How to Read and Understand a Poem

1. Learn some (or many) of the circumstances that led to or surround the composition of the poem.
2. Study the title. Understand each word singly; understand words in combination. Identify any proper names. If the poem is labeled a sonnet, ode, hymn, etc., find out what such a label means. (Use the dictionary; use the introduction of the editors; use an encyclopedia; etc.)
3. If there is such, find a summary of the poem, either the author’s own or some editor’s or commentator’s. Read the summary before reading the poem.
4. Read through the whole poem, or most of it (i.e., a preliminary reading to get the general idea), or read at least as far as you can without becoming hopelessly bogged down.
5. How is the material in the poem treated: realistically, romantically, figuratively, symbolically, satirically, humorously, etc.?
6. If the poem is in stanzas, treat each stanza as a separate paragraph. (Some of the stanzas may overlap or run over.) Write a brief summarizing statement or sentence of each stanza.
7. If there are no stanzas (i.e., if the poem is in blank verse or couplets), watch for such helpful mechanical features as indented lines for paragraphs and/or spacing between parts. Write a brief summarizing statement or sentence of each paragraph or part.
8. Do not expect the sense to end with each line. Watch for punctuation marks. Copy a stanza or two, or more, as if the material were straight prose, but use the same punctuation marks. Especially pay attention to periods or semi-colons (i.e., since they indicate terminating of sense).
9. Pay attention to the headnotes or footnotes by marking the words or phrases in the poem that are headnoted and footnoted.
10. Difficult words or allusions? Check any such difficult or unknown-to-you references or allusions in the footnotes, a dictionary, an encyclopedia, other reference works, or elsewhere.
11. Watch for inversions, transposed words and phrases, insertions, strong parenthetic elements. Rearrange each sentence so that the word order is normal: subject and modifiers, predicate and modifiers, object and modifiers.
12. Read aloud, slowly, watching the punctuation in the rearranged-as-prose version (#8 above) or read aloud the normal-word-order version (#11 above).
13. Now read the poem itself aloud, slowly, for sound, sense, and rhyme.
14. Remember that you learn what poetry is -- and its content -- from carefully reading it aloud and carefully reading it silently. Sometimes it is helpful to hear someone else read the poem aloud. (There are now many records available containing readings of famous poems of famous poets, read by well-trained actors, actresses, and/or readers.)
15. Somewhere, sometime, write a one-sentence statement of the purpose of the poem.
16. Somewhere, sometime, write a one-sentence statement of the content of the poem.
17. Somewhere, sometime, freewrite a personal response to the poem, concentrating only on what you like, love, hate, envy about the poem. Find our what you feel as well as what you think.
18. Try to determine what kind of poem it is (kinds or types of poems are the following: epistolary, expository -- informative or didactic, satirical, meditative, dramatic, narrative, and lyric.)
19. Determine the mood or tone of the poem: joy, sorrow, grief, sadness, consolation, faith, hope, certainty, etc.
20. Determine the pattern of the poem, i.e., both its rhyme scheme (abba, etc.)and metrical pattern (iambic pentameter, anapestic tetrameter, octosyllabic couplet, etc.)
21. If there is an “I” in the poem, check the “I” identity: Is the “I” the writer or is “I” a character created or used by the writer to tell the story or express the ideas of the poem?
22. If the poem seems difficult and is not comprehended after steps 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, and 13, lay it aside for a time. Meditate about it, perhaps subconsciously, and then return to it afresh.
23. Obtain an adequate knowledge of the various technical terms used in poetry: i.e., blank verse, assonance, consonance, rhyme, pentameter, iambic, ode, sonnet, etc., up to about two-to-three dozen such.
24. Watch for added poetical adornments: alliteration, onomatopoeia, similes, metaphors, personifications, hyperbole, litotes, synecdoche, anaphora, puns, double entendre, etc .
25. Learn the major (and minor) facts of the poet’s life, as well as the kind of poetry and the mood of poetry he usually writes.