

Christopher North:

The elements— sound, rhythm and musicality have always been central features of the art form and its ability to entrance and engage with the listener at a deeper layer than mere comprehension of the surface meaning. ... Sound and articulation are two of the central features of all poetry in my view. I am not a formalist and rarely write myself in the set patterns and metric conventions; nonetheless I always pay enormous attention to the sound of the poem I'm writing and to its rhythms and flow.

Stephanie Northgate:

I think it's very important for poetry to be read aloud - after all, it stems from song. Though I don't always use regular metres, I think the rhythmic sound of a poem is crucial, is what makes it a poem rather than a piece of prose.

Jane Draycott:

When I started doing readings, I used to really hate the sound of my own voice, thinking wrongly that it was me the audience was listening to, rather than the poem each time. Recently, it's helped me to enjoy reading a bit more to feel that I'm more like a singer or a musician, interpreting/inhabiting what is essentially a dramatic sound piece. I'm very hooked on sound and radio. I run several writing workshops at which I encourage members to read out one another's work, so that the poets can hear their own work as an audience would. In practice, people opt for this almost every time, and the process turns out to be a very useful workshop tool. I'd love to hear mine read by someone else.

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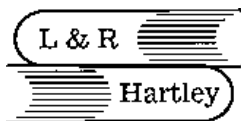
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Guidelines for Audio Recording of Poems or Short Stories.

If we are to distribute CD audio copies of a selection your poems or short stories and you are reading them, here are a few pointers to make the finished product more professional:

1. Record in as quiet and uninterrupted environment as possible.
2. Each poem or story needs to be recorded with at least ten seconds silence between items. If using a computer, save items as separate files.
3. The name of the poem or story needs to be stated clearly at the beginning of each item. Allow a pause between the title and the poem. Advise the editor if you want the title included in the final recording.
4. In advance of recording, read the poem or short story aloud to yourself until you find that you're really comfortable with every aspect of it.
5. If you're nervous about reading aloud, try standing up or sitting in the same kind of posture you might use if you were singing (e.g. tall and relaxed). If you're nervous, it can be hard to catch your breath, and good posture will help you to stay in control as you read.

6. Many first-time readers tend to read more quickly than they would otherwise, and listeners will miss some of what is being read. Remind yourself to speak slowly and to give each word its chance to be heard

7. Some readers find that their mouth will probably get dry and they find it hard to speak. Keep a bottle of water at hand, and have a big drink just before you read. Most poems are so short that, by the time your mouth has dried out you'll be finished reading!

8. Your reading will convey more and be more convincing to your audience if you allow yourself to really think about the meaning of what you're reading and to envision the images, as you read (you're not 'acting,' but the same kind of principle can apply. An actor who's just reciting lines isn't as convincing as someone who's really present to the text). Focusing on the poem in this way will also help you to forget about the fact that people are listening to you, and you'll feel more relaxed and comfortable.

9. One question people often ask about reading poetry out loud is "Do I pause at the line-breaks?" Different poets will have different responses to this question. Overly-obvious pauses at line-breaks will make the poem sound choppy and can become annoying, but the poet does use the line-break for a reason, and so offering listeners just the hint of a pause (similar to the effect of a comma, or, for you musician-types, a subtle syncopation in the rhythm) can give listeners a brief chance to perceive the effect of the line-break. You might want to experiment with reading the poem in different ways to someone else, before you do the recording, and get suggestions.

10. If you make a mistake, start again, but keep all recorded copies in case the first is better than the last. Sometimes we get tired and it shows in our voice. For some people, the first reading is fresher and brighter and continued recording does not necessarily improve on this first effort. If an error is identified by a pause, the word 'ERROR' and another pause, then re-comencing the previous sentence or line, (provided this does not happen too often) we can often edit this out when we convert it to CD Audio.

Here's what others say about reading a poem (principles that may also apply to short story reading).

Former Poet Laureate Billy Collins:

Read the poem slowly. Most of us speak rapidly, and a nervous reader will tend to do the same in order to get the reading over with. Reading a poem slowly is the best way to ensure that the poem will be read clearly and understood by its listeners. Learning to read a poem slowly will not just make the poem easier to hear; it will underscore the importance in poetry of each and every word. A poem cannot be read too slowly, and a good way for a reader to set an easy pace is to pause for a few seconds between the title and the poem's first line.

Read in a normal, relaxed tone of voice. It is not necessary to give a dramatic reading as if from a stage. ... Let the words of the poem do the work. Just speak clearly and slowly.

Obviously, poems come in lines, but pausing at the end of every line will create a choppy effect and interrupt the flow of the poem's sense. Readers should pause only where there is punctuation, just as you would when reading prose, only more slowly.

—*Source: Poetry 180*

George Szirtes:

There are two extremes to guard against: Flat mechanical reading (over-emphasising regular rhythms, end-stopping lines that are not end-stopped on the page) on the one hand, and over-dramatised readings in which the reader emotes in a rather actorish fashion. The poem can do its own singing and, properly listened to, is its own best interpreter. Most poems prefer complex emotions to simple ones: they are as much about language as about states of mind. The secret of speaking or reading poetry aloud (and all poetry benefits from being spoken or read aloud) is clarity and pace. Respect these two and the poem does the rest. A hint of dynamics is usually enough.