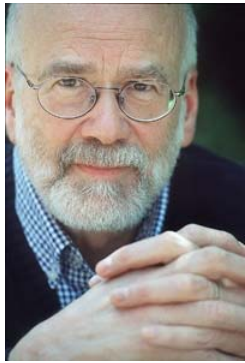


Ten Steps for Reading Poetry to an Audience

By Wes McNair, 2009

*Using samples from the
Wesley McNair Papers,
Colby College Special
Collections*



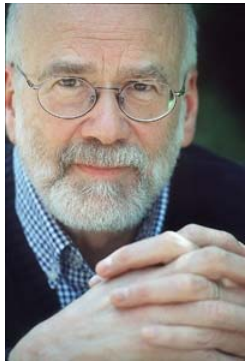
Reading Poetry to an Audience

“The ear is the best reader,” said Robert Frost, perhaps anticipating the plenitude of poetry readings in today’s America.

But good poetry readings don’t just happen.

They’re the result of careful preparation.

Here are some steps to follow as you put together your own reading, whether for class or the public lectern.



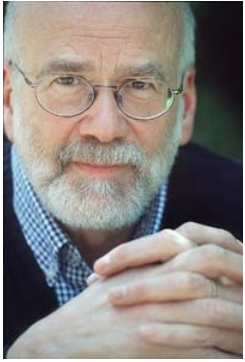
Step 1

Poetry is Different from Prose

Begin by considering how different reading a poem to others is from reading it to yourself.

Your audience has no written text to go by, only your voice.

Your task is not just to read the poem, but to communicate it.



Step 2

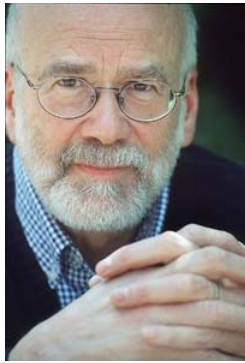
Find the Emotion in the Poem

What is the main feeling the poem expresses?

Is your poem sad? Humorous?

Does it convey astonishment or wonder?

Your aim should be to develop that feeling in your audience as you read.



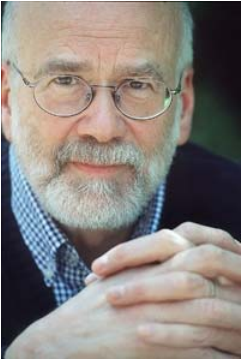
Step 3

Read Aloud to Yourself

Read your poem aloud to yourself several times until you find the delivery that seems right for it.

Imagine that you are speaking to a friend in a conversation, telling your friend about something that really matters to you, something you would not tell to just anybody and are thinking out as you say it.

This will give your reading a sense of urgency and intimacy.



Step 4

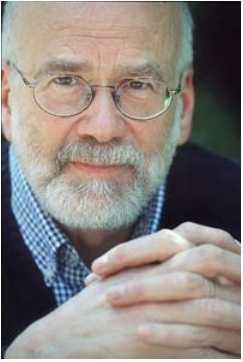
Slow Down

Slow yourself down as you practice, emphasizing key words and using short and long pauses.

Poems are layered with meanings, some of which will be lost to your listeners even at a slow speed.

The faster you go, the more your audience will lose.

Try for a slow and natural delivery, avoiding histrionics.



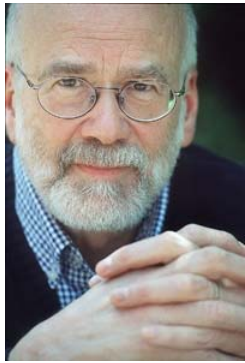
Step 5

Apply Reading Symbols

Now that you have said your poem aloud a few times, you may want to apply a set of reading symbols to enforce the delivery you have chosen.

If you do want to apply symbols, click on the link below to view samples of scored poems and listen to me reading them.

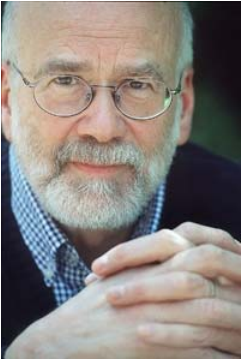
Feel free to borrow any of the symbols I've developed.



Step 6

Practice, Practice, Practice...

Reread your poem and all the others you will present until you're able to do away with your reading notations, even though you may decide to keep them as reminders, whole or in part, for your public presentation.

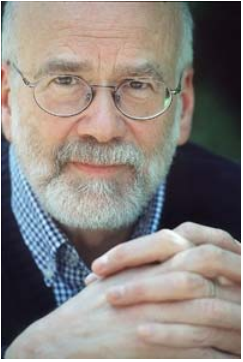


Step 7

Break Up your Reading

Because the language of poetry is intense and demanding, you should break up your reading with informal remarks as you move from poem to poem.

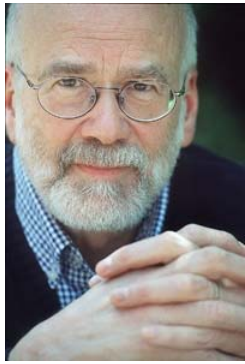
Plan an introduction for each poem you read. Tell your listeners about where the poem came from, or some difficulty you had with it, or an event that takes place in it, or anything else that might engage them without giving too much away.



Step 8

Listen to Other Poets

Now that you've begun to develop your own style as a reader, go online and listen to other poets read, adopting approaches that appeal to you. Click on the link below to visit The Library of Congress guide to poetry audio resources.

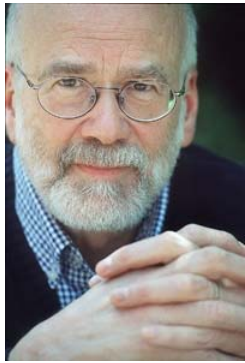


Step 9

Establish Audience Contact

Once you actually read your poems for your audience, look up from your manuscript often, establishing eye contact with your audience to make them know you're not reading at them, but to and for them.

Use your hands occasionally and facial expressions as well, just as you would in a normally active conversation.



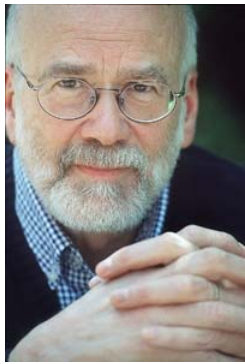
Step 10

Performance Prep (1 of 2)

First

Get a good look at your audience. Imagine yourself speaking in front of them.

Avoid the disorientation that can result from looking at your audience for the first time.



Step 10

Performance Prep (2 of 2)

Second

Take at least three deep breaths before you start.

Third

Be organized. Don't shuffle papers looking for your next poem.

If you haven't cared enough about your reading to put your poems in order, your audience has a good reason not to care, either.