Daljit Nagra

Poet, teacher and presenter.
daljitnagra.com
Poems by Daljit Nagra - The Poetry Archive

Other current voices we think you and your students will like:

Kate Clanchy
Poet, writer and teacher.
X **@KateClanchy1**
Author of *How to Grow Your Own Poem* (2020)
Some Kids I Taught and What They Taught Me (2019)

Amanda Gorman
American poet and activist.
Instagram **@amandascgorman**
X **@TheAmandaGorman**
The youngest ever poet (22 years old) to perform at a presidential inauguration.
You can watch her perform her incredibly rousing and empowering poem 'The Hill We Climb' in full via the BBC News website.

George the Poet (George Mpanga)
Spoken-word performer and poet.
georgethepoet.com
Have you heard George's podcast? (BBC Radio)
Instagram **@georgethepoet**
X **@GeorgeThePoet**

Kae Tempest (formerly Kate)
Poet, spoken-word artist, rapper.
kaetempest.co.uk
Poems by Kae Tempest - The Poetry Archive
X **@kaetempest**
Insatgram **@kaetempest**
Releases available on Spotify and YouTube
Watch 'My Shakespeare' (2012) on YouTube.

Dr John Cooper Clarke
Performance poet and comedian often referred to as the 'punk poet' and 'Bard of Salford'.
Most famed for his poem 'I Wanna Be Yours' which has featured in legacy poetry anthologies and has since been covered by the Arctic Monkeys.
X **@official_jcc**
Insatgram **@johncooperclarke**

Further reading and thoughts on poetry

During the process of making this Teaching guide and the accompanying AQA online course *Building skills and confidence for unseen poetry*, we came across many thoughts on poetry and the teaching of it. Below is a selection of inspirational and provocative thoughts on the subject for you to ponder on or even explore with your students.

'To read a poem, we believe, is to appreciate its illusiveness and allusiveness, to withhold cold critical analysis and the yearning for certainty for long enough to allow complexity, ambiguity, sound, musicality, verbal and visual patterning to do their sub-, semi-conscious work on our thoughts and feelings.'

'The 'I don't get it' response, can itself, be part of a fruitful conversation about what poetry is. Poetry is language 'in orbit' (as Seamus Heaney said). It's 'language made strange'.- The study of poetry needs to take this into account, embracing the defamiliarisation involved in reading the 'odd' language of poetry as a way into close linguistic exploration and analysis.'

Extracts from Barbara Bleiman: What Matters in English Teaching – Collected Blogs and Other Writing (© 2020) is reproduced by kind permission of the English and Media Centre. https://www.englishandmedia.co.uk

'A poem can feel like a locked safe in which the combination is hidden inside. It's okay if you don't understand the poem. Sometimes it takes dozens of readings to come to the slightest understanding. And sometimes understanding never comes.'

© Yakich, M, 2016, *Poetry: A survivor's guide*, Bloomsbury Academic, an imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc.

'Often in essays or seminars students tell us something about a couple of words or phrases taken from a poem. For instance, they detect and discuss assonance and alliteration, topics which all my life I have found tedious. The best response is 'Tell me something about the whole poem, not just about parts of it.'

This essay originally appeared in *The Use of English* 65.1 (2013), pp. 25–40. *The Use of English* is a publication of the English Association (www.englishassociation.ac.uk). © The English Association 2013. All rights reserved.

Acknowledgement

Thank you to the English teaching staff at Richmond School, North Yorkshire, for sharing your insights into the teaching of poetry.

Questions matter

Get help and support

Visit our website for information, guidance, support and resources at aqa.org.uk/8702

You can talk to us directly

E: english-gcse@aqa.org.uk

T: 0161 953 7504

@AQAEnglish

B00050