

When reading aloud, you need to “*make the poem talk.*”

In other words, and without creating a dramatic character, read the excerpt *as it would be spoken* if it were in fact someone’s actual, passionate speech.

A second principle: read the poem in the way that brings out the *most basic, most clear* meaning. If one reading is complex and “far-fetched,” choose the reading that is less complex and more simple.

Example #1. How would you read the following line?

The quality of mercy is not strained.

Choices?

Example #2. How would you read the following lines?

*I will speak to thee. I'll call thee Hamlet,
King, Father, Royal Dane! O, answer me!*

Choices?

Every choice of stress always produces a change in meaning.

The challenge for a reader is to ask which is *the simplest, clearest, most forceful* of all the meanings available for choice.

from *The Essentials of Elocution* by Alfred Ayres

Thoughtless readers, who comprise fully forty-nine in every fifty, are sure to make either QUALITY or MERCY, or possibly both, emphatic, while the thoughtful reader sees that the making of either of these words emphatic *puts a meaning into the line not intended*. To say that "The QUALITY of mercy is not strained" is to say that some other attribute of mercy is, or may be, strained -- the quantity, for example. And to say, "The quality of MERCY is not strained" is to say that the quality of something else is, or may be, strained. But the thoughtful reader sees that Portia's answer to Shylock's question "On what compulsion must I?" is simply this: "Mercy does *not* come by compulsion; it is spontaneous and freely given;" and, having seen this, he has no difficulty in deciding how the line should be emphasized:

The quality of mercy is not ***strained***, |
It ***droppeth*** | as the gentle dew of heaven
Upon the place beneath...

Canon Fleming defends his reading – "O answer ***me***" – in the following way:

According to the play there is a very decided question of the Ghost answering someone else. The Ghost first appears twice to other people, but will not speak. Horatio determines to inform Hamlet, for "this spirit dumb to US will speak to HIM." Hamlet therefore says "You would not answer them, so answer ***me***."

I will speak to thee. | I'll call thee Hamlet, |
King, | Father, | Royal Dane! | O answer ***me***!

However, the error in this reading lies in that fact that it does not express Hamlet's thought; it does not say what Hamlet wants to say, which is this: "Do not persist in remaining silent. Disclose, make known what your mission is. Do not let us burst in ignorance." The whole speech shows clearly, ay, most emphatically, that Hamlet's whole being is possessed with the desire to be ANSWERED, -- "O answer me" -- and not that *he*, being the Ghost's son, has special claims to consideration – "O answer ***me***":

I will speak to thee. | I'll call thee Hamlet, |
King, | Father, | Royal Dane! | O ***answer*** me!

To a Poet a Thousand Years Hence

-- by James Elroy Flecker

I who am dead // a *thousand years*, /
And wrote this sweet archaic song, /
Send you / *my words* / as messengers, /
The way I shall not pass along.

I care not if you bridge the seas, /
Or ride secure the cruel skies, /
Or build consummate palacies, /
Of metal / or of masonry.

But have you *wine*, / and *music* still? /
And *statues*, / and a *bright-eyed love*? /
And *foolish thoughts* / of *Good and Ill*? /
And prayers to *Him* / who sits above? /

How shall *we* conquer? // Like a wind
At eve our fancies blow /
And old Maeonides the blind said it, /
Three thousand years ago.

O Friend! / Unseen, / unborn, / unknown, /
Student of our sweet English tongue, /
Read out my words at night, / alone, /
I was a poet, / *I* was young.

Since I can never see your face, /
And never take you by the hand, /
I send my words through time and space
To greet you. // You will understand.

Much have I travell'd / in the realms of gold, /
And *many* goodly states and kingdoms seen; /
Round *many* western islands / have I been /
Which bards in fealty to Apollo hold. /
Oft / of one wide expanse / had I been *told*, /
That deep-brow'd Homer / ruled / as his demesne: //
Yet *never* did I breath its pure serene /
Till I heard *Chapman* speak out / loud and bold: //
Then felt I like some watcher of the skies /
When a *new planet* / swims / into his ken; /
Or like *stout Cortez* / when / with *eagle eyes* /
He *stared* at the Pacific – / and all his men /
Look'd at each other / with a *wild surmise* – /
Silent, // upon a peak // in Darien.

Since *brass*, / nor *stone*, / nor *earth*, // nor *boundless sea*, /
But sad mortality o'ersways their power, //
How / with this *rage* / shall *beauty* / hold a plea, /
Whose action is no stronger / than a flower? /
O how shall summer's honey breath / *hold out* /
Against the *wrackful* siege / of *batt'ring* days, /
When rocks *impregnable* / are *not so stout*, /
Nor gates of *steel* so strong / but *time decays*? /
O fearful meditation: / where alack, /
Shall *time's best jewel* / from *time's chest* / lie hid? /
Or *what strong hand* / can *hold* / his *swift foot back*, /
Or who / his *spoil* / of beauty / can forbid? //
O none, // unless *this* miracle have might, /
That *in black ink* / my *love* / may *still shine bright*.

Shall I compare *thee* // to a Summer's *day*? /
Thou art *more* lovely / and *more* temperate: //
Rough winds / do shake / the darling buds of May, /
And Summer's lease / hath all too *short* a date: /
Sometime *too* hot / the eye of heaven shines, /
And *often* / is his gold complexion dimm'd; /
And every fair / *from* fair / sometime declines, /
By chance / or nature's changing course *untrimm'd*: //
But *thy* eternal Summer shall not fade /
Nor lose possession / of that fair *thou* owest; /
Nor / shall Death brag / *thou* wanderest in his shade, /
When in eternal lines to time thou growest. //
So long as men can breathe, / or eyes can see, /
So long lives this, // and this // gives *life* / to thee.

Further reading/listening
on Elocution and Reading Aloud:

1) article on reading poetry aloud:

<http://academic.macewan.ca/einarsson/>

click on "*Prosody and Reading Aloud*"

click on "*Richard Outram and the Poet's Voice*"

2) podcast on poetry and culture:

<http://feeds.poetryfoundation.org/PoetryLectures>

click on "*Robert Pinsky*"