Introduction to Poetry

by **Billy Collins**

I ask them to take a poem
and hold it up to the light
like a color slide

or press an ear against its hive.

I say drop a mouse into a poem
and watch him probe his way out,

or walk inside the poem's room
and feel the walls for a light switch.

I want them to water-ski
across the surface of a poem
waving at the author's name on the shore.

But all they want to do
is tie the poem to a chair with rope
and torture a confession out of it.

They begin beating it with a hose
to find out what it really means.

Read with a Purpose What might each author want you to learn from his poem?



Reading Focus

Reading a Poem The title and first line will give you clues that the speaker is giving a lesson on poetry.

Literary Focus

Figures of Speech The poet uses a simile to compare reading a poem to examining a color slide. In later lines, the poem is also compared, through metaphor, to a hive, a maze, a room, and a body of water.

Literary Focus

Figures of Speech In the last two stanzas, the poet contrasts his pleasant suggestions for how to read a poem with the way his students go about it by using an extended metaphor in which the poem is seen as a prisoner who is brutalized.

Selection Readability	
Easily Accessible **Accessible** Challenging	familiar syntax; familiar context; accessible vocabulary; several examples of figurative language
Lexile	**N/A**

Selection Summary

In "Introduction to Poetry," a poetry teacher shows how students' impatience prevents them from understanding the meaning of a poem.

Guided Practice

? Reading Focus

Who is the speaker referring to when he says "them" in the first line? ***Possible response:*** *The speaker is referring to students in his poetry class.*

? Literary Focus

What is the poet trying to express about poetry by using these comparisons? ***Possible response:*** *The poet is trying to express the thought that poetry should be explored and enjoyed.*

? Literary Focus

What does this metaphor reveal about the students' approach to poetry? ***Possible response:*** *This metaphor reveals that students often focus on understanding a poem, rather than enjoying it.*

Review

Guided Practice

Read with a Purpose Ask students what they learned about poetry from the two poems. ***Possible response:*** *Taylor might want the reader to learn that giving up control sometimes has positive consequences. Collins might want the reader to learn to enjoy and appreciate poetry, rather than focusing on deciphering the meaning.*

Guided Practice

More About the Writers

- **Henry Taylor** often uses humor in his poetry. He says, "I think that the world is funny more often than a lot of serious artists have found ways of demonstrating that it is."
- **Billy Collins** works with Poetry 180, a program for promoting poetry reading to high school students. Collins says, "By just spending a few minutes reading a poem each day, new worlds can be revealed."

Think About the Writers

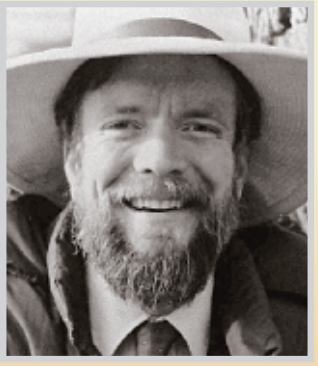
Tell students to think about how poets get ideas for their poems. Do they write about things they like or things they do not like? Do they write about their own experiences or the experiences of others? After students have discussed these questions, have them answer the Think About the Writers question in their **Reader/Writer Notebooks**.

For Independent Reading

- Students who enjoyed "Introduction to Poetry" might be interested in *Poetry 180: A Turning Back to Poetry,* a collection of poems chosen by Billy Collins and inspired by his work with the Poetry 180 program.
- For students who enjoy reading poetry about childhood experiences, you might recommend *Peeling the Onion,* an anthology of poetry compiled by Ruth Gordon. Some of the poems also address such topics as family relationships and sports.

Reading Model

MEET THE WRITERS



Henry Taylor

(1942–)

Pulitzer Prize WINNER

A Lover of Horses

A Pulitzer Prize–winning poet, Henry Taylor grew up in rural Virginia, where his father was a dairy farmer. Although Taylor decided at an early age not to follow in his father's footsteps, he was strongly influenced by his surroundings. He says,

> "Horses, in fact, were central to my life until I was in my early twenties; my sisters and I had various ponies and horses around the place, showing in small local horse and pony shows, and generally being as horsy as we could be. . . . Many of my poems draw heavily on that experience."



Billy Collins

(1941–)

U.S. Poet Laureate WINNER

A "Lifter of Chalk"

When Billy Collins was named poet laureate of the United States in 2001, he said,

> "It came completely out of the blue, like a soft-wrecking ball from outer space."

Surprising and playful images are typical of Collins's poetry. Collins was born in New York City. For more than thirty years, he has been a professor of English at the City University of New York—or, as he modestly puts it, a "lifter of chalk in the Bronx." His poetry has brought him many awards as well as wide popularity. Some have called him the most popular poet in America.

Think About the Writers How have the poets' interests in real life been translated into their poems?

Resources

Collection 7 Resources, Literary and Academic Vocabulary Skill Builder, p. 6

PowerNotes, interactive lesson presentations with activities go.hrw.com

Teacher One Stop™, on-level lesson plans and all print resources

WordSharp: An Interactive Vocabulary Tutor, more practice with Academic Language go.hrw.com

Academic Vocabulary

Writing About Poetry

Tell students they will encounter Academic Vocabulary words in standardized test questions and writing prompts. Write the following questions on the board, and have students work in groups to answer them.

- What is the poet's **intent** in "Riding Lesson"? ***Possible response:*** *The poet's intent is to show that people sometimes teach us lessons without meaning to do so.*

SKILLS IN ACTION

Wrap Up

SKILLS FOCUS **Literary Skills** Understand and analyze elements of poetry. **Reading Skills** Use strategies to read and analyze a poem. **Vocabulary Skills** Use academic vocabulary appropriately.

Into Action: Reading a Poem

Choose either "Riding Lesson" or "Introduction to Poetry." Fill in a chart like the one below to demonstrate your skills at reading a poem. Describe in the right-hand column what the items in the left-hand column contributed to your understanding or enjoyment of the poem.

Title of Poem: _____	My Comments
Re-reading/ reading aloud	
Paraphrasing	
Using form to find meaning	

Talk About . . .

1. With a partner who has chosen the same poem as you, talk about what you learned from the poem. Refer to the chart you filled in above for ideas, and try to use the Academic Vocabulary words listed at the right in your discussion.

Write About . . .

Use the underlined Academic Vocabulary words in your answers to the following questions. Definitions of the terms appear to the right.

2. What associations are evoked in your mind when the speaker in "Riding Lesson" says that the horse "threw her rider as you'd / throw a rock"?
3. What do you think is Billy Collins's intent in suggesting that his students "walk inside the poem's room / and feel the walls for a light switch"?
4. What is your interpretation of the meaning of each poem?

Writing Focus

Think as a Reader/Writer

You will find many types of poems in Collection 7. The Writing Focus activities on the Preparing to Read pages will guide you in understanding each poet's techniques. On the Applying Your Skills pages, you will have opportunities to practice these techniques in your own writing.

Academic Vocabulary for Collection 7

Talking and Writing About Poetry

Academic Vocabulary is the language you use to write and talk about literature. Use these words to discuss the poetry in this collection. The words are underlined throughout the collection.

intent (ihn TEHNT) *n.*: purpose; plan; aim. *The intent of a lyric poem is to share an idea or emotion.*

evoke (ih VOHK) *v.*: draw out; elicit. *A good poem will often evoke strong feelings in a reader.*

associations (uh soh see AY shuhnz) *n.*: connections in the mind between different things. *To understand a poem, you may have to consider your own associations to the words and images.*

interpretation (ihn tur pruh TAY shuhn) *n.*: explanation of the meaning. *Each reader may have a different interpretation of a poem.*

Your Turn

Copy these Academic Vocabulary words into your *Reader/Writer Notebook*. Now, think of one of your favorite songs. Use each Academic Vocabulary word in a sentence that explains why the song appeals to you.

Independent Practice

Into Action: Reading a Poem

Before students fill out the chart, review with them the skills of re-reading/reading aloud, paraphrasing, and using form to find meaning.

Talk About . . .

1. Model for students how to incorporate the Academic Vocabulary words into a conversation. For example, you might say: "'Riding Lesson' evoked memories of teachers I have had. This helped me make associations between the poem and my own life."

Write About . . .

Possible responses:

2. *This description can be associated with throwing something easily, as a rock can be thrown easily.*
3. *Collins's intent in using this metaphor is to suggest that students find the meaning of a poem by immersing themselves in the poem.*
4. *The first poem teaches readers to be prepared for surprises in life. The second poem suggests that readers explore poetry for the pleasure of it.*

Writing Focus

The Think as a Reader/Writer activities in the collection focus on the reading-writing relationship. Use the activities to help students explore the writer's craft in a text and to practice this aspect of craft in their own writing.

- What **associations** does Collins **evoke** when he says he wants students to "drop a mouse into a poem / and watch him probe his way out"? ***Possible response:*** *Collins evokes the image of a mouse trying to find its way through a maze.*
- How does the title "Introduction to Poetry" affect your **interpretation** of the poem? ***Possible response:*** *The title tells me that the poem will provide information about the genre of poetry.*

SKILLS FOCUS p. 681

Literary Skills
- Understand and analyze elements of poetry.

Reading Skills
- Use strategies to read and analyze a poem.

Vocabulary Skills
- Use academic vocabulary appropriately.