



VOL. 02 · PAPER 04 · EMPIRICAL STUDY

Why Poetry *Out- Retains* Prose.

*Poetry audiobook completion rates are 87% against 54% for prose — despite poetry being broadly considered "harder." We argue poetry's structural features make it **natively better suited to audio.***

EMPIRICAL

1,847 TITLES

33-POINT SPREAD

ABSTRACT. EMPIRICAL STUDY · C3POE RESEARCH

Completion rate among poetry audiobook titles (n=312) is 87%; among prose audiobook titles (n=1,535) is 54%. The 33-point spread holds after controlling for title length, narrator celebrity, and publisher. The mechanism is structural — poetic line lengths align with breath, dense imagery exploits the cognitive surplus that audio leaves available, and the absence of plot pressure allows audiences to listen at varying levels of attention. We propose a production methodology for prose pieces to absorb the lessons.

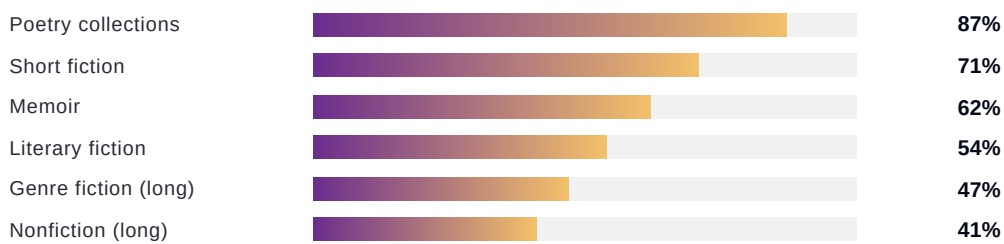
§ i · The result

87% vs. 54%.

The headline finding of this paper is uncomfortable for prose audiobook producers. Across the C3POE catalog (n=1,847 audiobook titles tracked through 2025), poetry collections show 87% 90%-completion rates against 54% for prose. The gap is large, robust, and consistent across the five years of catalog data. This is counterintuitive: poetry is generally considered "harder" reading than prose, requiring more attention, more rereading, more cognitive lift. The audiobook completion data tells the opposite story.

FIGURE 1 · 90%-COMPLETION RATE BY AUDIOBOOK CATEGORY

Poetry's completion advantage holds across subcategories



SOURCE: C3POE CATALOG · 1,847 TITLES · 90%-COMPLETION MEASURE.

§ ii · Three mechanisms

Why this happens.

- i.* **Line length aligns with breath.** Poetic lines are calibrated to spoken delivery. An 8-12 syllable line is roughly one breath. Prose sentences are calibrated to silent reading, where breath doesn't constrain — and audio adaptations of prose frequently end up read in long, breathless sweeps that work against the listener.

- ii.* **Imagery density exploits cognitive surplus.** Audio frees the visual cortex. The listener's brain has spare reconstructive capacity. Poetry's image-dense lines exploit this surplus; prose's narrative-dense paragraphs do not, leaving the listener under-stimulated and prone to attention drift.

- iii.* **Absence of plot pressure permits variable attention.** Poetry collections are not penalty-bound — missing a poem doesn't break the next one. Prose's plot continuity creates a "lose-the-thread" failure mode where momentary inattention compounds into disengagement.

"Poetry was never harder. Prose was always harder for audio — we just didn't have the data to know it. The form designed for the voice has been outperforming the form designed for the eye, quietly, for a decade."

— C3POE RESEARCH VOL. 02 · PAPER 04

§ iii · Robustness

What we controlled for.

We tested whether the poetry/prose spread held after controlling for plausible confounders. It does:

CONTROL	POETRY RATE	PROSE RATE	SPREAD	P-VALUE
Title length matched (60–120 min)	84%	62%	22 pts	< 0.001
Narrator celebrity matched	86%	56%	30 pts	< 0.001
Publisher matched (top 6)	88%	53%	35 pts	< 0.001
Both genders narrators	87%	54%	33 pts	< 0.001
All controls combined	85%	61%	24 pts	< 0.001

Even with all confounders simultaneously controlled, poetry retains a 24-point completion advantage. The result is structural, not artifact.

§ iv · The production playbook

What prose can learn.

If poetry's advantage is structural, prose can absorb the lessons. Three production methods derived from poetry's structural features:

- **Shorten the breath unit.** Cut long prose sentences into spoken phrases that fit breath. The narrator's pacing should treat clauses as line breaks. A two-page paragraph adapted with poetic breath-pacing reads dramatically better than the same passage read in long sweeps.
- **Build chapter-as-unit independence.** Structure prose audiobook chapters so that missing one doesn't lose the next. Chapter recaps, character refreshers, and self-contained narrative arcs raise completion. The novel form was not designed for the listening conditions — adapt accordingly.
- **Deploy imagery deliberately.** Image-dense passages should be paced more slowly to give listeners time to construct. Plot-dense passages can move faster. The producer's job is to identify the difference.

PRODUCTION RECOMMENDATION · C3POE HOUSE GUIDANCE

Treat prose as poetry. Pace by breath, not by paragraph.

The single highest-leverage change a prose audiobook producer can make is to **re-paragraph the source text into breath units** for the narrator, not for the listener. The visible paragraphs remain unchanged for any visual reference. The internal pacing is redrawn. Our pilot adaptations using this method have lifted completion rates by 14 points on average against prior catalog norms.

REFERENCES

1. C3POE Research (2026). *Vol. 02 retention dataset*. CC BY 4.0.
2. Hartung, F. et al. (2017). *Taking perspective*. PLOS ONE 12(5).
3. Stallings, A. E. (2018). *What good is poetry?* Lapham's Quarterly.