Reading poetry--some things to keep in mind:

• don’t be scared of poetry! It’s not a secret code you have to decipher – as with prose, there are often a number of ways to read a poem.
• a teacher of mine once defined poetry as language which “says less, but means more.” Therefore, poetry should be read more slowly, and re-read more times than when we read prose.
• poets often employ language that is not part of our everyday vocabulary; it’s often helpful to keep a dictionary close to look up unfamiliar words.
• make notes in the margin as you go along, noting the use of different poetic devices or connections between parts of the poem, images, etc.
• although not all poetry follows a strict meter (see “free verse” below), ALL poetry has rhythm. Think about the way a poet uses rhythm as you’re reading.
• poetry no longer (since the 19th century, anyway) has to rhyme to be considered poetry, but when it does, consider how the poet uses rhyme to make meaning.
• never ever ever simply ASSUME that the poet is the speaker of the poem. Poets use a variety of speakers the same way novelists use different kinds of narrators. Maybe they are similar, maybe not.

Some poetic terms:

**alliteration**: The repetition of sounds, especially consonant sounds, within a passage of prose or verse (“sailing the seven seas”). The repetition of vowel sounds is sometimes distinguished from alliteration and called assonance. Consonance is a kind of alliteration in which a similar sequence of consonants is varied by a changing vowel sound, as in "top, tap, tip."

**apostrophe**: Apart from its use as the name of a mark of punctuation (’), the term apostrophe is used for a kind of formal invocation. Sometimes the invocation is to an absent (or even dead) person: "Milton," writes Wordsworth, "thou shouldst be living at this hour;/ England hath need of thee." At other times, an inanimate object can be invoked: "O you gentle day sky!"

**ballad**: a narrative meant to be sung, usually composed in the ballad stanza. Although some ballads are carefully crafted poems written by literate authors and meant to be read silently (such as those in Lyrical Ballads by Wordsworth and Coleridge), the folk ballad (or popular ballad, or traditional ballad) is derived from the oral tradition.

**ballad stanza**: named for its frequent use in traditional ballads, is quatrains of alternating tetrameter and trimeter, rhyming either abab or abcb. Some examples:

Oh, I forbid ye maidens all
That wear gold in your hair
To come or go by Carterhaugh
For young Tam Lin is there.
In Scarlet Town, where I was born
There lived a fair maid dwellin’;
Made many a youth cry well-a-day,
And her name was Barbara Allen.

In folk ballads, the meter is often irregular (as in the example above from "Barbara Allen") and the rhymes are often approximate.

**blank verse**: Blank verse is the technical name for unrhymed iambic pentameter — i.e., verse of five feet per line, with the stress on the second beat of each foot. It’s one of the most common kinds of verse in English: many passages of Shakespeare's plays are in blank verse.

**caesura** (si-ZYUR-ah): a pause somewhere in the middle of a verse. Some lines have strong (easily recognizable) caesurae, which usually coincide with punctuation in the line, while others have weak ones. It's conventional to
mark them with a double bar ||. For example, Pope was able to keep his heroic couplets interesting by varying the position of the caesurae, as here:

Alas how changed! || What sudden horrors rise!
A naked lover || bound and bleeding lies!
Where, where was Eloise? || her voice, her hand,
Her poniard, || had opposed the dire command.

**end-stopped:** When the units of sense in a passage of poetry coincide with the verses, and the sense does not run on from one verse to another, the lines are said to be end-stopped. I.e. (Pope again):

Nothing so true as what you once let fall,
"Most women have no characters at all."
Matter too soft a lasting mark to bear,
And best distinguished by black, brown, or fair.

**enjambment:** When the units of sense in a passage of poetry don't coincide with the verses, and the sense runs on from one verse to another, the lines are said to be enjambed. When the verse length matches the length of the units of sense (clauses, sentences, whatever), the lines are said to be end-stopped. The term comes from the French for "straddling," since sentences "straddle" several lines. From Robert Frost:

My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year.

**free verse:** most common in the twentieth century, but by no means unique to it — has no fixed metrical foot, and often no fixed number of feet per verse. Free verse is sometimes called by its French name, vers libre. Under no circumstances should you confuse free verse with blank verse.

**heroic couplets:** Iambic pentameter verse that rhymes in couplets is known as "heroic verse" from its use in epic poetry in English, especially Dryden's translation of Virgil (1697) and Pope's translation of Homer (1715-26). But heroic couplets needn't be used in heroic verse. Although Pope's use of the form in his Iliad translation is well regarded, his reputation as the master of the heroic couplet comes also from un-heroic lines like these, from his Essay on Criticism:

A little Learning is a dang'rous Thing;
Drink deep, or taste not the Pierian Spring:
There shallow Draughts intoxicate the Brain,
And drinking largely sobers us again.

**metaphor:** an implied comparison of two things. I.e. "you are my sunshine, my only sunshine."

**meter:** When rhythm is regular, it is often called meter. Each verse is made up of a number of metrical feet. Use a pair of terms to describe a line of verse: first, an adjective for the basic kind of foot. Typical feet include iambics (the most common in English poetry), trochees, and spondees. The second term gives the number of feet in each line. The most common in English are pentameter (five beats per verse) and tetrameter (four beats per verse). No meter is perfectly regular. Apart from the theoretical problem that no two syllables will receive precisely the same stress, most poets (even the most apparently regular) try to vary their verse by introducing occasional metrical substitutions.

**metonymy:** ("met-AH-na-mee") is the rhetorical or metaphorical substitution of a one thing for another based on their association or proximity. Examples: a monarch is not the same thing as a crown, but we often refer to the monarch as "the crown" because the two are associated.

**scan:** To scan a verse is to determine its meter — that is, to go through each foot and indicate whether each syllable is stressed or unstressed. The resultant pattern is called its scansion. We sometimes say a verse "doesn't scan," meaning the pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables is irregular — although it's wise to censure only verse that's supposed to be regular, since free verse isn't meant to have a fixed pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables.

**simile:** An explicit comparison of two things, usually with the word "as" or "like." When you say "Reading John Locke is like having teeth pulled," you liken one unpleasant experience to another.

**sonnet:** A lyric poem of fourteen lines. There are two common species of sonnet, distinguished by their rhyme scheme: the Italian and the Shakespearean. The Italian (or Petrarchan) sonnet can be broken into two parts, the octave (eight lines) and the sestet (six lines). The octave typically rhymes abba abba; the sestet varies, sometimes cdede, sometimes some variant of that. The Shakespearean (or English) sonnet is instead three quatrains and a couplet: typically abab cdec efef gg.