Toolkit\_\_\_\_\_

How to Understand a Poem

Poetry can be read for the pure pleasure of its beauty and sound. But most good poetry is like a puzzle that requires **multiple readings** and close study to discover the many layers of meaning. There are some steps you can take though to better understanding a poem.

In the margins of the poem, complete the following:

1. Circle and write down the definitions of at least 2 words you don’t know or words that are interesting.
2. Box names and references to people including pronouns like I, we, they, us, them, etc. Figure out and label who the pronouns refer to.
   * What do you know about the speaker of the poem?
3. Identify 3-4 stylistic devices the author uses (contrasting language, absolutes, symbol, figurative language, etc.) and explain (What is being compared? What does the symbol represent? etc.).
4. Highlight 3 words that have strong connotations and create a connotation cluster for each.
5. Find 1-2 connections between a word, phrase or line and another in the poem and explain.
6. Name 3 major topics the poem relates to (friendship, education, injustice, etc.)
7. Identify the **tone**(s) - the speaker or author’s attitude about the topic(s) he/she is writing about (excited, curious, angry, outraged, humorous, sarcastic, disappointed, inspirational, etc.) See the back for more.
   * Note where any shifts or changes in the tone occur.
8. Highlight the line that you think best hints at the theme or author’s overall message.
9. Describe a theme/message or the overall feeling or impression the poem conveys (Tip: what is a message the author is suggesting about the topics the poem is about?).