What you need to have of the poem is an overview, a sense of what *The Waste Land* is about. It is impossible to completely understand the poem, but what we can do is identify recurring themes, images, characters, allusions and stylistic devices in the poem, which reveal the key ideas behind *The Waste Land*.

Firstly, we can see some simplistic coherence in the progression of the poem from parts one to five:

**I** Here is the Wasteland, barren, dead, peopled by the displaced and disparate, who are guided by false prophets and superstition. Unspecified, vague ailments contribute to the sense of disease and decay.

**II** Now we view the people of the Wasteland, specific characters who are anxious, isolated in loveless relationships, exploited and alone. Whether opulently rich or grubbing a living in the aftermath of war, the characters face betrayal and emptiness.

**III** The key ideas of the spiritual barrenness of the contemporary world, and the pointless, mechanical nature of sex are further explained here. However, we do meet two prophets who have gained self-validation through rejecting the easy satisfaction of lustful sex- the Buddha and St. Augustine, blending together the spiritual ideals of East and West. Our guide Tiresias blends past and present, male and female, in a disturbing dream-like vision.

**IV** We move now beyond lust to death and the endless cycle of life and death, mankind repeating the same mistakes, generation by generation. Figures from earlier in the poem seem to blend and swirl together in death.

**V** Finally we journey again through the Wasteland, but this time there is some hope, a need for water, the coming rain and the Thunder’s advice: give… sympathise… control. We end with a statement of hope or acceptance: the peace which passeth understanding.
You now need to keep re-reading the poem, learn key quotations and organise your understanding. Use the following ideas to help you.

- Identify points in the poem where the following themes are explored:
  - The struggle to seek truth/ meaning
  - The modern world as mechanical, spoiled, corrupt
  - Love as rotten, sex as an empty, selfish gesture
  - The breakdown of communication
  - Rebirth/ regeneration

- Identify the various prophets featured in the poem and what they have to tell us. Why are they used?

- What other characters are used? What do they have to tell us? Why are they used?

- Identify where the key images of the poem are repeated and identify their purpose. Look specifically at images associated with
  - Sterility
  - Water
  - Desert
  - Pollution
  - The macabre
  - Death
  - Sex

- Eliot employs a myriad of voices in the poem - one of the poem’s original titles was to be ‘He do the police in different voices’. Identify stylistically the various modes of language he utilises:
  - Ornate
  - Colloquial
  - Lyrical
  - Comedy
  - Biblical
  - Satirical
  - Shakespearean
  - Dialogue
  - Music
  - Various languages
  - The fragmentation of language

- Look at the locations of the poem: the polluted Thames, London the ‘unreal city’, Jerusalem etc. Again, how are they being presented and what point is being made?

- Eliot’s use of allusion is central to the poem. The key areas to be aware of are
  1. the Grail legend (the knight and the Fisher/ Maimed King who each quest to regenerate their lands)
  2. myths of regeneration and fertility
  3. the Biblical prophets, Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection.

- What references does Eliot make to 20th century history, from events in Russia and the fragmentation of Europe to the state of contemporary London?

- Finally, what might Eliot mean by the line: ‘These fragments I have shored against my ruins…’?