**Reading Poetry as a Critic**

Adapted from Nancie Atwell’s Naming the World

When we read a poem in Language Arts, we are going to talk about it like critics do. That does not mean we are going to give a poem a thumbs up or down. And it doesn’t mean we are going to talk about poetry the way you did when you were younger, focusing on ways you relate personally to a poem (e.g. saying that you like a poem about a dog because you have a dog).

Reading poetry as a critic means talking about the experience of reading: what you noticed or liked about the way the poem is built, how it means, how it makes you feel, and what the poet did to give rise to your feelings. Critics call this kind of reading “close reading;” sometimes we also call it “unpacking” a poem. Below are ten guidelines for reading poetry that we will follow. Read each one and then translate it into your own words in the space next to it.

1. We will read poetry together as critics is to improve our ability to experience poems on our own – to enter them independently, notice their features, unpack their meanings, bring the meanings into our own lives, and cherish them.
2. We will read poetry as critics to learn the language of criticism – to experience, in context, what is meant by such terms as alliteration, assonance, cadence, coded language, diction, form, imagery, line break and stanza break, metaphor, personification, rhyme scheme, simile, symbol, and theme.
3. We will read poetry as critics in order to improve our ability to write poems that matter to our lives, poems that work as good poetry and that other readers will want to experience – for example, to learn the difference between a word that’s good enough and one that’s precise and right.
4. One reader will respond to a poem differently than another. So another reason we’ll read poetry as critics is to discover which of our responses are inspired and supported by specific things a poet has done, and which are personal and idiosyncratic, e.g. “This poem about a dog is good ‘cause I have a dog.”
5. Our responses to a poem are affected by our past experiences with poetry. The more and longer we read and unpack poetry, the better we read it, understand it, and respond to it.
6. One reader’s response to a poem may be more grounded than another’s. Again, the more and longer we read and unpack poetry, the more perceptively we read it.
7. Still, no reader’s response is ever as good as the poem itself, ever “says” what the poem “says.” No matter how well someone explains all the words, images, and references in poem, its meaning is complete only within the context of the poem.
8. Because of the coded nature of the language of poetry, some poems need multiple readings to discover how and what they mean. Writing can help a reader unpack a poem, as can a dictionary. The best poems can be read a hundred times and still yield pleasures and surprises.
9. “How does a poem mean?” is a more useful question than “What does a poem mean?” Unlike other literature, in a poem, the way the meaning is coded is more interesting and important than the meaning itself.
10. When a reader unpacks a poem, the individual words, lines, images, and metaphors of the poem need to be considered in context—that is, in relation to other words, lines, images, and metaphors in the poem. In other words, a critic can’t build a theory of the meaning of a poem based on one line, if the theory doesn’t fit all the other lines of the poem.
11. Some words, lines, images, and metaphors in a poem are more important than others. They carry a great weight of meaning. A productive approach to experiencing a poem is to look for its most important words, lines, images, or metaphors. Conclusions are especially important.
12. Poems refer or allude to other poems – to all of literature, for that matter. No poem is completely original; if it were, we wouldn’t be able to read or understand it. This isn’t an argument for plagiarism. It is a reminder that critics might discuss a poem in relation to other poetry.