A Year of Living Poetically: Poetry Memorization Guide

A long time ago, memorizing poetry was par for the course in school. Communities had poetry recitation contests and poetry was frequently printed in the newspapers. Now, it is unusual if a student is asked to memorize anything beyond the prologue to *Romeo and Juliet*. But if you allow it to, the memorization of poetry can enrich your life, expanding your mind and bringing beauty to even your darkest days. If you remain unconvinced, please read the following:

> "Memorizing poetry turns on kids' language capability. It not only teaches them to articulate English words; it heightens their feel for the intricacies and complexities of the English language—an indispensable attainment if they are to go on to speak, write, and read English with ease. Susan Wise Bauer, author of *The Well-Educated Mind: A Guide to the Classical Education You Never Had*, argues that memorization 'builds into children's minds an ability to use complex English syntax.' The student 'who memorizes poetry will internalize' the 'rhythmic, beautiful patterns' of the English language. These patterns then become 'part of the student's 'language store,' those wells that we all use every day in writing and speaking.' Without memorization, the student's 'language store,' Bauer says, will be limited: memorization stocks 'the language store with a whole new set of language patterns.'
>
> "It also stocks those bins with a generous supply of the English language's rich accumulation of words. Research suggests that the size of a child's vocabulary plays an important part in determining the quality of his language-comprehension skills. 'The greater and wider the vocabulary,' says education historian Ravitch, 'the greater one's comprehension of increasingly difficult material.' Bauer points out that if 'a student reads a word in a novel, she might or might not remember it for later use. But when she commits it to memory in proper context (as the memorization of lines of poetry requires), she is much more likely to have it at her 'mental fingertips' for use in her own speaking and writing.'" from *In Defense of Memorization* by Michael Knox Beran

So, the benefits of memorizing poetry are varied and deep. It is free, uncomplicated, and has lasting, powerful benefits. This plan includes twelve poems. If you memorize just one a month, in one year you will have twelve powerful poems that will be yours forever.

Poetry is all that is worth remembering in life.
William Hazlitt

How to memorize a poem in a few simple steps (really)

1. Read through the poem carefully and slowly and out loud. It's okay if you don't get it all right away. Just read it, letting the language flow out of your mouth.
2. Copy the poem over in your own handwriting, writing on every other line. Try to keep the lines and stanzas on your paper the same as in the original poem.
3. Read the poem out loud again.
4. Using an index card or a piece of paper, cover up all of the poem except the first line. Say that line over to yourself three times. Now, gaze off into space for a moment and try to say the line from memory.
5. Repeat this with the rest of the lines in the stanza, saying the lines you have already worked on, too. If the poem is not divided into stanzas, divide it yourself into groups of three or four lines.
6. Once you have one stanza down, go to the next one, again working line by line.
7. Put those two stanzas together, and then move on. Repeat this until you reach the end of the poem.
8. You will think you have it down pat, and you will be wrong. It will take practice to move this information from your short-term memory to your long-term memory. To practice, follow the ideas below:

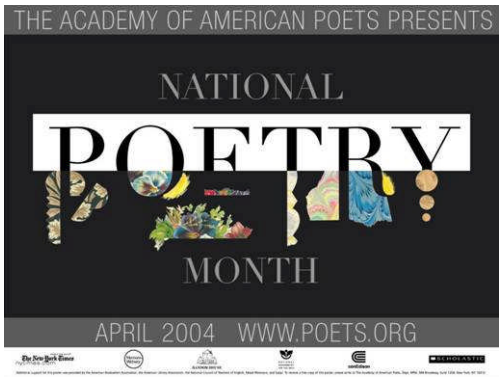
    - write the first letter of each word on an index card and practice with the card, using the letters to prompt you
    - record yourself reading the poem and listen to it (if you can load it on an iPod or MP3 player, that is awesome practice)
    - say the poem out loud when you are walking by yourself
    - recite to your parents (serious brownie points)
    - say it while you are in the shower, drying your hair, or exercising (repetitive motion like a foot striking the track will help get the pattern of the poem in your mind)
    - write it out over and over
    - think it to yourself when you are bored in class

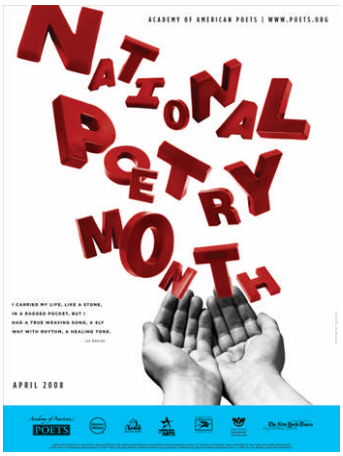
Using these simple steps and techniques, you will be able to learn the poem without too much difficulty. You already know the lyrics to about a bazillion songs. All songs are is poetry. You can do it. Take the time to practice it. Really try to learn it.

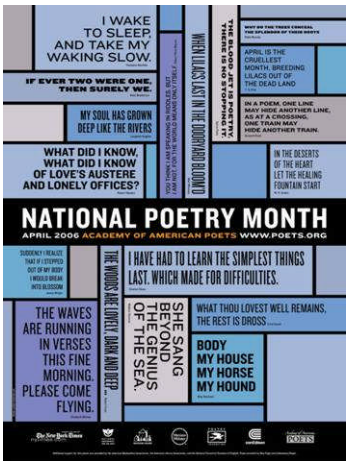
This plan contains suggested poems for memorization, along with an explanation of the poem, study helps and review sheets. It also contains suggestions for further memorization and resources to develop your relationship with poetry. The poems do not need to be memorized in any particular order.

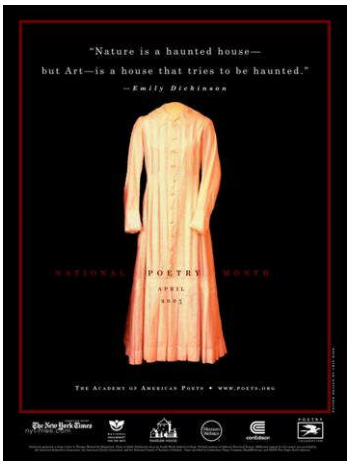
Memorization List

1. “No Man is an Island” by John Donne
2. “Sonnet 116” by William Shakespeare
3. “The Road not Taken” by Robert Frost
4. “Invictus” by William Ernest Henley
5. “Death be not Proud” by John Donne
6. “Sonnet” by Edna St. Vincent Millay
7. Teddy Roosevelt quote
8. “Richard Cory” by Edward Arlington Robinson
9. “Hope is the Thing with Feathers” by Emily Dickinson
10. “A Psalm of Life” by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow
11. “The Cloths of Heaven” by William Butler Yeats
12. “Do Not Go Gentle into that Good Night” by Dylan Thomas









We speak of memorizing as getting something 'by heart,' which really means 'by head.' But getting a poem or prose passage truly 'by heart' implies getting it by mind and memory and understanding and delight.
-John Hollander

Poem #1

”No Man Is an Island” by John Donne

No man is an island, entire of itself;
every man is a piece of the continent,
a part of the main.

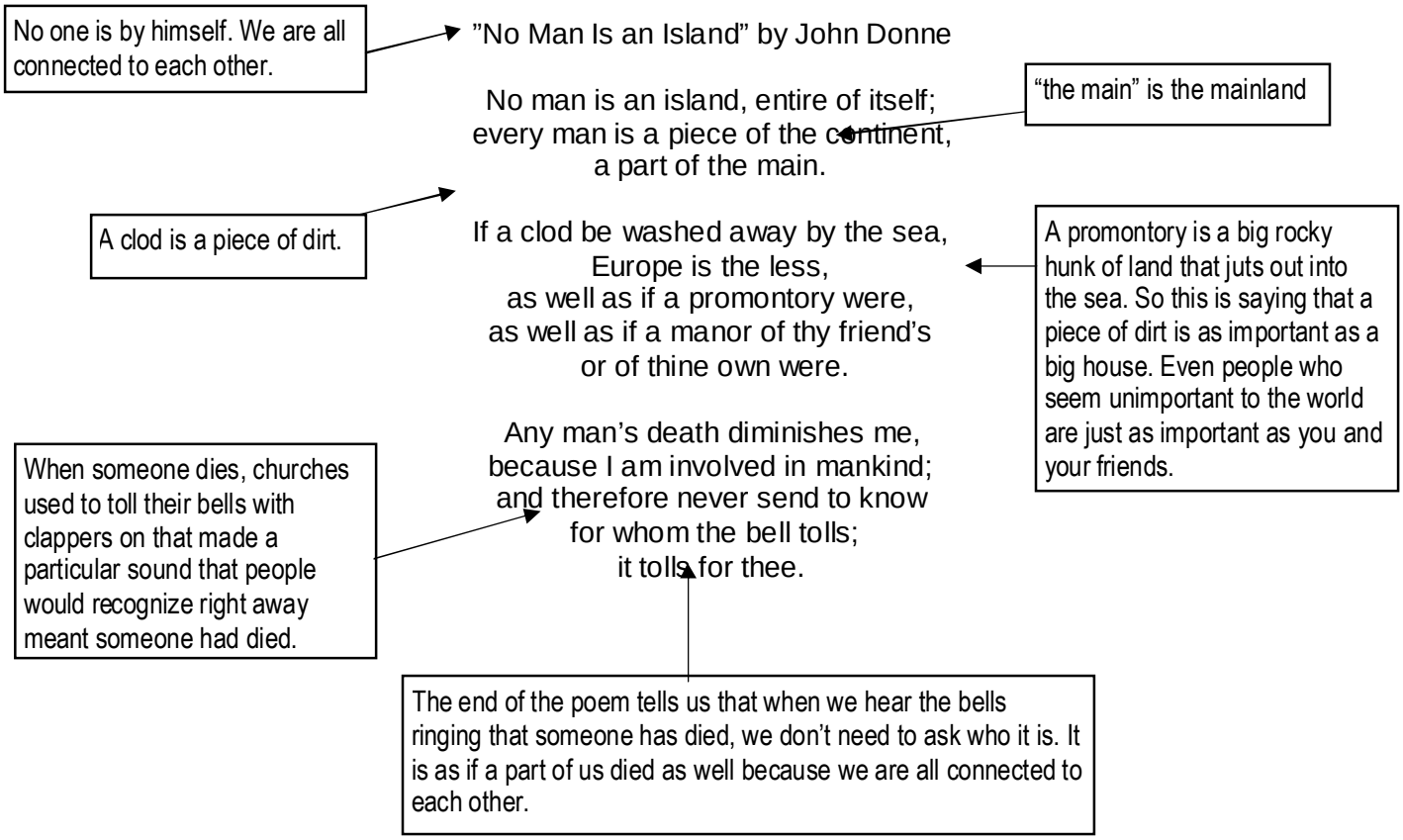
If a clod be washed away by the sea,
Europe is the less,
as well as if a promontory were,
as well as if a manor of thy friend’s
or of thine own were.

Any man’s death diminishes me,
because I am involved in mankind;
and therefore never send to know
for whom the bell tolls;
it tolls for thee.

In this poem, John Donne explores the idea of the connectedness of people. People are not isolated islands. We are all a part of a larger thing, and if one person dies, everyone is affected.

Although this poem does not have a strong rhyme scheme, it is short and easy to memorize.

Taking it apart



Although it seems like a sad poem when you first read it, understanding the idea of it – that we are all connected and important – can help you be more concerned about other people. When something happens on the other side of the world, it still affects you. If you feel sad or happy about something that doesn't really seem related to you, this poem explains why that is okay. It's okay to be interested in people you don't know. It's okay to be concerned about people you've never met. You are a part of mankind.

Memorizing it

Can you fill in the next word?

”No Man Is an Island” by John Donne

No man is an _____, entire of _____;

every man is a _____ of the continent,

a part of the _____.

If a clod be _____ away by the _____,

Europe is the _____,

as _____ as if a promontory were,

as well as if a _____ of thy friend’s

or of _____ own were.

Any _____ death diminishes me,

because I am _____ in mankind;

and _____ never send to know

for whom the bell _____;

it tolls for _____.

Memorizing it

Can you give the next line? The first letter is given to you.

”No Man Is an Island” by John Donne

No man is an island, entire of itself;

E_____

a part of the main.

If a clod be washed away by the sea,

E_____

as well as if a promontory were,

A_____

or of thine own were.

Any man’s death diminishes me,

B_____

and therefore never send to know

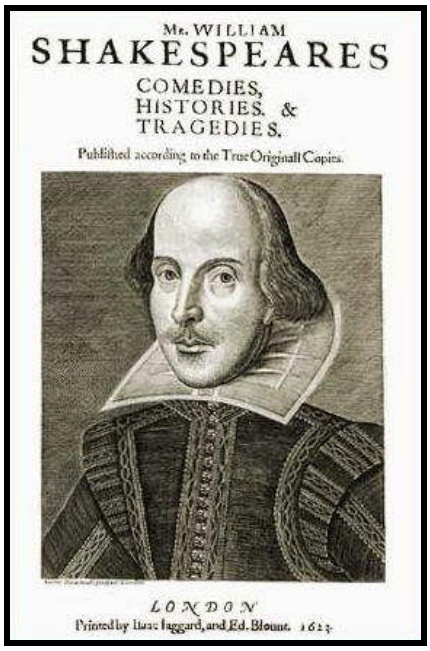
F_____

it tolls for thee.

Poem #2

"Sonnet 116" by William Shakespeare

Let me not to the marriage of true minds
Admit impediments. Love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove:
O no! it is an ever-fixed mark
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;
It is the star to every wandering bark,
Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.
Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
Within his bending sickle's compass come:
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
But bears it out even to the edge of doom.
If this be error and upon me proved,
I never writ, nor no man ever loved.



This is one of Shakespeare's most famous love sonnets. The idea behind it is that love doesn't try to change people. If you really love someone, you love the person for who he/she is, and you don't try to make the person someone else. The poem also says that love should last forever and not just go away when the person isn't beautiful any more.

Taking it apart

This poem is a sonnet, so it has a strong rhyme scheme. That makes memorizing it easier. A sonnet has three sections of four lines (called a quatrain), and then a couplet (two rhyming lines) at the end. Each quatrain has an ABAB rhyme scheme, which means that the first and third lines rhyme with each other, and the second and fourth lines rhyme with each other. Remember that he had an English accent, so the rhyme may not seem as strong to us.

"Sonnet 116" by William Shakespeare

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If this be error and upon me proved,
I never writ, nor no man ever loved.

Impediments are things that get in the way. "Ped" means "foot," so an impediment is something that makes your foot stumble.

To alter is to change.

Tempests are storms.

A bark is a boat.

To be something's star is to guide it like the North Star guides sailors.

A sickle is a tool used to harvest grain by cutting it down. This is saying that even though beauty (rosy lips and cheeks) will fade with time, love is not at the mercy of time, but rather will last forever.

If I'm wrong about this, I never wrote anything worth anything. This is saying that he is really sure he's right about this.

Memorizing it

Can you draw a picture for each section?

"Sonnet 116" by William Shakespeare

Let me not to the marriage of true minds
Admit impediments. Love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds,
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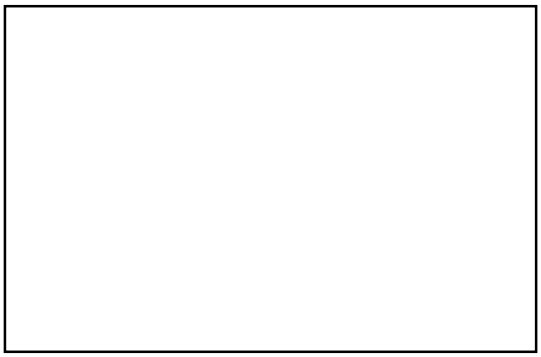

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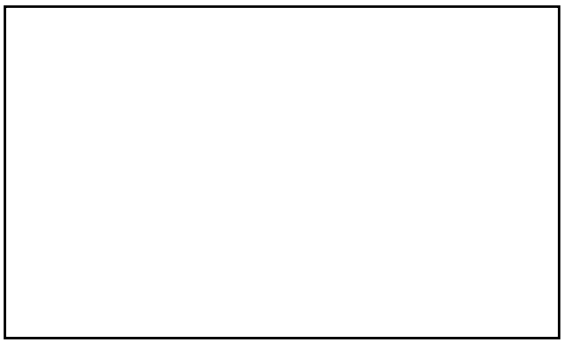

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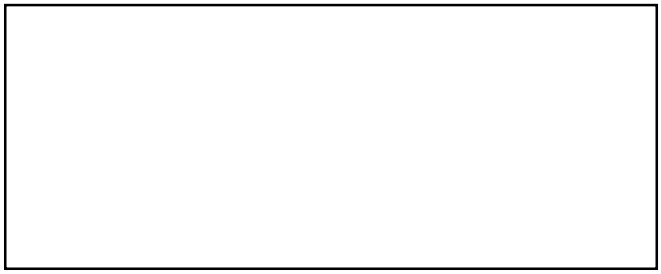

Memorizing it

Can you tap out the beats to the poem? Tap your foot on the first beat, and then clap the second beat. The first quatrain is divided into beats for you. You should clap five times and tap five times in each line.

"Sonnet 116" by William Shakespeare

Let - me - not - to - the - mar- riage - of –true - minds
Ad – mit – im – ped – i - ments. - Love - is - not - love
Which – al - ters -when - it - al –ter – a - tion -finds,
Or - bends - with – the – re – mo - ver – to – re - move:

O no! it is an ever-fixed mark
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;
It is the star to every wandering bark,
Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.

Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
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Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
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Poem #3

"The Road Not Taken" by Robert Frost

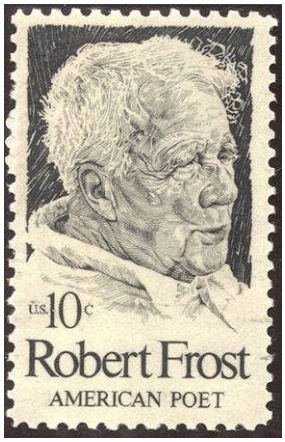
Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I –
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

- ROBERT FROST



This poem is one of the best known of Frost's poems, and one of the most popular poems in the English language. Although most people see it as explaining the importance of being an individual and taking the road "less traveled," most critics see it as an ironic poem that is a parody of people (specifically his friend, Edward Thomas) who regret not having taken other paths than the ones they did, when it really made no difference. People who read the poem this way, see the last two lines as ironic. Frost himself called this poem "tricky." The analysis on the next page looks at both interpretations, one on the right, one on the left.

Taking it apart

Popular Interpretation

Critical Interpretation

"The Road Not Taken" by Robert Frost

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

He has a choice of which road to take, and one of them "wants wear," meaning that not as many people have gone down it.

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

Even though one road was slightly less worn than the other, they were really "about the same."

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

The roads are equal. They both have leaves that no one has trampled on.

Once he's made the choice to go down one road, he knows that he will probably never face this same choice again. The chance is lost. He is committed to the path fewer have gone down.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I –
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

He is looking back on the choice from a time in the future and putting more of meaning into it than there was at the time. The roads were almost equal. There really was no difference. He's not being completely honest with himself or he's being overly dramatic about a minor choice he made a long time ago.

Because he chose a different road than most people choose, he had a completely different life than he might have led otherwise. This small difference earlier made a huge difference later.

Memorizing it

This poem has a strong rhyme scheme in which the first, third, and fourth lines rhyme with each other, and the second and fifth lines rhyme with each other.

Highlight the last words of each line using one color to highlight the last word of lines 1, 3, and 4, and a different color to highlight the last word of lines 2 and 5.

Read through the poem out loud three times, emphasizing the rhyme and trying to make a mental picture of the highlighting.

"The Road Not Taken" by Robert Frost

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Memorizing it

Can you say the poem with only the visual clues given below?

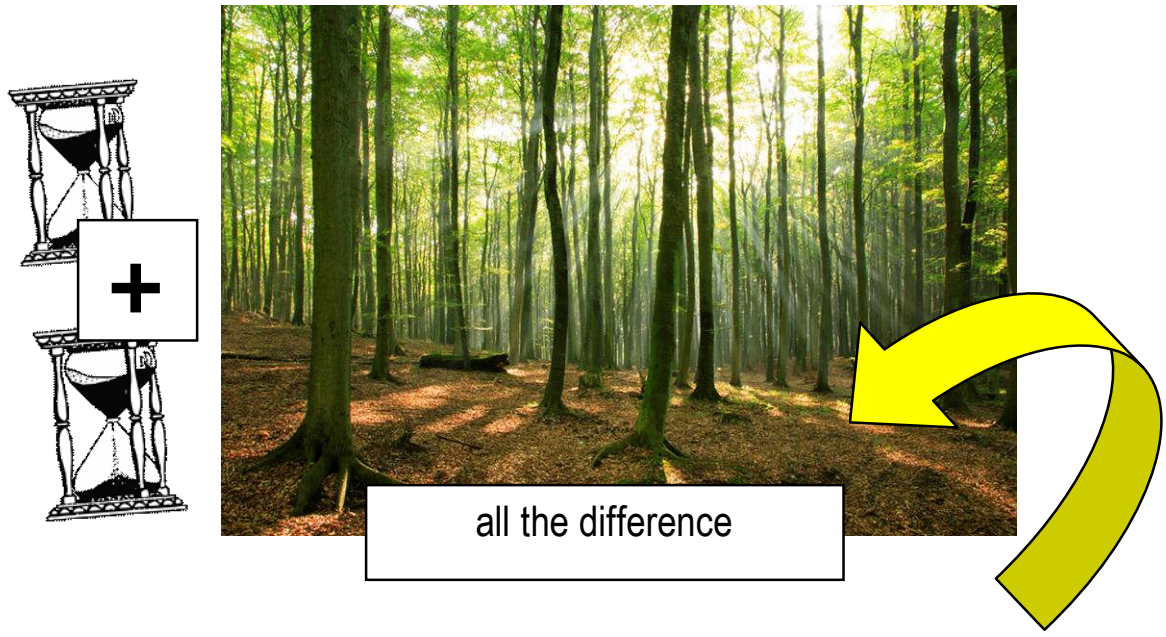
"The Road Not Taken" by Robert Frost

1st Stanza:

2nd Stanza:

3rd Stanza

4th Stanza



See if you can put these stanzas in order by putting the number of the stanza in the box.

"The Road Not Taken" by Robert Frost

☐
I s___ be t___ t__ ___ a ___
S____ ages and ages _____:
2 r____ d____ in a ___ , & I –
I __ the ___ less t____ by,
& t___ has m___ all the d_____.

☐
Two ___ d___ in a y__ w___,
& s___ I c___ ___ t___ ___
& be 1 t____, long I s____
& I____ d___ 1 __ f__ as I c___
To ____ it ___ in the _____;

☐
T__ t___ the ____, as j___ as f__,
& h____ p____ the b___ ____,
B____ it w___ g___ & w___ w__;
T__ as f__ t___ the p___ t__
H__ w__ t__ r__ a__ the s__,

☐
& b___ t__ m___ e___ I__
In I___ no s___ h__ t___ b__.
Oh, I k__ the f__ for a____ ___!
Yet k___ h__ w__ I___ on to w__,
I _____ if I ____ e___ c____ b__.

Poem #4

"Invictus" by William Ernest Henley

Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the Pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.

In the fell clutch of circumstance
I have not winced nor cried aloud,
Under the bludgeonings of chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed.

Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
Finds, and shall find me, unafraid.

It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul.

When he was twelve years old, William Henley developed tuberculosis that affected the bone, necessitating the amputation of his foot when he was older. Though many consider the poem inspiring, it gained some negative attention when Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh recited it as his deathbed statement before his execution. The message of the poem, that we are in charge of ourselves and not victims of circumstance, rings true today.

Taking it apart

"Invictus" by William Ernest Henley

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It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul.

"Invictus" is Latin for "unconquered."

"Pit" here means hell or darkest night.

No matter how dark it gets, he is still in charge of himself.

"Fell" means to knock down, like felling a tree, but it can also mean of a cruel nature.

To "bludgeon" is to beat. So he is saying that even though he's been harshly treated by fate, he is still standing proud.

He says here that even though what awaits him after this life is death, he is still brave.

"Shade" here refers to the darkness of death.

This is a biblical allusion to the saying, "Strait is the gate and narrow the way that leads to eternal life." (Matthew 7:14)

"Strait" means narrow, tight, difficult.

The scroll is a metaphor for the law.

When he says "captain of my soul," he makes an image of his life as a ship, and he's the one sailing it.

Memorizing it

"Invictus"

Out of the n_____ that c_____ me,

B_____ as the P___ from pole to p____,

I t_____ whatever g____ may be

For my u_____ soul.

In the fell c_____ of c_____

I have not w_____ nor cried a_____,

Under the b_____ of chance

My head is b_____, but u_____.

B_____ this place of w_____ and tears

Looms but the h_____ of the s____,

And yet the m_____ of the y_____

Finds, and s___ find me, u_____.

It m_____ not how s_____ the gate,

How c_____ with p_____ the scroll,

I am the m_____ of my f_____:

I am the c_____ of my s_____.

Memorizing it

"Invictus"

O__ o__ t__ n_____ t____ c_____ m__,

B_____ a_ t__ P___ f___ p__ t_ p____,

I t_____ w___ g____ m___ b___

F___ m__ u_____ s___.

I__ t___ f____ c_____ o__ c_____

I h___ n___ w_____ n___ c____ a_____,

U____ t___ b_____ o_ c____

M__ h____ i__ b_____, b__ u_____.

B_____ t___ p____ o_ w_____ a__ t___

L____ b___ t___ h_____ o__ the s____,

A___ y___ t__ m_____ o__ t__ y_____

F___, a___ s___ f___ m_, u_____.

I__ m_____ n__ h__ s_____ t__ g___,

H__ c_____ w___ p_____ t__ s___,

I a__ t__ m_____ o__ m__ f_____:

I a__ t__ c_____ o_ m_ s_____.

Poem #5

"Death be not Proud" by John Donne

DEATH be not proud, though some have called thee
Mighty and dreadful, for, thou art not so,
For, those, whom thou think'st, thou dost overthrow,
Die not, poor death, nor yet canst thou kill me.
From rest and sleep, which but thy pictures be,
Much pleasure, then from thee, much more must flow,
And soonest our best men with thee do go,
Rest of their bones, and soul's delivery.
Thou art slave to Fate, Chance, kings, and desperate men,
And dost with poison, war, and sickness dwell,
And poppy, or charms can make us sleep as well,
And better than thy stroke; why swell'st thou then;
One short sleep past, we wake eternally,
And death shall be no more; death, thou shalt die.

The official name of this poem is "Divine Sonnet X," although is it most frequently called by its first line. If you were going to name this poem, what would you call it? John Donne ("Donne" is pronounced like "done") was a poet who became an Anglican priest. This poem is a challenge to Death that tries to convince Death that he is not powerful or to be feared. Since most people are afraid of death, this poem challenges a common idea.

Taking it apart

This technique, addressing a concept or someone who is absent as if the thing or person were there, is called *apostrophe.*

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Much pleasure, then from thee, much more must flow,

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Thou art slave to Fate, Chance, kings, and desperate men,

And dost with poison, war, and sickness dwell,

And poppy, or charms can make us sleep as well,

And better than thy stroke; why swell'st thou then;

One short sleep past, we wake eternally,

And death shall be no more; death, thou shalt die.

Donne begins the poem by telling Death that Death has no reason to be proud because it's so scary, because it's not. He will spend the rest of the poem explaining why Death isn't scary.

One reason death isn't scary is that sleep is enjoyable, and death is just like a better sleep, so death must be even better than sleeping.

All the awesome people die, so death must be great. Also, it brings rest and takes your soul to heaven.

Death can't be scary when it can't even control when people die because kings send people into war, and some people commit suicide.

Death hangs out with some bad company, so how powerful could it be?

Drugs can make people sleep even better than Death, so why should Death be so puffed up?

When we die, we will sleep for a second, and then we will wake up forever. The only thing that will ever really die is Death itself, so in that way, it is the weakest thing of all.

Memorizing it

This poem has a strong rhyme scheme. The poem is a sonnet, so it has three quatrains and a couplet. Follow the directions below to figure out the rhyme scheme.

"Death be not Proud" by John Donne

DEATH be not proud, though some have called thee	_____
Mighty and dreadful, for, thou art not so,	_____
For, those, whom thou think'st, thou dost overthrow,	_____
Die not, poor death, nor yet canst thou kill me.	_____
From rest and sleep, which but thy pictures be,	_____
Much pleasure, then from thee, much more must flow,	_____
And soonest our best men with thee do go,	_____
Rest of their bones, and soul's delivery.	_____
Thou art slave to Fate, Chance, kings, and desperate men,	_____
And dost with poison, war, and sickness dwell,	_____
And poppy, or charms can make us sleep as well,	_____
And better than thy stroke; why swell'st thou then;	_____
One short sleep past, we wake eternally,	_____
And death shall be no more; death, thou shalt die.	_____

Step 1: Underline the last word of each line.

Step 2: Use marker to draw colored boxes around the quatrains and the couplet.

Step 3: Put an "A" on the line next to the last word of the first line, "thee."

Step 4: Put a "B" on the line next to the last word of the second line because it doesn't rhyme with "thee."

Step 5: Put an "A" next to any word that rhymes with the last word of the first line, "thee."

Step 6: Put a "B" next to any word that rhymes with the last word of the second line.

Step 7: Put a "C" next to the first word that doesn't rhyme with either "A" or "B."

Step 8: Put a "D" next to the first word that doesn't rhyme with either "A" or "B" or "C" and so on until you go through the whole poem.

Memorizing it

Some of the words of this poem have been replaced with words that rhyme with the original word. Find the replacement words and write the correct words above them.

"Death be not Proud" by John Donne

DEATH be not loud, though none have called thee

Flighty and dreadful, door, thou cart not so,

For, those, doom thou think'st, chow dost overthrow,

Cry not, poor death, nor bet canst thou bill me.

From best and sleep, hitch but sky pictures be,

Much treasure, then from bee, much more must stow,

And soonest our best men with thee do go,

Test of their stones, and soul's delivery.

Thou art crave to Fate, Dance, kings, and desperate hen,

And dost with poison, chore, and sickness knell,

And poppy, or charms man make us creep as well,

And cheddar than thy stroke; fly swell'st thou then;

Done short sleep last, we flake eternally,

And death shall be glow more; death, thou shalt shy.

Poem #6

Sonnet II: “Time Does Not Bring Relief” by Edna St. Vincent Millay

Time does not bring relief: you all have lied
Who told me time would ease me of my pain!
I miss him in the weeping of the rain;
I want him at the shrinking of the tide;
The old snows melt from every mountain-side,
And last year’s leaves are smoke in every lane;
But last year’s bitter loving must remain
Heaped on my heart, and my old thoughts abide!

There are a hundred places where I fear
To go, - so with his memory they brim!
And entering with relief some quiet place
Where never fell his foot or shone his face
I say, “There is no memory of him here!”
And so stand stricken, so remembering him!

Edna St. Vincent Millay was the first woman to win the Pulitzer Prize for poetry. In this poem, she defies the conventional logic that time heals all wounds.

If this poem seems to much for you, try this very short one, perhaps her best known:

"First Fig" from *A Few Figs from Thistles*

My candle burns at both ends;
It will not last the night;
But ah, my foes, and oh, my friends--
It gives a lovely light!

Taking it apart

Sonnet II: "Time Does Not Bring Relief" by Edna St. Vincent Millay

It isn't true that time heals all wounds.

Time does not bring relief: you all have lied
Who told me time would ease me of my pain!
I miss him in the weeping of the rain;
I want him at the shrinking of the tide;

Even though time goes by, I still miss him when it rains and when the tide goes out – through all the little things of daily life.

Even though the seasons have changed and time is going by, I still have the same feelings inside.

The old snows melt from every mountain-side,
And last year's leaves are smoke in every lane;
But last year's bitter loving must remain
Heaped on my heart, and my old thoughts abide!

There are a hundred places where I fear
To go, - so with his memory they brim!
And entering with relief some quiet place
Where never fell his foot or shone his face
I say, "There is no memory of him here!"
And so stand stricken, so remembering him!

I don't want to go places that are full of memories of him, but when I go somewhere that he never was, I am even more upset because I realize that he was never there.

Later, you will read a poem by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Although not the one included here, his poem "The Cross of Snow" shares the idea of Millay's work. Eighteen years after his wife's death, he wrote:

> Such is the cross I wear upon my breast
> These eighteen years, through all the changing scenes
> And seasons, changeless since the day she died

Memorizing it

Can you find the rhyme scheme on this one by yourself? How is it similar to that of Donne's poem? This poem has a unique divide for a sonnet – the first two quatrains are grouped together, and then the third quatrain is grouped with the couplet. Do you see a reason for this? What is the connection?

To work on memorizing this poem, say it through out loud three times. First, say it as if you were angry with a particular person. Next, say the first line softly, then the next line loudly. Repeat until the end. Lastly, say the poem with strong pauses at the ending punctuation and blending the lines where there is no punctuation at the end of the line.

Sonnet II: "Time Does Not Bring Relief" by Edna St. Vincent Millay

Time does not bring relief: you all have lied
Who told me time would ease me of my pain!
I miss him in the weeping of the rain;
I want him at the shrinking of the tide;
The old snows melt from every mountain-side,
And last year's leaves are smoke in every lane;
But last year's bitter loving must remain
Heaped on my heart, and my old thoughts abide!

There are a hundred places where I fear
To go, - so with his memory they brim!
And entering with relief some quiet place
Where never fell his foot or shone his face
I say, "There is no memory of him here!"
And so stand stricken, so remembering him!

Memorizing it

Every other word has been left blank. Can you fill them in?

Sonnet II: “Time Does Not Bring Relief” by Edna St. Vincent Millay

Time ___ not ____ relief: ____ all ____ lied

____ told __ time ___ ease ___ of ___ pain!

___ miss ___ in ___ weeping ___ the ___;

I ___ him ___ the ___ of ___ tide;

___ old ___ melt ___ every ___,

And ___ year’s ___ are ___ in ___ lane;

___ last ___ bitter ___ must ___

Heaped ___ my ___, and ___ old ___ abide!

___ are ___ hundred ___ where ___ fear

___ go, - ___ with ___ memory ___ brim!

___ entering ___ relief ___ quiet ___

Where ___ fell ___ foot ___ shone ___ face

___ say, “___ is ___ memory ___ him ___!”

And ___ stand ___ , so ___ him!

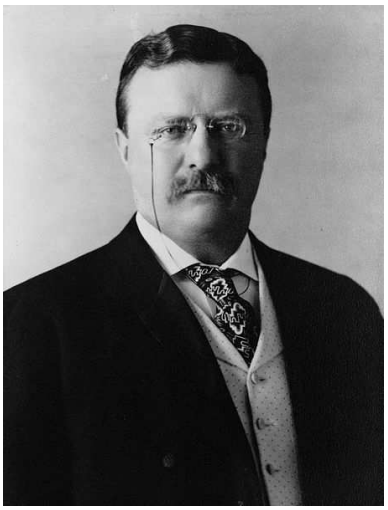
Poem #7

This one's not a poem at all!

This is an excerpt from a speech called *The Man in the Arena: Citizenship in a Republic* that Teddy Roosevelt gave at the Sorbonne in Paris on April 23, 1910. It was originally written in normal paragraph form, but it's been put in poetry form for ease of memorization.

Teddy Roosevelt said:

> It is not the critic who counts;
> not the man who points out how the strong man stumbled,
> or where the doer of deeds could have done better.
> The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena;
> whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood;
> who strives valiantly;
> who errs and comes short again and again;
> who knows the great enthusiasms,
> the great devotions,
> and spends himself in a worthy cause;
> who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement;
> and who at the worst, if he fails,
> at least fails while daring greatly;
> so that his place shall never be
> with those cold and timid souls
> who know neither victory nor defeat.



This excerpt from Roosevelt's speech addresses the tendency people have to belittle and attack those in charge. Roosevelt argues that it is better to be doing and do it wrong than to never try to do anything at all. You may never lose, but you will never win either. Roosevelt himself was a doer, and he is famous for his ebullient personality.

Taking it apart

Even though it's not a poem, Roosevelt uses alliteration (repetition of the beginning consonant sound) to add emphasis and rhythm to the words.

Teddy Roosevelt said:

It is not the **c**ritic who **c**ounts;

not the man who points out how the **s**trong man **s**tumbled,

or where the **d**oer of **d**eeds could have **d**one better.

What kinds of things are done in arenas?

The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena;

whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood;

who strives valiantly;

who errs and comes short again and again;

Notice how often he repeats the words "who" and "and." What effect do you think this has?

who knows the great enthusiasms,

the great devotions,

and spends himself in a worthy cause;

who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement;

and who at the worst, if he fails,

The important thing is to attempt something great, not to be satisfied with never trying anything at all.

at least fails while daring greatly;

so that his place shall never be

with those cold and timid souls

who know neither victory nor defeat.

Can you think of applications of this idea in politics? Sports? Entertainment?

Memorizing it

This is a fairly simple piece to memorize because so many of the lines are short and the words are easily spoken. Try saying the poem aloud, starting with just the first line, and then saying the first and second lines, then the first, second, and third, and so on. As you practice, put emphasis on the underlined words. After you have done the entire poem, use a highlighter to choose different words to emphasize and repeat the exercise. Speak slowly with strong inflections.

Teddy Roosevelt said:

It is **not** the **critic** who counts;
not the man who points out how the **strong** man **stumbled**,
or where the **doer** of **deeds** could have done **better**.
The **credit** belongs to the man who is actually **in** the arena;
whose face is marred by **dust** and **sweat** and **blood**;
who **strives** valiantly;
who **errs** and comes short **again** and **again**;
who knows the great **enthusiasms**,
the great **devotions**,
and spends himself in a **worthy cause**;
who at the **best** knows in the end the **triumph** of high achievement;
and who at the **worst**, if he **fails**,
at least **fails** while daring **greatly**;
so that **his** place shall **never** be
with those **cold** and **timid** souls
who know **neither** victory **nor** defeat.

Poem #8

"Richard Cory" by Edward Arlington Robinson

Whenever Richard Cory went down town,
We people on the pavement looked at him:
He was a gentleman from sole to crown,
Clean favored, and imperially slim.

And he was always quietly arrayed,
And he was always human when he talked;
But still he fluttered pulses when he said,
"Good morning," and he glittered when he walked.

And he was rich – yes, richer than a king,
And admirably schooled in every grace:
In fine, we thought that he was everything
To make us wish that we were in his place.

So on we worked, and waited for the light,
And went without the meat, and cursed the bread:
And Richard Cory, one calm summer night,
Went home and put a bullet through his head.

Robinson, who won three Pulitzer Prizes for his poetry, likely based this poem on the life of his brother, Herman, who committed suicide. The main ideas of the poem, that things are not always what they seem and that money cannot buy happiness, develop slowly and only reveal themselves in the last, startling stanza. Simon & Garfunkel recorded a song based on this poem called *Richard Cory*. You can view them performing it in concert here: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=euuCiSY0qYs

Taking it apart

"Richard Cory" by Edward Arlington Robinson

Whenever Richard Cory went down town,
We people on the pavement looked at him:
He was a gentleman from sole to crown,
Clean favored, and imperially slim.
And he was always quietly arrayed,
And he was always human when he talked;
But still he fluttered pulses when he said,
"Good morning," and he glittered when he walked.
And he was rich – yes, richer than a king,
And admirably schooled in every grace:
In fine, we thought that he was everything
To make us wish that we were in his place.
So on we worked, and waited for the light,
And went without the meat, and cursed the bread:
And Richard Cory, one calm summer night,
Went home and put a bullet through his head.

The narrator separates himself from Richard Cory by saying "We people" – like Cory is very different from everyone else. Also he comes "down," implying that where he usually is is "up."

"Sole" is the sole of his foot, and "crown" is a play on words here. It can be the top of your head, or it can be what a king wears. "Imperial" is another royal word that adds to the regal description.

The repetition of conjunctions in a series is called **polysyndeton.** Robinson uses this technique in the repetition of the word "and" at the beginning of sentences, phrases, and clauses. How many times do you see it?

Since no one can really "glitter" when he walks, the reader must imagine the effect Cory had on the town when he was there. It is similar to the term "star" applied to a celebrity.

Robinson uses simile and hyperbole (deliberate exaggeration) here to emphasize Cory's wealth. Is he really richer than a king? He must have seemed so to the poor of the town.

Notice the juxtaposition of the "calm summer night" with the violence of Cory's suicide. It makes it even more startling, more intense. Why is Cory's suicide so surprising?

Memorizing it

Four stanzas of four lines with a rigid rhyme scheme make this one of the easiest poems to memorize in the list. Its meter makes the words fall into an easy, sing-song rhythm. Taking one line at a time, cover the text with a piece of paper or index card, and read over the line twice. Then try to write the first letter of each word of the line to the right of the line. The first one is done for you as an example. Once you have done that, cover the text and use just the first letters to practice.

"Richard Cory" by Edward Arlington Robinson

Whenever Richard Cory went down town, *W R C w d t*
We people on the pavement looked at him:
He was a gentleman from sole to crown,
Clean favored, and imperially slim.

And he was always quietly arrayed,
And he was always human when he talked;
But still he fluttered pulses when he said,
"Good morning," and he glittered when he walked.

And he was rich – yes, richer than a king,
And admirably schooled in every grace:
In fine, we thought that he was everything
To make us wish that we were in his place.

So on we worked, and waited for the light,
And went without the meat, and cursed the bread:
And Richard Cory, one calm summer night,
Went home and put a bullet through his head.

Poem #9

"Hope" by Emily Dickinson

Hope is the thing with feathers
That perches in the soul,
And sings the tune--without the words,
And never stops at all,

And sweetest in the gale is heard;
And sore must be the storm
That could abash the little bird
That kept so many warm.

I've heard it in the chillest land,
And on the strangest sea;
Yet, never, in extremity,
It asked a crumb of me.

Emily Dickinson wrote over 1,800 poems during her life, but fewer than twelve of them were published before she died. This poem's most famous lines are in the first stanza that compares hope to a bird. Dickinson's rhyme (called slant rhyme) isn't traditional – for example, in lines two and four that end in *soul* and *all*. Sometimes this is called "near rhyme" or "half rhyme." Her meter is also interesting, and it enables most of her poems – including this one - to be sung to the tune of the *Gilligan's Island* theme song and *Oh, Little Town of Bethlehem*. Go ahead; try it.

Taking it apart

"Hope" by Emily Dickinson

This poem uses an extended metaphor to compare hope to a bird inside oneself that never stops singing its tune.

Hope is the thing with feathers

That perches in the soul,

And sings the tune--without the words,

And never stops at all,

A gale is a storm, and that is when the bird's song is sweetest.

And sweetest in the gale is heard;

"Sore" here means "harsh" or "terrible."

And sore must be the storm

"Abash" is "shame."

That could abash the little bird

That kept so many warm.

Here, the bird of hope keeps people warm, not even just the person who has it.

I've heard it in the chillest land,

And on the strangest sea;

Yet, never, in extremity,

This last stanza says that even though the bird of hope has sung its song in the hardest of times and never asked for even a crumb of payment.

It asked a crumb of me.

Memorizing it

Try singing it to one of the tunes mentioned above for practice. Next, associate a strong image with each stanza.

"Hope" by Emily Dickinson

Hope is the thing with feathers

That perches in the soul,

And sings the tune--without the words,

And never stops at all,

And sweetest in the gale is heard;

And sore must be the storm

That could abash the little bird

That kept so many warm.

I've heard it in the chillest land,

And on the strangest sea;

Yet, never, in extremity,

It asked a crumb of me.

Memorizing it

Now that you've sung it through a few times and associated a strong visual image with each stanza, try reciting the poem using just the first letters of the words.

"Hope" by Emily Dickinson

H__ i__ t__ t__ w__ f__

T__ p__ i__ t__ s__,

A__ s__ t__ t__— w__ t__ w__,

A__ n__ s__ a__ a__,

A__ s__ i__ t__ g__ i__ h__;

A__ s__ m__ b__ t__ s__

T__ c__ a__ t__ l__ b__

T__ k__ s__ m__ w__.

I__ h__ i__ i__ t__ c__ l__,

A__ o__ t__ s__ s__;

Y__, n__, i__ e__,

I__ a__ a c__ o__ m__.

Poem #10

"A Psalm of Life" by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

WHAT THE HEART OF THE YOUNG MAN
SAID TO THE PSALMIST

TELL me not, in mournful numbers,
Life is but an empty dream! —
For the soul is dead that slumbers,
And things are not what they seem.

Life is real! Life is earnest!
And the grave is not its goal;
Dust thou art, to dust returnest,
Was not spoken of the soul.

Not enjoyment, and not sorrow,
Is our destined end or way;
But to act, that each to-morrow
Find us farther than to-day.

Art is long, and Time is fleeting,
And our hearts, though stout and brave,
Still, like muffled drums, are beating
Funeral marches to the grave.

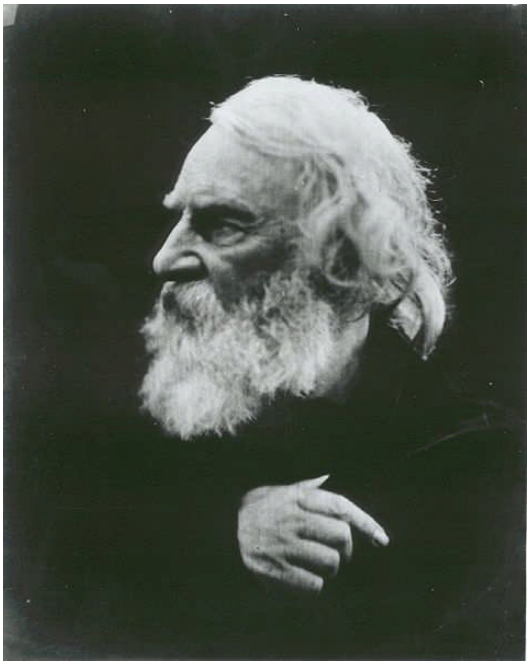
In the world's broad field of battle,
In the bivouac of Life,
Be not like dumb, driven cattle!
Be a hero in the strife!

Trust no Future, howe'er pleasant!
Let the dead Past bury its dead!
Act,— act in the living Present!
Heart within, and God o'erhead!

Lives of great men all remind us
We can make our lives sublime,
And, departing, leave behind us
Footprints on the sands of time;

Footprints, that perhaps another,
Sailing o'er life's solemn main,
A forlorn and shipwrecked brother,
Seeing, shall take heart again.

Let us, then, be up and doing,
With a heart for any fate;
Still achieving, still pursuing,
Learn to labor and to wait.



Longfellow was one of five poets called the “Fireside Poets” because their poetry was read by the firesides of American homes. He was the most popular poet of his day, and this poem is one of several, including “Paul Revere’s Ride,” that remain well-known today, over a hundred years after his death. This poem’s advises the reader that one should make the best of things and face life bravely.

Taking it apart

"A Psalm of Life" by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

WHAT THE HEART OF THE YOUNG MAN
SAID TO THE PSALMIST

TELL me not, in mournful numbers,
Life is but an empty dream! —
For the soul is dead that slumbers,
And things are not what they seem.

A sleeping soul is like being dead, so to be truly alive, a person needs to believe that he/she can achieve his/her dreams.

Life is real! Life is earnest!
And the grave is not its goal;
Dust thou art, to dust returnest,
Was not spoken of the soul.

This is from a line in the Bible that talks about one's body being created from dust and returning to dust after it dies. Longfellow says that this is only the body – the soul lives on.

Not enjoyment, and not sorrow,
Is our destined end or way;
But to act, that each to-morrow
Find us farther than to-day.

Life isn't just for pleasure (or pain), but is to **do** something – to make progress.

Art is long, and Time is fleeting,
And our hearts, though stout and brave,
Still, like muffled drums, are beating
Funeral marches to the grave.

Even if you are brave, the truth is that everyone is getting closer and closer to death. Time is flying by.

In the world's broad field of battle,
In the bivouac of Life,
Be not like dumb, driven cattle!
Be a hero in the strife!

"Bivouac" is a camp. This term is often used in the military. This stanza uses a military metaphor to explain that we are here temporarily like an army set up in tents preparing for battle. We should be brave, not just try to blend in with the crowd.

Trust no Future, howe'er pleasant!
Let the dead Past bury its dead!
Act,— act in the living Present!
Heart within, and God o'erhead!

The moment right now is the most important moment. You can't change the past, and you can't trust the future. All you can do is seize this moment, trust your heart, and trust God.

Lives of great men all remind us
We can make our lives sublime,
And, departing, leave behind us
Footprints on the sands of time;

This stanza contains the poem's most famous phrase: footprints on the sands of time. "Sublime" means heavenly. So, Longfellow says that we can leave a mark on the world if we make the most of our lives.

Footprints, that perhaps another,
Sailing o'er life's solemn main,
A forlorn and shipwrecked brother,
Seeing, shall take heart again.

Using a different metaphor this time – of life as a ship – Longfellow says that we may leave a path that someone else can follow in a time of trouble.

Let us, then, be up and doing,
With a heart for any fate;
Still achieving, still pursuing,
Learn to labor and to wait.

This last stanza is a rousing quatrain that inspires the reader to work and never stop, prepared to face anything that comes along.

Memorizing it

This poem, containing nine quatrains, is the longest of the poems included. Although it has thirty-six lines, it has a strong rhyme scheme and meter that make it fairly easy to memorize in spite of its length. Memorize one stanza at a time by couplet (two lines).

"A Psalm of Life" by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

TELL me not, in mournful numbers,
Life is but an empty dream! —
For the soul is dead that slumbers,
And things are not what they seem.

Life is real! Life is earnest!
And the grave is not its goal;
Dust thou art, to dust returnest,
Was not spoken of the soul.

Not enjoyment, and not sorrow,
Is our destined end or way;
But to act, that each to-morrow
Find us farther than to-day.

Art is long, and Time is fleeting,
And our hearts, though stout and brave,
Still, like muffled drums, are beating
Funeral marches to the grave.

In the world's broad field of battle,
In the bivouac of Life,
Be not like dumb, driven cattle!
Be a hero in the strife!

Memory Tip: Try to create hand or body motions for each stanza. For example, you can count on one hand for "numbers," and you can lay your head on your hands for "slumbers." Try it for the other stanzas.

Memory Tip: Use a highlighter to mark the word in each couplet that you think is the key word of the couplet.

Trust no Future, howe'er pleasant!
Let the dead Past bury its dead!
Act,— act in the living Present!
Heart within, and God o'erhead!

Lives of great men all remind us
We can make our lives sublime,
And, departing, leave behind us
Footprints on the sands of time;

Footprints, that perhaps another,
Sailing o'er life's solemn main,
A forlorn and shipwrecked brother,
Seeing, shall take heart again.

Let us, then, be up and doing,
With a heart for any fate;
Still achieving, still pursuing,
Learn to labor and to wait.

Memory Tip: Memorize in groups of three stanzas. After you have a group of three stanzas memorized, move to the next group. Have someone quiz you by prompting you with the first words of the lines.

Poem #11

"Aedh Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven" by William Butler Yeats

HAD I the heavens' embroidered cloths,

Enwrought with golden and silver light,

The blue and the dim and the dark cloths

Of night and light and the half light,

I would spread the cloths under your feet:

But I, being poor, have only my dreams;

I have spread my dreams under your feet;

Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.

Yeats was an Irish poet who won the Nobel Prize for Literature. This poem is from the period when he wrote primarily about mythology and Irish legend. Aedh, the god of death in Irish mythology, was one of four characters who appear in Yeats's poetry in the middle of his writing career. A love poem often abbreviated "The Cloths of Heaven," this work of Yeats explores the idea of wanting to give gifts to someone you love, but having only the greatest gift of all, your dreams, to give. The poem also explores the idea that love makes you vulnerable because the person you love could hurt you by treading harshly on your dreams.

Taking it apart

"Aedh Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven" by William Butler Yeats

HAD I the heavens' embroidered cloths,

Enwrought with golden and silver light,

The blue and the dim and the dark cloths

Of night and light and the half light,

I would spread the cloths under your feet:

But I, being poor, have only my dreams;

I have spread my dreams under your feet;

Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.

Although its meaning is deep, this poem is short and simple to understand. Imagine here in the first lines that the poet had a marvelous piece of cloth made in heaven that was beautifully woven with gold and silver strands of light.

The gold and silver light are interwoven with the beautiful blues of the sky at morning and noon and night.

If the poet had such a cloth, he would lay it under the feet of the person he loved. Imagine laying a work of art under someone's feet.

But the poet is poor, and he doesn't have anything like this cloth. In fact, he has nothing except his own dreams.

So he lays his dreams at the feet of the person he loves, and he asks that the person tread lightly on his dreams, as lightly as she would on a beautiful heavenly cloth.

Think about how valuable someone's hopes and dreams are and why it would be important to be careful how we walked on them.

Memorizing it

This poem has a very odd ending pattern. Notice how lines 1 & 3 end with the same word. So do 2 & 4, 5 & 7, and 6 & 8. That means that of the eight lines, there are only four words they end with, which makes for a very strong rhyme scheme. Memorize this poem line by line, then couplet by couplet, then in two four-line groups, then all together. As you work on memorizing the lines, let your mind imagine the beauty of the colors and images that Yeats describes.

"Aedh Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven" by William Butler Yeats

1. HAD I the heavens' embroidered cloths,
2. Enwrought with golden and silver light,
3. The blue and the dim and the dark cloths
4. Of night and light and the half light,
5. I would spread the cloths under your feet:
6. But I, being poor, have only my dreams;
7. I have spread my dreams under your feet;
8. Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.

Poem #12

"Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night" by Dylan Thomas

Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Though wise men at their end know dark is right,
Because their words had forked no lightning they
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright
Their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Wild men who caught and sang the sun in flight,
And learn, too late, they grieved it on its way,
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight
Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

And you, my father, there on that sad height,
Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray.
Do not go gentle into that good night.
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Dylan Thomas was a Welsh poet who died tragically young but left a powerful legacy of work. This poem, written to Thomas's dying father, has a strict structure, but an unconventional message. Thomas encourages his father to rebel and struggle against death, what he calls the "dying of the light." Although written for his father, Dylan Thomas himself ironically died the year after his father.

Taking it apart

"Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night" by Dylan Thomas

Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Thomas sees life as a day – death is the closing of that day, and the dying of the light is the sunset and coming night. Notice the pairing of lines 1 & 3. Gentle matches rage; good with dying; and night with light.

Though wise men at their end know dark is right,
Because their words had forked no lightning they
Do not go gentle into that good night.

This is a mythological allusion to the gods who could throw lightning bolts and have the skies tremble at the sound of their voice. In this stanza, Thomas says that even though men accept that they are mortal and should die ("Death is right"), he still encourages a rebellion against it.

Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright
Their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Stanza 2 talks about how wise men approach death. This stanza is about how "good" men do. They see the things they did in life reflect like light off of a bay.

Wild men who caught and sang the sun in flight,
And learn, too late, they grieved it on its way,
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Rather than being useless, it is the old, near dead, "grave" men who can really see. "Gay" here means "happy" or "carefree."

Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight
Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Notice the oxymorons here: "blinding sight" and "blind eyes." There is also a simile comparing eyes that "blaze like meteors."

And you, my father, there on that sad height,
Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray.
Do not go gentle into that good night.
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

From the general men discussed in the previous stanzas, Thomas narrows to his father in this stanza, pleading with him to fight against death, pleading with him to still be "fierce." The lines that have been separated throughout the poem come together in the last couplet to reinforce the theme of the poem.

Memorizing it

The form of this poem is called a villanelle. It has only two end rhyme sounds. The first and third lines of the stanzas rhyme, and the second line rhymes with all other second lines. A villanelle ends with a rhyming couplet, and has nineteen lines – divided into five tercets and one quatrain at the end.

The strict villanelle structure and rhyme scheme make this poem particularly easy to memorize, particularly since the last line of the tercets are repetitive: you get five lines memorized for the price of two! You actually get more than that because the line "Do not go gentle into that good night" appears in the poem four times.

Using a highlighter or colored pencil, underline the lines that are repeated.

"Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night" by Dylan Thomas

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Memorizing it

Can you say the poem filling in the blanks?

"Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night" by Dylan Thomas

Do __ go g__ into t__ good __,
O__ age s__ burn __ rave __ c__ of __;
R__, __ a__ the d__ of the l__.

T__ __ m__ at their __ k__ d__ is r__,
B__ their __ had __ no l__ they
Do n__ go __ i__ that __ __.

Good m__, the l__ w__ by, c__ how b__
T__ f__ d__ __ have __ in a g__ bay,
R__, __ a__ the d__ of the l__.

W__ men who caught and s__ the sun in f__,
And l__, too l__, they __ it on its __,
Do n__ go __ i__ that __ __.

G__ men, near d__, who s__ with b__ sight
B__ eyes c__ b__ like __ and be gay,
R__, __ a__ the d__ of the l__.

And __, my father, t__ on that sad h__,
C__, b__, me now with your f__ tears, I p__.
Do n__ go __ i__ that __ __.
R__, __ a__ the d__ of the l__.

Additional Poetry Resources

Books

- *Committed to Memory: 100 Best Poems to Memorize* by John Hollander
- *Ten Poems to Last a Lifetime* by Roger Housden
- *The Best-Loved Poems of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis* by Caroline Kennedy

Web Resources

General Poetry Resource:

- http://www.poets.org/
- http://poems.com/

Poetry Recitation Competition:

- http://www.poetryoutloud.org/

Poetry for Schools: This site has poems specifically selected by former Poet Laureate of the United States Billy Collins to be used in schools. The “180” in the title stands for the 180-day school year

- http://www.loc.gov/poetry/180/