Speaking of Tough Texts: Teaching "Level of Difficulty"
through Close Reading, Reflection, and Performance
by Eileen Murphy

Total Number of Sessions
1-3, depending on options selected

NCTE Standards
1, 2, 3, 6, 9, 11, 12

Lesson Overview
Students sometimes say that poetry is hard to read; this lesson gives students the chance to explore the particular challenges some poems pose. Poetry Out Loud (POL) provides the competitive performer and the skeptical student alike a good reason to consider the difficulty of a poem. Not only is "Level of Difficulty" one of the criteria used to judge performances, it is also an invitation to larger questions about what makes a poem or anything else seem "difficult" to read or to perform. Given the valuable skills and knowledge that students gain from reading challenging texts, there are many good reasons to invite our students, as Poetry Out Loud does, to explore this question and engage in important related conversations about literacy and critical thinking.

Background Theory
Asking students to consider a poem's level of difficulty gives them the opportunity to engage in close reading, one way to overcome many of the challenges texts present. Furthermore, students have good reason to consider the difficulty of poetry, since the higher up the academic ladder they go, the more often they may face seemingly impenetrable discourse and the challenge of searching for meaning in texts. As Gerald Graff, 2008 Modern Language Association president, points out in his book *Clueless in Academe*, students need opportunities to talk about the anxieties this impenetrability may cause and air doubts they may have about why teachers often insist on finding hidden meaning in texts in the first place. The "Level of Difficulty" component of the Poetry Out Loud evaluation criteria opens up a wonderful opportunity to have these conversations and, as Graff suggests, provide students with the help they need "to conduct the search [for meaning] well, with a sense of how and why it can be useful."

Learning Objectives
In this lesson, students will have opportunities to
- read a range of poetry from various periods, styles, and perspectives.
- apply a range of reading strategies to comprehend, analyze, and evaluate poems.
- work cooperatively to develop a common vocabulary for describing and evaluating poetry.
- generate ideas and pose questions about poetry and other forms of discourse.
- reflect on their own critical literacy.
- compare and contrast the ways in which elements of print and performance convey meaning in texts in similar and different ways.

Teacher Preparation

- The lesson on "Level of Difficulty" should be introduced after a more general introduction of the Poetry Out Loud contest and discussions about the characteristics of good performances in particular.

- If students are unfamiliar with some of the specialized terms found in the contest materials, provide a glossary or have small groups of students research terms and create definition posters to present and display in class. The definitions—along with 1-2 examples of terms such as "diction," "syntax," "meter," "rhyme scheme," "tone," and "mood"—can then be displayed throughout the unit.

- If available, set up and test computer access for presenting Poetry Out Loud video resources.

- Secure student access to the print and/or online Poetry Out Loud anthologies. While the online anthology is available to everyone, several classroom copies of the print anthology are available for each teacher participating in the contest. Students will need to bring copies of what they might call "difficult poems" to class, however they need not necessarily use poems found on the Poetry Out Loud site in this exercise. Suitable examples can easily be found in library books, literature textbooks, or online, as well.

- Print classroom copies of poems that you will feature in this lesson plan.

- Prepare double-sided copies of "Speaking of Tough Texts" handouts. Depending on the size of the small discussion groups, several copies of the handout may be needed. Descriptions of two poems may be recorded on each copy, so descriptions of four poems fit on one double-sided sheet.

- If you have not distributed them in an earlier lesson, print copies of the Poetry Out Loud "Evaluation Criteria" and "Scoring Rubric" for your students. These documents are available at the POL web site in the "Competition Resources" section under "Teachers and Students."

- Read background articles on difficulty in poetry, which can be found in "Additional Resources" below. Excerpts of these articles may also be shared with students.

- If time allows, try the lesson steps in the "Activities Description" below using a poem that you personally find difficult. Because of the cognitive and sometimes emotional challenges this lesson has the potential to raise, revisiting the experience first-hand is invaluable.

Activities Description

Whether you provide a few pre-determined poems (Option 1) or you ask students to find poems on their own (Option 2), the objective of this lesson is to have students generate a list of criteria that might be used to describe qualities that make a poem seem "difficult." Whether you select Option 1 or Option 2, or decide to repeat the process and use both approaches in that sequence, proceed with the sessions as outlined below.

> ### Option 1: Teacher provides examples of poems
> Choose and assign three different difficult poems, providing printed copies of each. Your selections might come from the Poetry Out Loud print or online anthologies or any other reputable source.
>
> Student Preparation:
> As homework prior to the first lesson, have students consider what makes your assigned selections seem difficult, jotting down 2-3 elements that make them seem hard to read. Encourage students to underline and circle specific items that make the text challenging as well. Students should bring these annotated poems to the first session. Have students rank the poems from most difficult (1) to least difficult (3).
>
> ### Option 2: Students select and share poems they would rate as "difficult."
> Student Preparation:
> As homework prior to the first lesson, have students explore the POL print or online anthologies to find a poem they would consider extremely difficult to *read*. Students may also use a textbook, anthology, or another reputable source of published poetry. Have students consider what makes the poem seem difficult, jotting down 2-3 elements that make it seem hard to read. Encourage students to underline and circle specific items that make the text challenging as well. Students should bring these annotated poems to the first session.

Session 1
Though not totally subjective, "Level of Difficulty" is a relative term, so be sure to stress to students that the poems shared are meant to help generate a description of qualities that might make a poem seem "difficult," not to serve as the sole definition of a difficult poem. Class discussions will reveal that many factors, including the difference between reading and memorizing/performing a poem, the reader's preconceptions about what makes a poem difficult, or a reader/listener's background knowledge, might make a poem seem more or less difficult to different readers/listeners.

1.   Have students review the "Level of Difficulty" section of the "Evaluation Criteria" and the "Scoring Rubric" and explain that this is an opportunity for them to explore the difficulty issue. Then have students share their poems and annotations in small groups, discussing what makes a poem difficult to read, and complete the "Speaking of Tough Texts" handout. Circulate around the room as students compose their lists, modeling terms such as "archaic language" and "complicated syntax" to help students

be as specific as possible in describing elements that contribute to each poem's difficulty.

2. After groups have completed the logs, have students look for similarities and differences among the entries in the "Qualities that Contribute to the Poem's Difficulty" column and compile a list of commonly cited qualities that might make poems seem difficult to read.

3. Have groups revisit their collection of "difficult poems" and choose the one poem the group would label most difficult. List 2 or 3 qualities that make it so. Then have groups select a spokesperson to share the poem aloud with the whole class and present their group's list of factors that make poems "difficult."

4. As each spokesperson shares their group's findings, including their difficult poems, record the elements that contributed to the difficulty for readers. The list might be called the "Hit Parade of What Makes Texts Tough."

5. After the class has compiled an index of qualities that might make a poem seem difficult, ask how the list would change if the task were not only reading the poem, but *memorizing* and *reciting* it. What modifications, including additional criteria, might they make?

What makes a poem difficult?

Listed below are some possible sources of difficulty. Consult the Teacher's Guide and Judge's Guide for additional insight.

- Archaic or obscure language
- Complexity of diction and syntax, meter, rhyme scheme, and shifts in tone or mood
- Sophisticated themes and emotions
- Abstract subject matter
- Missing cues (In prose, words, phrases, or scenes are linked together. These cues are often left out of poetry, requiring readers to make the connections on their own.)
- Some poems may seem to defy our sense of what poetry is or should be. An unusual form or style, abstraction, complex nuances, a sensibility from another time, or culture, etc. might challenge preconceived conceptions.
- Length

In performance, rhythm, rhyme, and syntactical intricacies pose challenges for students who wish to convey the sense of the poem without sounding artificial or labored.

Session 2
(If following Option 1 lesson plan)

1. Have students take out their scoring rubrics and share several performances from the
    Learning Recitation video on the POL website. Below each performance, you will find
    a "Keys" section, which indicates the areas of particular strength. Select a variety of
    performances, including those in which "Level of Difficulty" appears as a key strength
    in the notes below the image. Ask the students to read these poems, then view the
    videos. (Although most of the poems featured in Learning Recitation are no longer
    eligible for Poetry Out Loud, you can find texts for these poems at
    www.poetryfoundation.org.) After each performance, have students rate the level of
    difficulty of the poems and describe what made the poem difficult.

2. Have students discuss the ways in which the performer (or performance as a medium)
    helps audience members grasp difficult poems.

3. Have students revisit the "Evaluation Criteria" for the contest, focusing on the "Level
    of Difficulty" section in particular, and discuss how the class list they compiled in
    "Session 1" compares to the description in the evaluation criteria. What elements of
    poems do both contest organizers and students label "difficult"? Discuss what, if
    anything is missing from the class's list? From the organizer's list? Discuss why
    certain elements of difficulty might be included, left out, or emphasized for contest
    purposes? In other words, ask: How does thinking about a poem within the context of
    a recitation contest, as opposed to simply reading it or discussing it in an English class,
    change the way we might view the level of difficulty?

Session 2
(If following Option 2 lesson plan)

1. Have groups view several performances using the viewing activity above and reflect
    on how the choices made by the performer might have helped audiences understand
    the poem.

2. Have students prepare ad hoc performances to present their group's most "difficult
    poem" in class. Each performance should be geared toward the explicit purpose of
    making sure their audience can understand the poem on a first hearing. They might
    consider both their peer audience and those outside of the class in making decisions
    about how to perform the poem.

Session 3
(For all students)
Wrapping up the lesson on difficulty, revisit the list of qualities that make a text tough and
have students generate a list of strategies to help them read challenging poems, noting that
they may be drawn to a poem over which they don't feel complete mastery. In that case,
rather than ruling out a poem, they should apply some strategies to help them grasp it. For
example, if the vocabulary is difficult or obscure, they might look up words. If an allusion is

unfamiliar, they might research a term. Sentences that seem challenging might make more sense if students try to rewrite them in regular prose order or begin by asking, "Who is doing what in this sentence?" Assure students that simply reading the poem out loud several times can sometimes help them understand it better, especially if they continue to ask themselves, "How would the speaker say this out loud?" Continue to generate strategies they can use to help them tackle poems they like, despite the difficulties they may pose. You might even extend the lesson by having the class apply these strategies to a difficult poem or assign students the homework of applying the strategies to a poem they like but find difficult.

Extended Learning Opportunities

- Prior to reading, everyone in the classroom, including the teacher, might perform a quick write about a difficult reading experience and share this experience to begin a discussion about approaching challenging texts.

- Students may parody a difficult poem with their own original "difficult" poem and perform it for classmates.

- Have students prepare debates about why we ought or ought not read and study difficult poems in high school.

- Have students research explications of a difficult poem and prepare a presentation for peers about the poem's meaning, as scholars read it.

- Have students choose a poem that they perceive as difficult and develop notes toward an original explication of the poem or a formal analysis.

Student Assessment/Reflections

- Student reflections (written or oral) and their questions may be used to assess learning.

- Student annotations of "difficult poems" may be used to assess student reading challenges and plan future lessons.

- Use the "Speaking of Tough Texts" entries to assess student understanding of their own reading challenges.

- "Speaking of Tough Texts" entries may also be used to assess participation in small groups activities and/or student understanding of the common vocabulary of literary terms.

- Teacher observations of student participation in small group activities can be used for assessment as well.

Additional Resources

Referenced, page 1:
Graff, Gerald. *Clueless in Academe: How Schooling Obscures the Life of the Mind*. New York: Yale UP, 2003, page 52.

Further Reading
Robert Pinsky's wonderful article "In Praise of Difficult Poetry" in *Slate* and Brian Stavely's Poetry Foundation article, "Herbert Sucks. Donne is Pimp: Why High School Students Make the Best Poetry Critics" are great readings for thinking about difficulty in poetry from various perspectives.
http://www.slate.com/id/2164823
http://www.poetryfoundation.org/journal/article.html?id=178772

The Reginald Shepherd article from *The Writer's Chronicle* gives an eloquent description of what makes poetry difficult. It is an excellent reading for brushing up your own fluency with literary language, especially the language experts use to describe what contributes to difficulty in poetry.
http://jjgallaher.blogspot.com/2008/09/on-difficulty-in-poetry-reginald.html

Jago, Carol. "Crash! The Currency Crisis in American Culture." NCTE. Urbana, IL April 2009.
http://www.ncte.org/library/NCTEFiles/Press/Jago_final.pdf.

Scholes, Robert E. *Textual Power: Literary Theory and the Teaching of English*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1985. Print.

Additional Online Resources
In their online Learning Lab, the Poetry Foundation has put together a useful collection of teaching and learning resources, including a glossary of literary terms and links to videos from the Poetry Everywhere series.
http://www.poetryfoundation.org/learning/index.html

Poets are often the first to note the difficulty of poetry. In fact, many wonderful poems have been written about that very topic. "A Major Work" by William Meredith, for example, begins, "Poems are hard to read." The brief, two stanza poem goes on to make a case for poetry's rewards. The William Meredith Foundation site has the full text of "A Major Work" as well as a number of prose pieces about approaching poetry.
http://www.williammeredithfoundation.org/william-meredith-works.htm

The Verizon Foundation's www.thinkfinity.org brings together web-based content from some of the most trusted resources in education, including the National Council of Teachers of English/International Reading Association's www.readwritethink.org.

Speaking of Tough Texts

Directions: Complete the following log, entering each poem in a separate row.

Poem Title	Author	Time Period	Level of Difficulty (Using the POL "Evaluation Criteria," what score would you assign?)	Qualities that Contribute to the Poem's Difficulty (Describe these in your own words)	Literary Terms that Might be Used to Describe Qualities that Contribute to Poem's Difficulty (Optional)