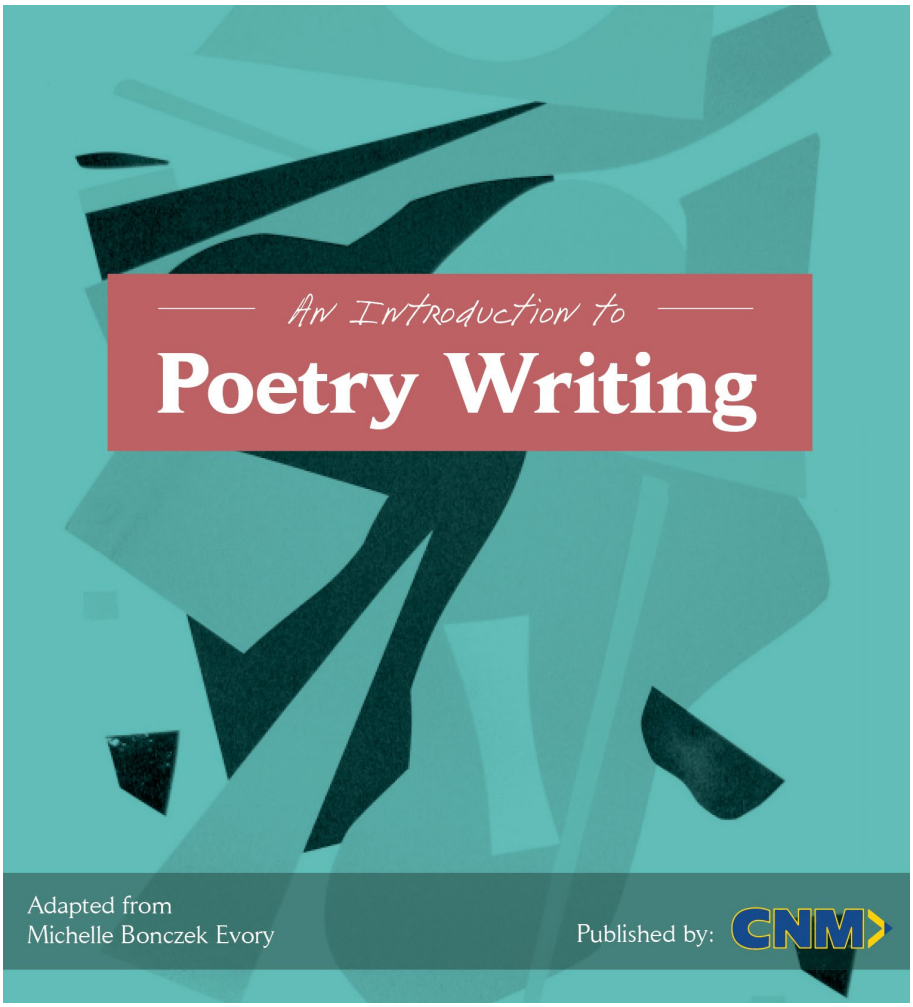
English 2330: Introduction to Poetry Writing



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Preface

This free online resource is the main text we will use for our poetry course readings this semester, along with video and audio recordings of poets reading their work and discussing poetry, and plenty of poems by professional writers and by you, the members of our own class.

We will focus on elements of craft, the tools of a poet's toolbox, and on the process of drafting, revision, and presenting poetry. The aim of this book and of the course in general is to read a wide variety of voices and approaches to poetry, to become familiar with the vocabulary and practice some of the techniques available to poets, and to approach all of what we read and write with an open mind and a playful and willing heart.

The main text is adapted from *Naming the Unnameable: An Approach to Poetry for New Generations* by Michelle Bonczek Evory, with additional discussions and exercises from current CNM instructor Rebecca Aronson. We'll read and discuss the chapters and sample poems, read and post to on-line blogs in response to posted video and audio recordings, and respond also to one another's posts. You will be writing and submitting drafts of poems and revisions of those drafts, as well as writing and experimenting with a variety of forms and techniques, based on prompts. Let's begin!

Thanks to Lauren Camp, Erin Adair-Hodges, Michelle Otero, and Jennifer Givhan for poems and related commentary. Some exercises are also contributed by Felecia Caton-Garcia.

Naming the Unnameable: An Approach to Poetry for New Generations by

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Introduction: Our Natural Inclination to Play

When the poet William Stafford was asked when he first realized that he wanted to be a poet, he responded:

> My question is "When did other people give up the idea of being a poet?" You know, when we are kids we make up things, we write, and for me the puzzle is not that some people are still writing, the real question is why did the other people stop?

Other artists have asked similar questions, and made similar assertions. "Every child is an artist," said Pablo Picasso "the problem is staying an artist when you grow up."

Discussion

What kind of artist were you when you were young? Did you paint, color with crayons, build with blocks? What creative acts did you enjoy? When did you write your first poem? What was it about? How did you come to poetry?

What both Stafford and Picasso observe is the fact that we all naturally possess the ability to be expressive, to give free rein to our imaginations, to invent, to bring into the world something new. As Stafford notes, as children we naturally enjoy making up things; we delight in imagining, in creating, in *playing* with colors, shapes, with words—so why then do many of us stop playing, or stop being, as Picasso says, "an artist"?

Answering this question is useful for practicing poets. If we can understand the barriers to writing poetry, then we can avoid writer's block and stagnant periods by finding ways to avoid the barriers or bring them down. One obstacle to being creative, whether through painting or writing poetry, is our tendency to be critical and judgmental of ourselves and our art—especially while in the process of writing. If we are in the middle of writing a poem and begin to doubt ourselves or tell ourselves that what we are writing is silly or just not good, then we are standing in the way of our creative act of play and our growth as a writer. We are, in a sense, becoming our own obstacle. Think about what it means to play.

When we play we are spontaneous. When we play we do not aim to harm ourselves—physically or with harsh criticism that stops us from playing. And when we play, we pay attention to words and sounds.

When we criticize our own writing while in a state of creating—of playing—we might say, "This line/image/word isn't working. This isn't good enough to be a poem." In order to write poetry, we must be willing to indulge the creative state, to forgive ourselves as we write, to enjoy and appreciate what we have in front of us—especially in the early stages of a drafting a poem.

In poetry, there is always the opportunity to revise. The great poet Walt Whitman revised his book *Leaves of Grass* throughout his entire life, even after it was published. A poem has its own life. The creative process can be expressed in endless ways. For as many people alive on this planet, there are as many, if not more, ways of expressing creative impulses. The authors of this text hope that in your journey through this course, this book will act as a guide to nurturing your own natural creativity.

Essential Tools

In this book, the authors share with you what they have seen work for themselves, for other poets, and for our students. The chapters will provide you with approaches to writing and reading poetry, suggestions for discussions and

prompts for poems, explanations of key terms associated with poetry, some poetry history, and many poems to explore. To excel, you will need the following tools:

Something on which to write

Something with which to write

A folder

Forgiveness

In her essay "The Getaway Car: A Practical Memoir About Writing and Life," from her collection of essays *This Is the Story of a Happy Marriage*, Ann Patchett lists forgiveness as being one of the essential skills necessary in order to write successfully:

> Forgiveness. The ability to forgive oneself. Stop here for a few breaths and think about this because it is the key to making art, and very possibly the key to finding any semblance of happiness in life. Every time I have set out to translate the book (or story, or hopelessly long essay) that exists in such brilliant detail on the big screen of my limbic system onto a piece of paper (which, let's face it, was once a towering tree crowned with leaves and a home to birds), I grieve for my own lack of talent and intelligence. Every. Single. Time. Were I smarter, more gifted, I could pin down a closer facsimile of the wonders I see. I believe, more than anything, that this grief of constantly having to face down our own inadequacies is what keeps people from being writers. Forgiveness, therefore, is key. I can't write the book I want to write, but I can and will write the book I am capable of writing. Again and again throughout the course of my life I will forgive myself.

Patchett is right that when a writer puts pen to paper–or fingers to a keyboard–the writer experiences the feeling of failure almost "Every. Single. Time."

Students sometimes ask, “Once you have a master’s degree and extensive experience, does writing becomes easier?” It is true that the mechanics do become easier with practice. Consistent writing also helps the writer to organize and develop habits—some good, some bad—that can advance (or hinder) the process. And of course the more you read, the more aware you become of different ways to write. But there are some struggles that never go away. These struggles can be different for each person.

Not only is forgiveness a necessary part of the writing process in the sense that we cannot translate our minds exactly to a page, but also in the sense that good writing deals with sensitive, hard-to-describe, difficult-to-face subjects, and so forgiving oneself for past actions, thoughts, and desires—for feeling the way one actually does—might also be necessary to write well. This doesn’t just happen in personal poems that expose our memories and feelings directly; it can occur in more indirect ways, too. Such as when you are freewriting and an image forms itself in the process that calls up a difficult memory. Or when you experience an insight into how you truly feel about a parent or sibling or friend. Or when you realize how you may have hurt someone in your past or neglected someone you love. We all make mistakes. And mistakes make good subject matter for poems. So, start forgiving yourself and move onward.

Receptivity

The mindset of forgiveness that Patchett describes is similar to what William Stafford writes in his essay “A Way of Writing” when he recommends that a writer must “be willing to fail” in order to be successful. As with Patchett’s essay, Stafford’s advice is all about giving yourself over to the writing *process*. One cannot expect a poem or any piece of writing to be perfect, or as Patchett says, to translate the “brilliant detail” one imagines and feels onto a page. As Stafford explains, you have to listen to what occurs to you in your mind and let the ideas “string out.” The process relies upon trust—you must trust that what you are doing *will* go somewhere. Here is an excerpt from Stafford’s essay:

> One implication is the importance of just plain receptivity. When I write, I

> like to have an interval before me when I am not likely to be interrupted. For me, this means usually the early morning, before others are awake. I get pen and paper, take a glance out of the window (often it is dark out there), and wait. It is like fishing. But I do not wait very long, for there is always a nibble–and this is where receptivity comes in. To get started I will accept anything that occurs to me. Something always occurs, of course, to any of us. We can't keep from thinking. Maybe I have to settle for an immediate impression: it's cold, or hot, or dark, or bright, or in between! Or well, the possibilities are endless. If I put down something, that thing will help the next thing come, and I'm off. If I let the process go on, things will occur to me that were not at all in my mind when I started. These things, odd or trivial as they may be, are somehow connected. And if I let them string out, surprising things will happen. . . .
>
> So, receptive, careless of failure, I spin out things on the page. And a wonderful freedom comes. If something occurs to me, it is all right to accept it. It has one justification: it occurs to me. No one else can guide me. I must follow my own weak, wandering, diffident impulses.

I am not sure if being "careless of failure," as Stafford says, is a rule to apply to all aspects of life, but in creative acts, it is necessary.

Silliness

The poet Richard Hugo has said that he wrote his book *The Triggering Town* in order to help the writer "with that silly, absurd, maddening, futile, enormously rewarding activity: writing poems."

Why prescribe silliness? For possibility. For new ways of thinking and writing. For fun. If you're worried that you may not have it in you, don't. According to Hugo, the fact that you are even taking a course in poetry already means that this quality, this playfulness, is already inherent in you. After all, as Hugo so eloquently puts it in The Triggering Town, "You have to be silly to write poems at all."

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Chapter One: Getting Starte… →

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Chapter One: Getting Started: The Nine Muses

Throughout history, writers and other artists have envisioned angels and muses as embodiments of inspiration who bestow upon us the moments of clarity and imagination from which our poems have crystallized. In Greek mythology, the god Apollo was recognized as the God of poetry and music. In Norse mythology, Bragi fills this role. Aengus is the Irish god of poetry to whom William Butler Yeats devotes his poem "The Song of Wandering Aengus."

If you had a very specific type of poem you wished to write, you could call upon the Nine Greek Muses for inspiration: Calliope for epic poetry, Clio for history, Erato for music, and so on. In his 1933 essay "Theory and Function of the *Duende*," poet Federico Garcia Lorca articulated the source of poetry as coming not from without, as from angels and muses, but from within—it "has to be roused in the very cells of the blood." He called this force *duende*, "an Andalusian word used to describe the particular quality of deep song," as editor Michelle Kwansy explains in an introduction to Lorca's essay, which she included in an anthology of essays on poetry. Throughout the essay, Lorca describes *duende* as a power, "the spirit of the earth," as a force that breaks old structures, as "authentic emotion," and he imagines her, as she is linked so closely with surrealist images, death, and passion, as "dragging her wings of rusty knives along the ground."

Should you ever call out to one of these gods and receive no answer or struggle to tap into *duende*, however, here are nine alternative muses who have been known to grant poems:

Man’s hand with pen writing on notebook

1. Journaling

For many of us, a poem starts with an idea, a memory, a sound, an image. Or it starts when we finally take a pen to paper or sit at our computers and begin to type. A poem begins way before composing that first line. As we move through our days, our minds sort through experiences, sensations, feelings, images, and ideas and then files them in memory. And as time passes, we forget many of the memories we hold onto in the short term. Something we experience today and remember tomorrow may be lost in a year. This forgetting is one of the many reasons writers keep journals—to take notes, pay attention and observe, collect images, sounds, ideas, and experiences as they happen before they are stowed away in the basement of our brains.

Keeping a journal works to encourage poems in mainly two ways. First, journaling provides us time to practice writing and to play with words, while at the same time uncovering potential material for poems. The poet William

Wordsworth famously defined poetry as “a spontaneous overflow of feelings” recollected in tranquility. Keeping a journal encourages time for the second half of this equation. When we make time to sit with and explore our thoughts and feelings in writing, we edge closer to those memories created during intense moments of experience. The practice, I might even say *learned skill,* of making time to write can sometimes be the hardest obstacle to overcome in our daily lives of work, school, and family responsibilities. Keeping a journal produces a routine that becomes easier to keep the more we do it, and it gives us a way to uncover material to write about.

Collection of Books

2. Collecting

A journal can be very useful in helping us to collect material for when we are ready to write. But collecting does not only come in the form of prose writing. Remember, the brain works in fragmented and non-sensible ways. Memories are subjective and often unreliable. In our contemporary

technological world of multi-tasking, our attention spans have been shortened. Sometimes, in order to maintain a writing lifestyle, it is more practical to work in bursts. And this is where we can remain attentive and we can, like fishing, catch moments—images, ideas, phrases—that we come across and write them down. Keeping a "collection notebook" helps us to remember the gems of images and sounds that spark poetry before we forget them. When you hear, see, or think something that sings, write it down.

Many writers keep notebooks or scraps of paper on their night tables, in their cars, in pockets and purses. As long as you have a pen and some form of paper —or a phone or other device on which you can take or record notes– you are equipped and can consider yourself to be a writer in the act of hunting. Then, when you sit down to write, you will not start from nothing; you can flip through what you've collected and build from there.

In whatever you use to keep take notes, jot down musical or odd phrases or pieces of conversation you overhear throughout your day. Write down a new word you learn in biology class, or a funny sentence out of context you overhear while waiting in line at a coffee shop. Write down a phrase you like from a poem or a story you read (and a note about where it is from, in case you need to acknowledge it later), or capture an image you see while you're driving or on a walk: a bird's shattered blue egg, the greasy fingerprints of a child in a display window, a squirrel towing an apple down a neighbor's porch stairs. If you think of a strong memory, write it down: a hawk that screamed then dove into a river for a fish, the first time you met your significant other.

Mine the world for language and images. When you write, pull out your collection and begin a poem from one of the phrases or images, or insert one into a revision.

Woman sitting in a cafe, reading book.

3. Reading

For many, the act of writing is wed to the act of reading. Reading poetry re-patterns the rhythms in my mind and refocuses my attention on the craft of poetry. There are poets I turn to again and again, but I also read literary journals, magazines, new books of poetry, and essays on craft—anything to engage me in the contemplation of writing or inspire me to write.

We build upon the achievements of our predecessors, and when you write poetry, you write on the shoulders of such poets as Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, Langston Hughes, and Shakespeare, and you add pages to our *Big Book*. You, of course, will not necessarily enjoy all the poets you read, or agree with their writing philosophies, but it certainly helps you as a writer to be aware of them and to consider them. It helps you to learn to know your poetic self.

Begin to assemble your own anthology of poems that interest you. Either poems

you enjoy or ones that puzzle you. Anything that stimulates your capacity to think, feel, or inspires you to write. You may include poems you do not like, too—it all adds up to your own poetic persona. How can you tell someone who you are as a poet and imaginative individual by simply allowing them to read your anthology? What poems will you pick to represent you?

When you read in this way, you are "reading like a writer." What does it mean to read like a writer? Well, for starters, it means you are *actively* reading, paying close attention to the decisions the poet made when composing and revising the poem as though you yourself were the poet who wrote it. You consider the choices made concerning line, tone, image, diction, metaphor, form. You ask questions about its composition:

- Why did the poet choose this word instead of another synonym?
- Why is this written in quatrains instead of couplets?
- Why choose to end on an **image** rather than a statement?
- Why choose to write this in third person rather than first person?
- What does this title do for the reader's experience of the poem?

Asking Questions

Asking questions such as these makes us think like writers rather than just readers. The hope is that we will learn some tricks to bring back to our own poems. An exercise that can help us to delve even deeper into the processes of other writers is **to write an imitation poem** in which you mimic a poem's form and moves to create a new poem. The purpose of the exercise is to immerse yourself deeply and attentively into a poem and, following its style, produce a poem modeled after its characteristics. By unfolding a poem step by step and repeating its poetic moves you will see what it is like to actually make the mental decisions and leaps that the poet did. Some of the elements you will want to pay attention to include the following:

- Form and line length

Syntax and sentence structure
- Tone, voice, and mood
- Frequency of **metaphor** and images
- Use of punctuation

Browse the Academy of American Poets online collection for a poem you like and compose your own imitation of it. Moving line by line, note the syntax of each one—perhaps take notes in the margins—and then transcribe these moves into your own poem.

Of course, reading need not be limited to poetry or literature. In fact, it should not be. When we write poetry we don't write about poetry (usually). We write from experiences either real or imagined and, therefore, reading books of all kinds benefits you by expanding the possibility of the experience and knowledge you bring to a poem. Personally, in addition to poetry and novels, I read newspapers, *The New Yorker*, *National Geographic*, books about gardening, non-fiction books about many, many things—insects, salt, American history, mythology, physics, anthropology, crop circles, cephalopods. These feed my writing by providing me with new images, words, ideas, metaphors. Knowledge and experiences are the imaginative fuel on which our poems' engines run.

Activity

Go to the library and find a book on a subject that interests you but that you know little about. Horses, the human brain, gemstones, wave theory, astronomy, coral. Adopt this book into your writing life by committing to write a poem inspired by your new knowledge.

4. Freewriting

In Peter Elbow's classic text on creative writing, *Writing Without Teachers*, the first chapter opens with an explanation of freewriting. What is freewriting? It is as it sounds. It is writing for a certain amount of time without stopping—writing down whatever occurs to you without being charged with having to be correct grammatically or syntactically or factually; it is writing with no barriers or taboos: it is *free* writing. Sometimes it is referred to as "automatic writing," and it is incredibly helpful for both loosening the imagination, warming up our writing brains, and–as was the case with the Surrealists who loved such activities–capturing what associations our minds are making unconsciously and bringing to light the unknown parts of ourselves.

Freewriting readies us for writing without judgment, for writing without editing ourselves while in the beginning stages in which wild and raw energy, uncovering connections, and taking risks are more important than properly constructing sentences that are clear and cliché-free. Put simply, freewriting is a type of play.

Activity

Choose from one of the following prompts (and see end of book for many additional freewrite prompts) and write for fifteen minutes without stopping or editing yourself. No matter what, do not stop. Do not rest your hands. Do not under any circumstances worry about the subject of your writing changing. Just follow where your thoughts lead. Do not concern yourself with proper spelling or punctuation or even complete sentences. Just keep writing whatever comes to your mind. Just keep going, going, write, write, write.

- If you could spend your day doing anything, what would that be?
- Describe your ideal vacation. Where would you go? What does it look like?
- From a dictionary, choose two words randomly and insert them into the following sentence:

- ◦ Explaining_____to a _____.
- ◦ Now, explain!

- What did you dream about recently?
- If I were any animal I'd be a _____.
- Are you more like a river or a lake?

Female in a yoga pose against a sunset sky

5. Meditating

Although writing results in an external object that can be shared, the formation of it depends and arises from a process that takes the inward life of a writer and delivers it outward. Because writing is an internal, solitary process, sometimes it can be frustrating, such as when you cannot seem to make language capture

your exact feelings and thoughts. Your blood pressure rises, your body heats. You lose interest and excitement in your project, and your patience and attention wane. Meditation can help to quiet the mind and give you the tenacity to keep trying.

Meditation can also clear your mind of distractions that may be keeping you from connecting with your poem. Meditation can help you focus and relax so new thoughts come more easily into the mind and the body permits the mind to enter a flow state. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi writes about this process in his book *Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention*.

In a flow state, time evaporates. You begin to write and everything else falls away. It's just you and the page. When you stop, it feels like you're returning from another dimension—and, in some sense, you are. Perhaps some of you have experienced this state as an athlete or performer.

Some days you're just "in the zone." You're focused, measured, energetic, precise. On the field, on the court, on the stage, you are exactly where you are supposed to be, doing exactly what you need to do—and doing it well. Unfortunately, writers do not enter these states 100 percent of the time.

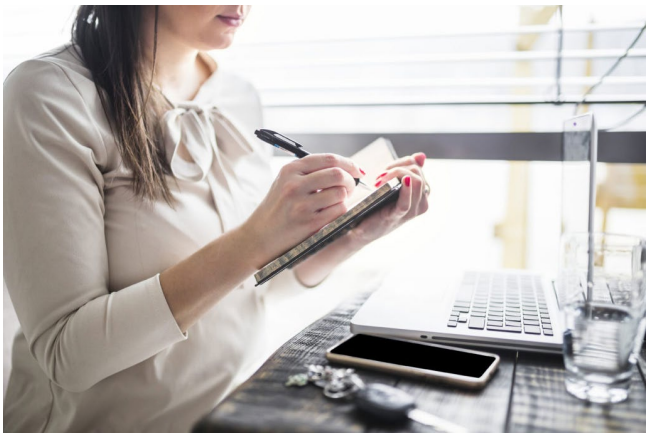
In its simplest form, meditation is focused attention. Conscious movement, conscious stillness.

Here is a link to some basic instructions to get you started: How to Meditate for Beginners.

People walking around.

6. Moving

For some poets, it's not so much going in that helps them to write; it is going out. Wallace Stevens famously composed poems in his head on his daily two-mile walks to and from work in Hartford, Connecticut, where he was employed at the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company. He reportedly liked to match the sounds and rhythms in his poems to his steps. Edward Hirsch shared similar feelings in a 2008 *Washington Post* article. As he sums up, "Poetry is written from the body as well as the mind, and the rhythm and pace of a walk can get you going and keep you grounded." In addition to keeping words in rhythm with your steps, walking is also useful for observing.



7. Keeping a Writing Routine

Whether you write every day or once a week, only in coffee shops, or always in a quiet room, it can be helpful to you as a writer to have a routine. Like physically training your quadriceps and lungs for a marathon, routine trains us as writers to write well, to be prepared and ready to catch and develop ideas. Routine readies our mind to write.

Question

When do you find yourself writing? Are you a night owl, early bird, or neither? What do think the advantages might be to writing at these different times?

8. Create a Ritual

Mason Currey's book *Daily Rituals: How Artists Work* chronicles the habits of 400 writers and their quirky rituals, many of which include partaking in coffee, tea, sherry, wine, and tobacco. The poet William Heyen lights a candle before he writes. Whatever the ritual, the purpose is to instill a certain mindset that arises from the act. As you may know, many athletes have rituals, too. Boston Red Sox third-basemen Wade Boggs ate chicken before each game. Among his many eccentricities, pitcher Turk Wendell insisted on chewing four pieces of black licorice whenever he started a game. According to David K. Israel, "At the end of each inning, he'd spit them out, return to the dugout, and brush his teeth, but only after taking a flying leap over the baseline." We need not be that elaborate, but of course, if it works. . .

Question

What type of rituals, if any, have you used for writing, sports, or performing? Do you have any ideas for some you might consider adopting for writing?

9. Dream

Whether it's staring out a window and daydreaming or keeping a dream journal, exploring the strange images in our minds can also inspire writing, especially if you're an avid dreamer. When we dream, our brains make connections that our conscious minds do not make while we're awake. And sometimes these connections lead to eureka moments and new discoveries. For example, did you know that all of the following scientific discoveries were made in dreams: the periodic table; evolution by natural selection; and the scientific method? (You can read about these and others at the website Famous Scientists https://www.famousscientists.org/.)

Or did you know that Paul McCartney reportedly composed the melody of "Yesterday" in a dream? According to an article by Jennifer King Lindley, "Stephanie Meyer awoke from sleep with the idea for the *Twilight* series."

Activity

Keep a dream journal on the side of your bed and write down your dreams every morning before you rise for one week. At the end of the week, read through and select the best material to start a poem. Keep this practice up and when you need images or material, flip through your dream journal for ideas.

Consult a dream dictionary and look up some of the images cataloged in your dream journal. Blending the meaning and the images together, compose a poem in which your dream becomes reality.

Suggested Reading

William Stafford. "A Way of Writing"

Richard Hugo "Writing Off the Subject"

Richard Hugo "The Triggering Town"

Walt Whitman "Song of Myself"

Walt Whitman: An American Experience. PBS Documentary.

Museum of Modern Art. Most viewed exhibits.

Matthew Crawford. *The World Beyond Your Head: On Becoming an Individual in an Age of Distraction*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015.

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Chapter Two: Welcome, Re… →

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Chapter Two: Welcome, Reader: Reading Poetry

Muriel Rukeyser says in *The Life of Poetry* that in order to successfully read a poem, we must give a poem "a total response." This means giving it all our attention, taking it in slowly, reading it several times. It means listening to the poem openly, without judgment, and without projecting our own assumed meanings onto it, but rather as Ruykeyser writes, coming "to the emotional meanings at every moment." As she explains, "That is one reason for the high concentration of music in poetry."

To come to emotional meanings at every moment means to adjust and react to the way a poem takes shape with every word, every line, every sentence, every stanza. Each poem creates its own universe as it moves from line to line. It is a universe that Ruykeyser describes as the "universe of emotional truth."

So how exactly do you listen with your emotions? Reading is one of the most intimate forms of connection you can have with someone. You take their words —their breath—into yourself. You shape the words with your own body and, too, give them life with your own breath. Reading poetry, you breathe in what a poet breathes out. You share breath. The words and their meanings become part of your body as they move through your mind, triggering sensations in your body that lead to thoughts. And through this process, you have experiences that are new and that change you as much as any other experience might.

Poetry is a condensed art form that produces an experience in a reader through words. And though words may appear visually as symbols on the page, the

experience that poems produce in us is much more physical and direct. The elements of poetry permit a poet to control many aspects of language—tone, pace, rhythm, sound—as well as language's effects: images, ideas, sensations. These elements give power to the poet to shape a reader's physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual experience of the poem. Because form and function are so closely intertwined, it is impossible to paraphrase a poem. When author Michelle Bonczek Evory was an undergraduate, her first poetry teacher Anthony Piccione used to say, "A poem is what a poem does." This is why we must read poems with full concentration and focus more than once. It is why we must read them out loud. It is why we must be attentive to every aspect of the poem on both ends: as a writer, and as a reader.

Readers come to the page with different backgrounds and a range of different experiences with poetry, but how we read a poem determines our experience of it. By "read" I do not mean understand or analyze, but rather, the actual process of coming to the poem, ingesting its lines, and responding emotionally.

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Be a Good Listener

I would guess that all of us have heard someone described as a "a good listener" in our lifetimes. Well, what is it that makes someone a good listener? List the qualities you associate with good listening skills and think about your experiences of people who demonstrate these skills. In contrast, what makes someone a "bad listener"? How can you relate these concepts to reading a poem?

Being a good listener requires many of the same traits as being a good reader. When you listen to someone speak, you listen to their emotions and ideas through meaning and tone, body gestures, and emphasized words. You do not judge or interrupt. Before offering advice, condolences, or other reactions, you as a listener try to see their perspective and its complexities from their side. Good listeners take their identities out of the equation and place the speaker's concerns in the middle of their attention. Every poem has a speaker that seeks

connection with a listener.

A poet seeks to create an emotional experience in the reader through the poem's process, just as if a friend—or stranger—were telling an intense story. Unlike a person speaking, who can use the entire body to gesture, poetry has only a voice to rely on to speak. Yet the poem seeks to speak to a reader as if it had a body. The poem uses rhythm, pauses, stresses, inflections, and different speeds to engage the listener's body. As a reader, it is your role to listen to the speaker of the poem and to *embody* the words the speaker speaks with your own self as if you are the one who has spoken. Readers identify with the speaker, with the voice of the poem. Good readers listen with what John Keats called a "negative capability," meaning you are capable of erasing your own identity and ego in order to imagine what it is like to take on another. Although Keats used the term to apply to the writing side of poetry, it is useful to consider the concept in terms of the reading side of the equation, as well.

Like individuals, each poem's speaker speaks from a perspective, physical and/or psychological. As the reader moves word to word, line to line, you must allow the universe of the poem to take root in your imagination as if it is the only universe that exists. When you are open to the words' music and meaning, the poem has the potential to envelop your entire being and body, as poet Emily Dickinson expresses in one of her letters:

> If I read a book [and] it makes my whole body so cold no fire can ever warm me I know that is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry. These are the only way I know. Is there any other way.

Dickinson speaks of the poem affecting her entire body and being. Great poetry does this, Rukeyser explains, because of the musical language, one of the most important properties of poetry. Music is seductive. Music is instinctual beyond language. Music is a universal language. When accompanied by language, it has the power to affect our **senses** and our sensibility in intense ways.

How to Conduct a Close Reading of a Poem

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The Title Matters

Start at the beginning—the title, which sets up an expectation for the poem. A title can set a mood or tone, or ground us in a setting, persona, or time. It is the doorway into the poem. It prepares us for what follows.

The First Time Through

Read the poem **out loud**. *Listen* for the general, larger qualities of the poem like tone, mood, and style. After reading through once aloud, read it again silently, and this time *look up* any words you cannot define. *Circle* any phrases that you don't understand and *mark* any that stand out to you. Some questions we may ask ourselves include:

Questions To Ask

1. What is my emotional reaction?
2. Is this poem telling a story? Sharing thoughts? Playing with language experimentally? Exploring one's feelings or perceptions? Describing?
3. Is the tone serious? Funny? Meditative? Inquisitive? Confessional?

We can apply this approach to the following poem by Jorie Graham:

Begin with the title: "I Watched a Snake." What does this title do to you? What kind of expectations and tone does it set up?

Perhaps you expect a poem about observing nature, like a David Attenborough documentary, or maybe the blunt, declarative statement leads you to anticipate a list of other things the speaker has seen, or maybe you expect a poem about the speaker's feelings about snakes.

Then ask and begin to answer these questions:

1. Where in the poem do you notice having an emotional reaction? Locate any places (words, phrases, images) in which you particularly liked a sound or phrase, or in which you felt interest, frustration, or even disgust (or any other emotion).

- There is no one answer to this, obviously. But maybe you recognize or enjoy the image of the pattern the snake makes as it moves through the grass, or some other area of description. Maybe you're confused by the references to lust or work.

2. Is this poem telling a story? Sharing thoughts? Playing with language experimentally?

- This poem seems to be telling a story. The poem contains a sequence of events: "It kept on disappearing," "It took it almost a half an hour," "I'm not afraid of them today, or anymore, I think"; the speaker is sharing emotional and intellectual reactions to something she has seen.

3. Is the tone serious? Funny? Meditative?

- It seems inquisitive, contemplative, and a little personal. It's not humorous and it isn't experimental.

Images and Tone

After an initial introduction to the poem, read slowly and allow the meanings to emerge as you move from line to line, paying attention next to images and **tone**. Before moving ahead, ask what your emotional response is at the end of each line, as lines can create different meanings and give the poem complexity. For instance, in the following stanza excerpt, we respond one way to the first two lines' image, and another way after its turn to the fourth line:

> --just as we
> stitch the earth,
> it seems to me, each time
> we die, going
> back under, coming back up…

The phrase "just as we/stitch the earth," forms an image with what precedes before it can form an image with what follows. The line leaves us with the image of "we" (in this case, all people, the speaker and the reader and everybody else) doing something to the earth, stitching it, which sounds like

sewing, but might be planting (sowing!). It is preceded by the image of the snake moving through grass, and so I am left expecting another image of living, of movement, but that expectation is reversed with the next lines: "it seems to me, each time/we die, going/ back under, coming back up…" So here is an image of death and burial, but also of growth. "Coming back up" might be read as whatever grows from the earth fed by bodies; it is life and movement, but not the kind a reader might have been expecting from the earlier lines. The sewing image ("—just as we/ stitch the earth") is taken up not as planting seeds but as renewal: burying the dead and becoming thus part of what grows from the ground: "It is the simplest/ / stitch, this going where we must,/leaving a not/ unpretty pattern by default."

The larger image here is something like an aerial view of the earth, such as seen from an airplane window, but rather than crop circles and field demarcations, the view might be of grave sites, or more broadly of generations: old people dying and being replaced with babies, new life filling in where others have died. It is sad in one way and hopeful in another. (Note that when quoting poems within one's one sentences or paragraph / indicates a line break, and // indicates a stanza break.)

There may also be other possible readings, of course. For example, in the lines,"—just as we//stitch the earth,…/,each time/we die, going/back under, coming back up" some readers will think of the resurrection or of reincarnation. As long as there is some evidence in the text to support your reading, there might well be more than one valid interpretation.

The next lines switch tones and subjects again, by returning to the movement (of the snake through the grass, of bodies through life cycles) by way of what drives it:

> …But going
> out of hunger
> for small things—flies, words—going
> because one's body
> goes.

The *hunger* that drives a body –in one case for flies if you are a small snake, or for words if you are a human—is appetite, or, said another way, desire. And the phrase "going/ because one's body//goes" lets us know that we are all driven by appetite. We pursue what we pursue because of desire.

The snake, described next as "this disconcerting creature" whose "tiny hunger"..."won't even press/the dandelions down" and of which the poem implies the speaker has previously been afraid, is now suddenly less frightening. The speaker seems to have recognized something familiar, that desire or appetite, is natural and shared, as well, by herself.

Perhaps you associate snakes in gardens with the story of Adam and Eve and the Garden of Eden, with the concept of original sin, in which desire itself is a problem. The speaker of the poem also makes this association, as we see in the next lines:

> "...We are not, were not, ever
> wrong. Desire
>
> is the honest work of the body,
> its engine, its wind.
> It too must have its sails—wings
> in this tiny mouth, valves
> in the human heart, meanings like sailboats
> setting out
>
> over the mind. Passion is the work
> that retrieves us,
> lost stitches. It makes a pattern of us,
> it fastens us
> to sturdier stuff
> no doubt."

There is a lot to unpack in these lines. It begins with a statement that sounds like epiphany: "We are not, were not, ever/ wrong." This seems like a direct response to the idea of original sin, or to the idea that desire and appetite are sinful. It also harks back to the beginning of the poem, where the speaker says of watching the snake's progress, in stanzas one and two, "And though I know

this has/something to do//with lust, today it seemed/to have to do/with work."

The speaker, in observing the little snake, comes to a realization and forms an argument: desire is part of being alive, it is the necessary and natural work of bodies. To eat ("wings in this tiny mouth"), to breathe ("valves in the human heart"), but also to wonder, to be curious ("meanings like sailboats/setting out//over the mind"). She concludes that passion is not just what feeds us literally and what drives us to reproduce, but is what makes life meaningful. "Passion is work" –like breathing or hunting or thinking—"that retrieves us,/lost stitches. It makes a pattern of us,/it fastens us/ to sturdier stuff/no doubt." Here passion redeems and renews us, keeps us from being *just* bodies that function and gives us purpose. Not only is the speaker no longer afraid of the little snake, she is no longer afraid of her own appetites and curiosities; indeed, by the end, it is passion that makes life meaningful. Those lines remind me of the words to an old spiritual "I once was lost, but now am found…." In this case it is desire (physical or intellectual) that redeems us, that finds us and, perhaps, saves us.

Aside from these associations and implications, there are many descriptive images that help us readers to visualize what the speaker is seeing. Notice that the title also serves as the poem's first line, and opens the poem with an image of a snake "hard at work in the dry grass/ behind the house/catching flies." These opening lines place us somewhere—a backyard— and we too are watching this snake. We know the snake "kept disappearing" into the grass, and that it took a long while "almost half/an hour" for it to move "roughly ten feet." Its movement was undetectable, "so slow//between the blades you couldn't see/it move." We see, as the speaker sees, the snake re-emerge from the grass, its "black knothead up, eyes on/ a butterfly." Later we learn the snake is small, its weight "won't even press/the dandelions down" as it slides in pursuit of a "blue-/black dragonfly//that has just landed on a pod…."

Find Connections and Ask Questions

After moving through the poem and noting images, their effects, and the tone

or places where tone changes, the next helpful question to ask is: What does *x* remind me of? Or, what associations am I making? Often the connections will be within the poem itself and the patterns it creates—between lines, images, repetitive words or themes, diction (word choice).

What other connections and patterns can we see? And what questions can these patterns raise in us? In this poem, you might notice the form: there are ten stanzas of six lines each, every other line indented, to make a long, narrow, undulating poem that might be thought to resemble the body of a snake.

Look Closely at Diction

When reading a poem, always look up words you do not know; moreover, it helps to look up words you know when they have more than one meaning.

- What is your experience of this poem? Look for places to ask questions (a friend and excellent reader of poetry says to look out for "the weird stuff." In this poem, she says, for her the weird stuff is the moment the poem switches from watching a snake to observations about how "our" habits of death and birth affect the earth.)
- What do you think is the most powerful part of the poem?
- What, if anything, confused you in its reading? Did your confusion change once you conducted a closer reading of the poem?
- Does your interpretation align with the textbook in some places? Are there sections in which your interpretation differed?

There is no one way to interpret a poem, though it is helpful to be able to support your interpretation with specific elements in the text, as the discussion above demonstrates.

Discussion of “I Watched a Snake” written by Rebecca Aronson and used according to creative commons CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

← Chapter One: Getting Starte…

Chapter Three: Images →

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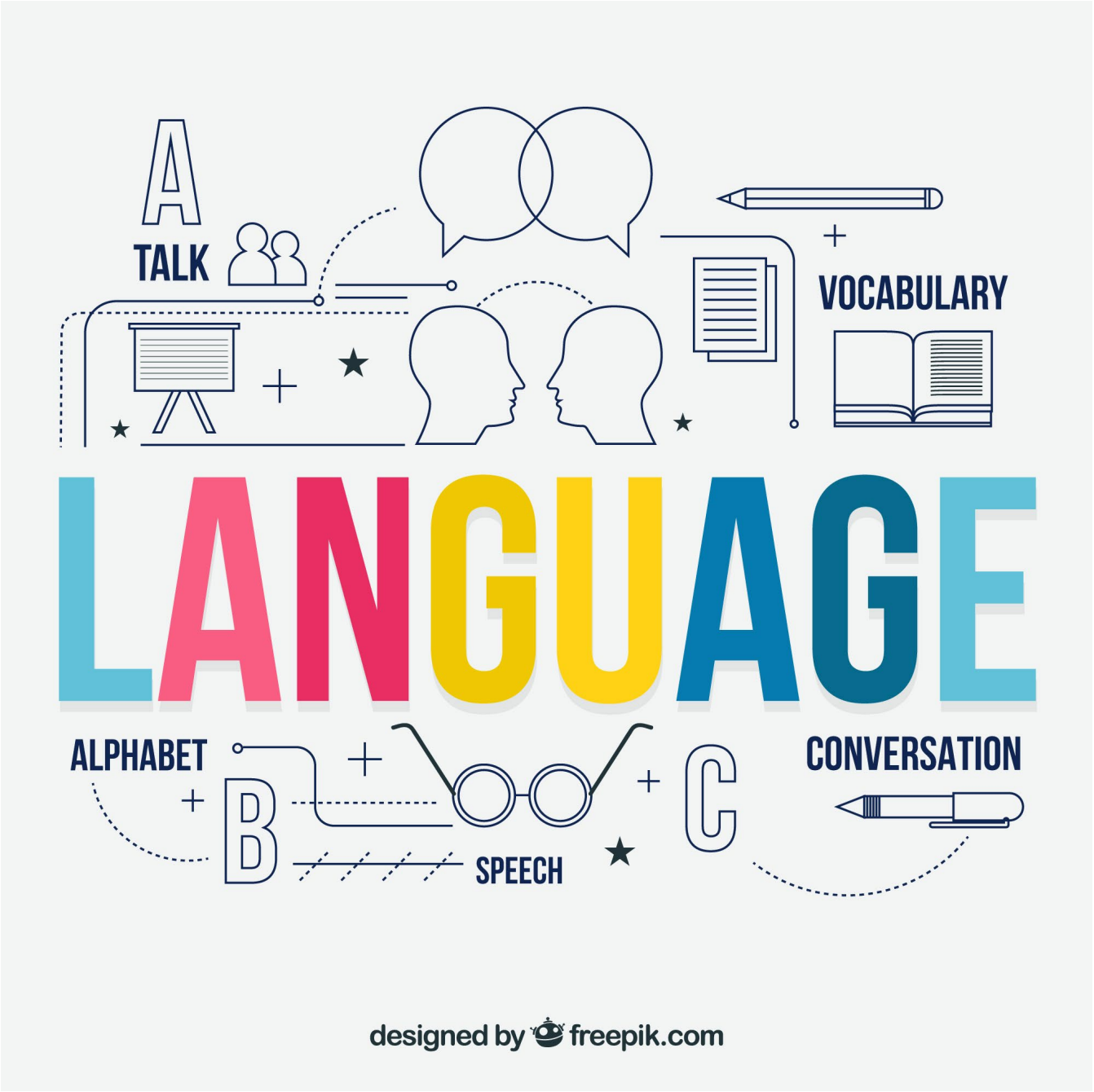
Chapter Three: Images

Put simply and directly, creative writing is the language of images. Whereas other forms of writing like news articles, academic essays, and instruction manuals relay information from the writer to the speaker in order to *inform* or *instruct*, in fiction and poetry images translate the world to text so a reader may *experience*.

If you are a creative writer, you are an image creator. And to be a master image creator, you need to be really good—really, really good—at finding ways to stimulate a reader's senses through significant, concrete detail. When poets write, they see through the speaker's eye, what we call *the mind's eye*. By writing through the mind's eye, you describe what the speaker *sees* in order to recreate the world of the speaker on a page so then the reader can translate those words back into images and experience the poem.

Language is Physical



If we examine the words associated with the act of writing, we find that language is directly rooted in the physical world of the body. Let's consider the answers to the questions below.

Where does poetry come from?

A. I*magination—*

Imagination. Imagine. Image. This is the language of creative writing and what the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines as "a mental picture." When we read, our mind

processes the words into mental images with our five senses—sight, smell, taste, touch, and hearing. When we are writing poetry we want to give our readers the world in its raw, physical, concrete form. The more specific we can be, the better.

For example, note how the following descriptions affect your physical, emotional, and mental experience differently:

1. The child was sad because it was her first day of school.
2. Standing in the doorway between the dark interior of the classroom and the sunny sidewalk, four-year old Meredith twisted her mother's flowered skirt in her hands, hid her face in its folds, and stained its red silk with her mucus and tears.

The second example is much more detailed and **imagistic** than the first. It, therefore, engages our senses and emotions much more directly.

In example two above, vivid details invite your senses to take in the scene. But once a piece of creative writing contains specific images and details, those details begin to have an additional effect on the reader's intellect as the images resonate into symbols and create connections and suggestions.

- What effects do the images in the above example have on your intellect?
- What types of connections, contrasts, resonance, and suggestions do the images make? For example, notice the contrast between the shady classroom and the sunny sidewalk.
- What types of interpretations does this image invite?

Sensation. Sensual. Sense. This is how we make sense of the writing. How we *make sense* of the words on the page. We do not understand through abstract thought. We understand

How does poetry affect the reader?

A. With sensations—

mentally through what our eyes, ears, nose, mouth, and skin understand physically. Merriam-Webster defines "sense" as: One of the five natural powers (touch, taste, smell, sight, and hearing) through which you receive information about the world around you.

One of our five natural *powers*. The word "power" makes us sound supernatural; but these are not *super*natural—they're natural to our bodies. Poetry enables us to use and sharpen them.

What do we do when we rework a piece of writing?

A. We envision it differently through revision—Envision. Revision. Vision. Again, a root word associated with sight. Merriam-Webster defines "vision" as:

> **a :** something seen in a dream, trance, or ecstasy; *especially* **:** a supernatural appearance that conveys a revelation
>
> **b :** a thought, concept, or object formed by the imagination
>
> **c :** a manifestation to the senses of something immaterial <look, not at *visions,* but at realities—Edith Wharton>

The second and third definitions reflect the impact of poetic images on a reader. These poetic images produce *vision* in the reader by manifesting "to the senses" "something immaterial." In other words, a reader's senses react to the vision, or images of an "object," created by the poem as though that object were real. With poetry, those images give way to "a thought, concept," or idea. In the above example describing Meredith's first day of school, for instance, we are led to the thought or concept of how she is sad via the images.

When we consider the genres of novel, essay, and poem, among the most

relevant things we see is the use of images and description. These genres immerse their readers in a different world, one which values and believes in the power of language to stimulate our senses and transport us somewhere new. And the most successful ones, the masters like John Steinbeck or Ross Gay, are able to access our brains in the same way that real-life experiences do, producing in the reader feelings and thoughts and insights generated intelligently by the processing of sensory information.

The Purpose of Poetry

If you've taken a composition or freshmen writing course, you might recognize some of these terms: summarizes, sources, persuades, ethos. These words you will rarely if ever use in reference to writing poetry. And why is that? Well, what's the purpose of poetry? Perhaps this is not an easy question to answer. In fact, the answer might depend on time and culture. Epics such as *Gilgamesh* aided in memorization and preserved stories meant to be passed down orally. The British Romantics valued the pleasure derived from hearing and reading poetry.

In some cultures poetry is important in ritual and religious practice. In contemporary times, many describe poetry as being a tool for self-expression. In the excellent glossary in his book *How to Read a Poem and Fall in Love with Poetry*, poet Edward Hirsch provides the following definition for a poem:

> Poem: A made thing, a verbal construct, an event in language. The word poesis means "making;" and the oldest term for the poet means "maker." The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics points out that the medieval and Renaissance poets used the word makers, as in "courtly makers," as a precise equivalent for poets. (Hence William Dunbar's "Lament for the Makers.") The word poem came into English in the sixteenth century and has been with us ever since to denote a form of fabrication, a verbal composition, a made thing. William Carlos Williams defined the poem as "a small (or large) machine made of words."

(He added that there is nothing redundant about a machine.) Wallace Stevens characterized poetry as "a revelation of words by means of the words." In his helpful essay "What Is Poetry?" linguist Roman Jakobson declared:

> "Poeticity is present when the word is felt as a word and not a mere representation of the object being named or an outburst of emotion, when words and their composition, their meaning, their external and internal form, acquire a weight and value of their own instead of referring indifferently to reality."

Ben Johnson referred to the art of poetry as "the craft of making." The old Irish word *cerd,* meaning "people of the craft," was a designation for artisans, including poets. It is cognate with the Greek *kerdos*, meaning "craft, craftiness." Two basic metaphors for the art of poetry in the classical world were carpentry and weaving. "Whatsoever else it may be," W. H. Auden said, "a poem is a verbal artifact which must be as skillfully and solidly constructed as a table or a motorcycle."

The true poem has been crafted into a living entity. It has magical potency, ineffable spirit. There is always something mysterious and inexplicable in a poem. It is an act—an action—beyond paraphrase because what is said is always inseparable from the way it is being said. A poem creates an experience in the reader that cannot be reduced to anything else. Perhaps it exists in order to create that aesthetic experience. Octavio Paz maintained that the poet and the reader are two moments of a single reality. Of the many ideas provided here in this definition, perhaps the one to emphasize most is that the poem is "an event in language." It is also one of the harder to understand concepts. "A poem creates an experience in the reader that cannot be reduced to anything else," writes Hirsch. Especially not through paraphrase. This means that in order to "experience" a poem, a reader needs to read it as it is. The poem is itself a type of virtual reality.

Jeremy Arnold, a professor of Philosophy at the University of Woolamaloo in Canada, likens the poem to the "pensieve" device in the Harry Potter series: "A

poem allows someone to preserve a mental experience so that an outsider can access it as if it were their own." When coming to poetry, there may be nothing more important to understand because nothing can shape your perspective more on how to write and for what purpose. Poetry requires a reader, an audience; therefore, the poet must learn how to best engage an audience. And this engagement doesn't happen by sharing ideas, feelings, or experiences, by telling the reader about *your* experiences—it happens by *creating* them on the page with words that evoke the senses. With *images*. These, then, are how the literary genres speak. Images are their muscles. Their heart. Images are poetry's body and soul.

Activity

Choose a poem from the Poetry Foundation's featured poems https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems and look again at Edward Hirsh's definition of poem.

- How does this poem typify his explanation?
- Are there any ways in which it does not?

"Show Don't Tell"

Campbell McGrath on how to write a poem

How many of you have heard this phrase before? Maybe you heard it in your high school creative writing or English classroom. Or maybe this is the first time you are hearing it. The adage "Show don't tell" is shorthand for the most important tenet of creative writing. It asks you to create with an attention to the concrete, physical world rather than to simply tell with abstract words which produce thoughts about the speaker's experience or ideas (instead of feelings in the reader's body through the five senses).

In the following poems, images can not only be seen, but heard, tasted, smelled, and felt. Here are some examples of the different types of imagery we use in poetry. Many use more than one kind:

AUDITORY IMAGERY

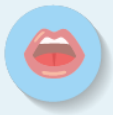
She sinks her eight ball, drinks me under
the table. I whimper for a date, a smooch,
a slap. She hits the jukebox, that old song.

(Mike Dockins, from "American Love Story")

...Oh
prayer for the hat to be a puller
for her even as it circles the city
or enters someone else's flat, hat
have an arm to keep her from his fist,
moon and train, moon and train, moon
and train: pull her, pull her, pull her.

(Michael Burkard, from "Hat Angel")

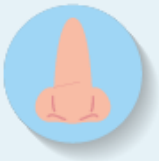
GUSTATORY IMAGERY



I love saying the name. Each sweet syllable seems like there ought to be a crush of sugar on your tongue, a tiny reward just for saying the word. These milk-balls, fried golden and soaked in sugar syrup, are glassed up in a luxuriously over-sized jar that my grandmother collects under her spice table to store homemade mango and spicy lime pickles.

(Aimee Nezhukumatathil, from "Gulabjamoon Jar")

OLFACTORY IMAGERY



I loved him most
when he came home from work,
his fingers still curled from fitting pipe,
his denim shirt ringed with sweat
and smelling of salt, the drying weeds
of the ocean.

(Dorianne Laux, from "The Shipfitter's Wife")

On things asleep: No balm :
A kingdom of stinks and sighs,
Fetor of cockroaches, dead fish, petroleum,
Worse than castoreum of mink or weasel,
Saliva dripping from warm microphones,
Agony of crucifixion on barstools.

(Theodore Roethke, from "The Longing")

TACTILE IMAGERY

I am a man of many heads. Each one capable
of loving you, each one unwrapping your paper
delicately by hand, slipping my fingernail be-
neath your coating till I can feel the smooth skin
of your nakedness.

(Robert Evory, from "Garlic")

I love the sound of the bone against the plate
and the fortress-like look of it
lying before me in a moat of risotto,
the meat soft as the leg of an angelwho has
lived a purely airborne existence.

(Billy Collins, from "Osso Bucco")

VISUAL IMAGERY

The fish rises with a red body in the green pond.
Under the arch of heaven
his fingers still curled from fitting pipe,

(Georg Trakl, from "The Sun," translated by Robert Bly and James Wright)

They decide to exchange heads.
Barbie squeezes the small opening under her chin
over Ken's bulging neck socket. His wide jaw line jostles
atop his girlfriend's body, loosely,
like one of those nodding novelty dogs
destined to gaze from the back window of cars.

(Denise Duhamel, from "Kinky")

Notice not only how imagistic these examples are, but how specific the details are, as well. In the poem "Hat Angel," Michael Burkard recreates the sound that the train makes in the last two lines through his use of diction and line breaks. And in "Kinky," Denise Duhamel attends to the small details of a Barbie doll

—"the small opening under her chin" while Robert Evory in "Garlic" brings our eye to the meeting of the delicate paper of a garlic clove and a fingernail.

These poems describe a pair of pants, a Barbie doll, and a garlic clove the way we would see them if we were holding them in our hands. And with Billy Collins in his poem "Osso Bucco," we get the sense that we are looking closer and closer and closer at the meat on his (on our!) plate. In these examples, the reader must be—cannot avoid being—sensually immersed in these images, which trigger the five senses—sight, taste, smell, touch, and hearing—through memory and imagination to create an actual experience for the reader. We do not read about George Trakl's experience on the water in the poem "Sun"; we are there ourselves.

Activity

Click on the following link to read Gary Snyder's poem "The Bath." Lines 1-9 are a good example of how the senses may be activated in multiple ways from one image. For example, the line "steaming air and crackle of water drops" can be classified as auditory, visual, and tactile. We see the steam and drops, hear the crackle, feel the heat. Can you identify any other images that engage more than one sense? After Snyder, return to the preceding examples and see if you can identify places where more than one sense is being used. How are your senses activated in the poems? What pictures do you see when you take the images in? Go through each poem and underline examples of objects you can touch—pants, waistband, snap, zipper, etc.

Adjectives and Adverbs

In an effort to create sharper, clearer images, beginning writers tend to add adjectives and adverbs to their sentences:

The sun shone brightly on the relaxing lake.

The flower is beautiful.

In each of these sentences adjectives and adverbs make for vague, generalized images by presenting ideas rather than things. What does it mean that the lake is "relaxing"? It is an idea and therefore does not produce a specific image in your mind's eye. What image is brought to mind with the word "beautiful"?

Although it may seem counter-intuitive, relying on adjectives and adverbs actually dulls an image rather than sharpening it. They *tell* a reader rather than *show* a reader by providing judgments made by the speaker. To remedy this, we need to sharpen the images through expansion or tightening:

The sun shone on the flat surface of the lake reflecting the purple evening light and
the white-capped mountains in the distance.
The tulip spread its petals wide creating a circle yellow as the sun.

Sticking to concrete, specific details engages readers' senses and allows them to come to the conclusion of whether or not the lake is relaxing or the flower beautiful.

Activity

Make the following images more concrete by replacing the adjectives and adverbs. You may also reconsider the verbs and their tense. Feel free to rewrite them using more than one sentence:

- Driving in the snowstorm was difficult.
- Our new puppy is so cute.
- Angela was thrilled to finally reach the top of the mountain.

Grandpa gently planted this year's seedlings in his lovely garden.
- Mom frantically got the kids ready for school.

Abstract vs. Concrete Words

The success of the above poems results in the poets' uses of concrete images, the images that refer to things you can actually touch in real life. In poetry, we work with two types of words:**abstract** and **concrete**. Ideally, the poem should re-create the experience of a poem through concrete details so the reader isn't merely *told* about the experience through the speaker, but *shown* the experience which the poet re-creates in a way that engages the reader's five senses.If the poets had used mostly abstract words, their poems may not be, well, poems. They might tell us more than show us. They might report or summarize. For example, if Gary Snyder relied more on abstractions than concretes, "The Bath" might tell us outright how he feels about washing a baby or how the baby feels about being washed rather than creating images of the baby being washed. The concrete images create a scene and allow us to come to our own conclusions. Here is an example of what Snyder's poem might look like if it relied too heavily on abstractions:

> **The baby was scared**
> **but we were happy**
> **in the sauna washing him**
> **because we love him**
> **and his body so much.**

The sentiment in these lines is intimate and warm, but as readers we struggle to see the event in our mind's eye. But note, even with the abstractions, the poem cannot escape using some concretes—baby, sauna, body. Rather than putting us in the room with the bath and allowing readers to feel the actions and be there themselves, the poem shifts its spotlight on the feelings of the speaker.

To better understand, let's look closer at abstract words. Here are some

examples:

- **Love**
- **Fear**
- **Happiness**

These are what we call *abstract* words. They refer to ideas we think with our minds rather than specific, individual things we can feel with our five senses and that call an exact image into our mind's eye. Think of concrete words as something you can actually *touch*. You cannot touch"love" and "safe" but you can touch your son in "warm water / Soap all over the smooth of his thighs and stomach." Once you finely tune the images into specific, concrete details, the sentiment will come through naturally.

Sometimes this concept confuses my students. "But I can *feel* love," they say. "I can *feel* anger."And, yes, of course we can recall what those emotions feel like when they are referenced in a poem. And, in fact, we feel actual sensations brought on by these emotions when they happen.Our blood races when we're in love, our stomach jumps when our lover or someone we desire walks into sight. We may feel our chests swell when we think about our mothers and our fathers, but when we read abstract words like "love" and "anger" we experience them in a vague, cloudy way, reliant more on our own individual memories that involved our five senses, rather than the poem itself using our five senses through imagery to create a new experience and memory.

Trying to avoid concretes is difficult. In fact, in order to even explain to you the sensations we feel when we experience love, as I just did, I had to use much more specific language that refers directly to physical things—chest, blood, stomach. Lover, mother, father. We read the word "love" and imagine love; we do not have a specific image come immediately into our mind's eye. And immediacy is the poet's job and responsibility to the reader of poems—words should vanish. The walls between the experience created by the words and the reader's senses taking in that to which the words refer, should fall. When we read good writing, we get lost in the experience and images the words are

creating in our minds. We are transported.

In contrast to abstractions, take in these words:

- **Apple**
- **Blue**
- **Boat**

What happened? What do you see?

Go around the room and have each class member share the image that comes to mind with the above words. How many different images are there for apple? Blue? Boat?In a poem, we want readers to have a specific experience created by images. The above words bring images to our mind, but we can do better still by being even more specific.

Use Specific, Significant Details

Now, what if we were to make these words even more specific:

- **Apple ... Golden Delicious Apple**
- **Blue ... Turquoise blue**
- **Boat ... Sailboat**

Now the brain is working more quickly. We see these things more immediately in our mind's eye.

Activity

Begin with the following vague categories and narrow down the word making it more and more specific:

1. **Food**

2. **Vehicle**
3. **Animal**

In the poem "The Bath," Gary Snyder is very attentive to specific details. He names his son, Kai, places us in a sauna, describes the lantern as being kerosene and set on a box. There is not a window, but a *ground-level* window which the light from the lantern illuminates. The light also illuminates not the stove, but the *edge* of the *iron* stove. Kai's body stands not in water but *warm* water, and it's not his body that is soapy—but his *thighs* and *stomach*.

Snyder creates a concrete, physical world for his readers and places us in a very specific time and setting. The details feel like they are slowed down—in both the writing and reading process—so the event may be created on one side and taken in on another. Snyder slows down and looks closely so we may, too.

Once details become this specific, something magical begins to happen. The poem naturally begins to amass different levels of meaning; it grows in complexity. For example, what's the significance of the lantern being kerosene? What does that tell us about the setting? The speaker? What do we take away from the detail about the ground-level window? What ideas come to mind when we read "ground-level"? Once we attain a literal reading, a first reading, which creates the scene, we may look again only this time more closely at the words, the diction. We may notice that "ground-level" evokes a sense of simplicity in us, an idea about being closer to the earth, being grounded. If so, how then does this feeling and idea relate to the poem as a whole?

This symbolic way of reading of poetry happens naturally when images are concrete, and details specific and significant. Snyder could have used any words in the poem, but he used these. Why? What do these words do inside their poetic space? What we do as writers affects the way readers read our poems. But when we write—here's the catch—we don't necessarily have to think of how a reader will interpret and read the poem. We just need to concentrate on making the words we choose be specific and significant so language—naturally

symbolic—can do its thing. After all, Alexander Fleming didn't discover penicillin by setting out to cure disease—he saw some mold growing, tapped into his curiosity, and used his imagination.

Read the poem "What Came to Me" https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/what-came-me by Jane Kenyon and note how the poem thinks small but produces big feelings. The poem's use of line, sound, tone, and image creates a moment in which the speaker is overwhelmed with grief. And what causes this for both the speaker and the reader? Finding a drop of gravy on the porcelain lip of a gravy boat. One "hard, brown / drop." Why does this image have such power? It is a short poem—nine lines—and those lines are short, ranging from four syllables to one line that is seven syllables long. But although brief, it is compact and bursts with emotion. We are not told how the speaker feels.

She does not say she felt sadness, pain, remorse, or loss. The first line describes action, simply,"I took." And the penultimate, the second-to-last, line also describes an action: "I grieved."Kenyon doesn't write "I felt grief" (a filter) or "I thought of all the good times" (a cliché). Instead, we are there with her, lifting the gravy boat from the box, only to discover in line five, a "hard, brown" and in line six, "drop of gravy still." The word "still" here doubly stops time and implies no movement while it also ends the line and hangs there, still on the sixth line's edge just as the gravy drop is on the edge of the gravy boat's lip.

As Hirsch writes, "A poem creates an experience in the reader that cannot be reduced to anything else." The effect of Kenyon's poem cannot be reduced only to the image of the gravy drop. As said, the diction, sound, form and tone do a lot of work. But it cannot be denied that the image is central to the poem's effect. And when it is combined with all the other poem's elements, it produces an experience that cannot be replicated any other way.

Activity

Write a poem about an experience with an object that invokes emotions for you. Rather than tell the reader about this experience, show the reader by using concrete, specific words. You may wish to start by free writing about the memory and then forming it into a poem, especially if no specific object comes immediately to mind. Through writing about an emotional experience while paying close attention to specific details, a concrete object should emerge.

Write What You See

...not what you think. Thoughts explain, report, conclude, reflect, and basically do the opposite of what images do. With images, readers are left to come to their own conclusions, reflections, ideas, analyses, and insights. And readers like it this way. They don't want to be told what to think and feel. They don't want to be told the ending to a movie that they haven't yet seen. When we tell instead of show, when we use conclusions to inform readers rather than evoke their senses, we steal the pleasures of literature from them. The pleasure of reading literature, and therefore poetry, comes from being able to reflect on what you experienced and form your own conclusions. When we read a story, we want to go along for the ride and lose ourselves with our imaginations. In writing, we say trust your reader. It means letting the images and actions exist without our interpretations. If a reader wants interpretations they will reach for a book of criticism, an essay, or the editorial section of a newspaper.

Often in creative writing classes, beginning writers rely heavily on saying how they feel and what they think rather than describing what they see. Perhaps this is because beginning writers are used to being asked for their thoughts in classes like composition and courses in literature. But here we are *writing* the literature. Not interpreting it. It's a different kind of writing.

When revising, try to change thoughts to images. It's okay to have thoughts, what Ezra Pound called *logopoeia,* at any stage in the writing process. The

trick, as poet Bruce Smith once so eloquently wrote, is “not getting rid of thought, but finding a way to realize and music the thought.” Note the word “music” being used as a verb—*music* your thought. When we revise, poets will sift through a poem over and over making images more succinct, diction more precise, lines more musical.

Zoom In, Zoom Out

via GIPHY

One way to enable yourself to see things more vividly when you write is to imagine that your mind's eye is a camera. And, like a movie camera, it can zoom in and out. It can move outside a house, inside a house. It can be on a roof, in a basement, and in orbit all in one poem. How boring would a film be if the camera stayed in one spot the entire time? Move your lens around. Change out the telescopic lens in one line for a microscopic lens. Use a wide angle in partner with a 50 mm, which captures things closest to their actual size. And, as any good photographer knows, when photographing a subject, try a different angle. Instead of taking shots from only above the bird's nest, move to the side, see what's below.

When taking pictures one cannot use a filter to make a photograph say, "*I thought* the blue egg looked like a sapphire." Nope. Instead, the photograph can only show a sapphire-blue egg. The photographer's opinion doesn't exist in the picture; they stay behind the lens. So, too, with the poet. Stay behind the lens and let the images and their sequence speak for themselves. The fact that the poet points the camera in a specific direction already tells the reader that the speaker/photographer/poet believes this is important to see.

Just as a camera-operator must be present in their surroundings when filming, so too the poet must locate themselves in the setting—be it time, place, or mood—of the poem. Pay attention to what your senses detect. What do you see, hear, smell? Who is with you? Who was here before?

Look around. Orient yourself.

Begin by locating yourself very specifically in a moment with your lens. Then, move out from there—through time, through space. Try not stay in one spot. Don't stagnate and bore your reader. You can go anywhere, any time. Think of chaos theory and the butterfly effect: if a butterfly flaps its wings halfway around the world, does it cause something else to happen on the other side? It doesn't matter. A butterfly flaps its wings on a dry stone at the edge of Otsego Lake's shore. In Seattle, a meteor lights the sky. Are these connected? It doesn't matter—they can both exist in a poem and, therefore, be connected. Or not.

What else do you want to see? Pick up the camera and go.

Activity

Using a place as a unifying principle, write a poem that creates a type of collage of events that happened in that place throughout time. For example, try a diner, a hospital room, a stage, a street corner, a schoolroom—a specific desk for that matter (third row back by the window) and create a series of moments that have taken place there using the zoom in, zoom out method.

Use Active Verbs

Earlier we spoke about filters and how removing them can make your writing more energetic. Another way to add energy to your writing is to use active sentences and specific verbs. Verbs are amazing little things. They may be only one part of speech but they're the one that provides motion or stillness that define a subject or event. Verbs affect tension, energy, and pace. And just think about it: grammatically, a sentence cannot exist without one. Of course, such is the way of the world: not all verbs are created equal. *To be* forms of verbs create passive sentences, which slow down the pace, zap energy from writing, and tend to create generalized images. They add unnecessary syllables to an art form whose purpose is to be concise and condensed. They appear as the following:

Present Tense

- **I am, we are**
- **You are, you are**
- **He/she/it is, they are**

Past Tense

- **I was, we were**

- **You were, you were**
- **He/she/it was, they were**

Progressive Form

- **I am being, you are being, he/she/it is being**

Perfect Form

- **I have been, you have been, he/she/it has been**

Here is an example of a sentence that uses the *to be* forms of *wash* and v*acuum*:

I was washing the dishes while my brother was vacuuming the carpet.

And here is that sentence rewritten with active verbs:

I washed the dishes while my brother vacuumed the carpet.

Notice how the change creates a sentence with more stresses thereby creating more energy. Now take a passive sentence that places the emphasis on the milk:

The milk was spilled by Hector.

An active sentence that focuses our attention on the subject's action:

Hector spilled the milk.

Though passive sentences have their place and create their own effect by shifting emphasis from the subject to the object, generally they should be used sparingly.

Activity

Read Dorianne Laux's poem "The Shipfitter's Wife" and take note of her verbs. Make a list of them. What do you notice? What is the effect of these verbs on the poem's experience? Now, change those verbs to to be forms. What else changes?

In addition to using the active forms of verbs, experienced poets use a wide variety of verbs in their writing. As you revise, don't settle on the first verb you think of; every verb can offer something different. For example, did the little girl *look* out the window at the deer? Or did she gaze, peer, stare, glance, glimpse, notice, or behold? All of these words produce a slightly different meaning and music.

When revising your poems, a thesaurus can be a useful tool when expanding your vocabulary.

Anglo-Saxon vs. Latinate Diction

The English language is a combination of Latin and German. As you begin to expand your vocabulary by experimenting with different verbs that make your images more specific, keep in mind that for a poet, short and succinct Anglo-Saxon verbs often work better than Latinate, multi-syllabic verbs. Though all words have their place, those Latinate, so-called "SAT words" or "ten-dollar words" slow down your reader. They are intellectual rather than physical; of the mind rather than of the body. Anglo-Saxon words tend to be shorter and more concrete, whereas Latinate words tend to be longer and more abstract:

Latinate	Anglo-Saxon
Masticate	Eat
Abdomen	Tummy

Inquire	Ask
Disclose	Tell
Cognizant	Aware
Excrement	Shit
Precipitation	Rain

Think about how and when you hear these words. If you stub your toe or slam your finger in a car door, I bet most of the words you say would be monosyllabic and Anglo-Saxon rather than multi-syllabic and Latinate. The shorter words are more immediately felt, whether exclaiming them or reading them. When people become excited, their words shorten and the pace of language quickens. There is more urgency and more energy—what we want in our poems.

Sometimes students worry that their poems will be too remedial if they stick to shorter words. Though there is nothing wrong with a reader having to use a dictionary on occasion, remember that creative writing is the land of images. We want our readers to forget they are reading. We want them to experience a poem through their senses. Poems are condensed moments of an experience meant to be taken in as a whole; all at once, in a way, no matter the length of the poem. We want the words on the page to translate into images in the mind's eye quickly; therefore, big, academic words are *usually* not the diction of choice in poetry.

Activity

Choose a poem from this book or the Poetry Foundation and change Anglo-Saxon words into Latinate words. What difference do these new words make to how you experience the poem?

Figures of Speech

Figurative language uses words or expressions not meant to be taken literally. Whether you realize it or not, we encounter them every day. When we exaggerate we use hyperbole: *I'm so hungry I could eat a horse*; when Rhianna sings about *stars like diamonds in the sky* she uses simile; when we say *opportunity knocked on my door* we are using personification. In addition to making our conversations interesting and capturing our intense feelings, figurative language is very important to the making of poetry. It is a tool that allows us to make connections, comparisons, and contrasts in ways that produce insight, raise questions, and add specificity. Earlier we worked to make words more specific. We changed *apple, blue,* and *boat* into *golden delicious*, *turquoise*, and *sailboat*. The changes made the images more immediate and sharper and offered the reader opportunities to understand the poem. Figures of speech are the next step to adding layers to your poems, to adding even more complexity and meaning.

Types of Figurative Language

Figurative language, often the comparison made between two seemingly unlike things, is almost all image-based and, therefore, a good friend of poetry. In fact, some, like Owen Barfield in his essay on metaphor https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/text/metaphor , would go so far as to say that poetry *is* **metaphor**:

> The most conspicuous point of contact between meaning and poetry is *metaphor*. For one of the first things that a student of etymology—even quite an amateur student—discovers for himself is that every language, with its thousands of abstract terms, and its nuances of meaning and association, is *apparently* nothing, from beginning to end, but an unconscionable tissue of dead, or petrified, metaphors. If we trace the meaning of a great many words—or those of the elements of which they are composed—about as far back as etymology can take us, we are at once made to realize that an overwhelming proportion, if not all, of them referred in earlier days to one of these two things—a solid, sensible

> object, or some animal (probably human) activity. Examples abound on every page of the dictionary. Thus, an apparently objective scientific term like *elasticity,* on the one hand, and the metaphysical *abstract* on the other, are both traceable to verbs meaning "draw" or "drag." *Centrifugal* and *centripetal* are composed of a noun meaning "a goad" and verbs signifying "to flee" and "to seek" respectively; epithet, theme, thesis, anathema, hypothesis, etc., go back to a Greek verb, "to put," and even *right* and *wrong*, it seems, once had the meaning "stretched" and so "straight" and "wringing" or "sour." Some philologists, looking still further back into the past, have resolved these two classes into one, but this is immaterial to the point at issue.

"*Nihil in intellectu quod non prius fueriot in sense*."

"Nothing in the intellect that was not previously in the senses," wrote philosopher John Locke. In short, the way we know *anything* is through the senses—even abstract idea originates through experience gained through our bodies. And in the case of language's origin, as explained above, it appears that all words, at their invention, referred to something concrete—an object or a specific action that evoked the senses. As we continue to use words, they evolve, for they live their own life. And when we use a word, we invite its history and permutations into its meaning. Of course, this is all way too much to think about at once in the writing process. But it is why writers revise and cross-examine their diction, thinking out what meanings the word may suggest. Language is *naturally* symbolic in origin, in its fabric. And an art that uses words cannot help but also have more meanings than just the literal.

The following types of figurative language are used most often in poetry:

- Metaphor—A direct comparison between two unlike things, as in *Hope is the thing with feathers* (Emily Dickinson, "Hope").

- Simile—A comparison that uses *like* or *as,* as in *something inside me / rising explosive as my parakeet bursting / from its cage* (Bruce Snider,

"Chemistry")

- Personification—Human characteristics being applied to non-human things, as in *irises, all / funnel & hood, papery tongues whispering little / rumors in their mouths* (Laura Kasischke, "Hostess").

- Metonymy—When one thing is represented by another thing associated with it, as in *The pen is mightier than the sword* (where pen stands in for writing, and sword stands in for warfare or violence).

- Synecdoche—When a part of something symbolizes the whole, or the whole of something symbolizes the part, as in *All hands on deck* (where *hands* stands in for *men*), or *The whole world loves you* (where *whole world* represents only a small number of its human population).

When we read such literary devices, our mind lights up a new pathway between the two things and we discover new ways of thinking about the relationship between these two things. We wonder, how is his love a red, red rose? But before we wonder, our senses have already made a connection. As we look closer at the poem, we begin to explore the idea more. The following is a poem by Laura Kasischke. It contains numerous metaphors and similes:

CONFECTIONS

Caramel is sugar burnt

to syrup in a pan. Chaos
is a pinch of joy, a bit of screaming. An infant sleeping's
a milky sea. A star

is fire and flower. Divinity
is beaten out of egg whites

into cool white peaks. Friendship

begins and ends in suspicion, unless
it ends in death. Ignite

a glass of brandy in a pan, and you'll

have cherries jubilee: sex
without love's sodden nightgown

before your house burns down. Music's

a bomb of feathers
in the air
in the moment before it explodes
and settles itself whispering
onto the sleeves of a child's choir robe. And

a candied apple's
like a heartache—exactly

like a heartache—something
sweet and red tortured to death

with something sweeter, and more red.

The poem begins with a sentence that mimics a metaphor—stating something is something else: *caramel is sugar burnt / to syrup in a pan*. It sounds like a metaphor, but it actually isn't. Caramel actually is sugar burnt to syrup. Rather than a metaphor, the first two lines function as a definition, which sets the stage (note my own figurative language) for understanding how metaphors work in our minds, for whether definition or metaphor, we use the same structure: x is y; our minds equate the one thing with the other. In the poem this happens with caramel to sugar burnt to syrup.

In "Confections," the opening definition that looked like a metaphor is followed by a true metaphor (or is it?). *Chaos is a pinch of joy, a bit of screaming*. We

take this as metaphor, but because we do, it brings us back to the first sentence. If sentence two is figurative why isn't sentence one? And if sentence one is literal, why isn't sentence two? Both are structured exactly the same. Kasischke's poem exposes the slipperiness of language and syntax: how we use them and interpret them. The poem asks us to examine closely the line between imagination and reality and the role language plays in sorting them out, or not.

The next two metaphors are more imagistic that the previous: *An infant sleeping's / a milky sea. A star / is fire and flower*. While we couldn't "see" the abstraction *joy* and could only hear *screaming*, we certainly see a milky sea, and we certainly see a star flaring as fire, and flower. The parallel of fire and flower is interesting because they are so different. A flower would not survive if it were ablaze in flames. Yet, Kasischke's comparison between the star and fire and flower makes sense to us. It plays not on the science of heat, but on the images associated with fire and flowers—they both spread outward. So, we equate the shape and motion of a star with both fire and flower. Of course, like the comparison of caramel to sugar burnt to syrup, a star actually is a fire. Again, the poem engages our ability to hold two things in the mind at once—just as a metaphor does—only with the poem as a whole, these two things are the literal and symbolic nature of language.

When we use figures of speech in our poetry, we have the opportunity to invite a whole new layer of meaning into the poem.

Poet Mike Dockins and his Favorite Metaphor Exercise

THE FISH TANK OF RAGE

Goal: What we are essentially creating with this exercise are "implied" or "submerged" metaphors, where, in this case, the concrete object is never mentioned explicitly, but only implied by its descriptions.

PREP / MATERIALS

Prepare a whole bunch of little index cards: one pile consisting of concrete details (skyscraper, waterfall, volcano, etc.) and the other of abstractions (fear, loneliness, joy, etc.). Dockins says he uses emotions specifically rather than other abstract concepts such as capitalism or knowledge.

ROUND 1

In this first round, each student gets two index cards, one concrete and one abstract, and the first thing they do is "re-write" the name of their game. So now instead of "The Fishtank of Rage," they have "The Dagger of Fate" or "The Cocoon of Grief." At this point, do not worry about all the rules (see below), but, rather, describe the abstraction in terms of the qualities of the concrete object, not the other way around. For example, "A cocoon was sad because somebody died" is getting things backwards. The statement should actually be "Grief is somehow like a cocoon," and the question for you to answer is, "How so?" How is grief like a cocoon? Well, grief is confined to a small space, but in time can break out of its shell. Something is alive inside of grief. Grief is fragile, etc.

Take just a few minutes and brainstorm as many such short sentences as possible, and then we share a few. Be careful not to over-literalize: "When grief opens up, a moth flies out"— the idea in fact is to create metaphors. So, you should think imaginatively, creatively.

ROUNDS 2, 3, ETC.

In Round 2 and beyond (you can do as many rounds as you like), select new combinations of cards. Complete the steps described in Round 1 with your new words and share your work with each other.

Make sure that you consider *all* aspects of the concrete object. Make sure to not be too inflexible in your thinking — for example, if you only think of the object's size and shape. Think about how your object changes, and what

associations we have with it. For example, a balloon can be a certain color and size and shape, but it can also inflate, deflate, pop, and fly away from you. It can also symbolize celebration, birthdays, hospital visits, etc. Or, a volcano isn't always erupting. It spends much of its "life" in dormancy, and should give us a feeling of awe of the passage of time. Plus, it can be dangerous but also beautiful.

THE RULES / GUIDELINES, IN SHORT

1. Write several separate sentences, as opposed to one long continuous little story.
2. Describe the abstraction in terms of the concrete object, not the other way around.
3. Do not mention the concrete object directly.
4. Do not be overly literal.
5. Consider any and all of the object's qualities and associations.
6. You're essentially creating metaphors, so be creative! Be imaginative! Be profound!

Clichés

One of the reasons why Laura Kasishcke's poem "Confections" is so successful is because of its originality. When we read about how a star is fire and flower, or how a "baby sleeping's / a milky sea," we are taking things in through our senses that we have not before; we are forming new connections between things in our minds. One of the dangers of using figurative language in our writing is relying on **clichés**, or *word packages*, that have lost their evocative effect. Rather than startle our senses alive with new connections, clichés roll over us numbly, failing to spark an image in our minds. They are the walking dead of language.

One way to avoid clichés is to not use a phrase if you've hear it before. If you've heard it in a song, don't use it. If you've heard it on a television show, don't use it. The following is the first half of common clichés. See if you can complete the

phrase:

Cold as_____.

Hot as_____.

Blind as a _____.

Faster than a _____.

You are the apple of _____.

It's likely you were able to fill all of these in. Here are the answers:

Cold as ice. Hot as hell. Blind as a bat. Faster than lightning. You are the apple of my eye.

Rather than bringing an image to mind, notice how the words stay distant. They do not succeed in engaging your senses. They have become conceptual instead of sensory. When you have a cliché in your writing, the reader disengages from the poem's experience. To fix clichés, there are two main remedies:

1. Say what you mean. Eliminate the figurative language and be literal, direct. Instead of saying *I'm at the end of my rope*, say *I am frustrated and impatient*.

2. Rewrite the expression by expanding descriptive language. Instead of *He took the bait*, explain in detail and images what the bait is and how he took it.

3. Freshen up the figurative language by inventing a new metaphor. Instead of *quiet as a mouse*, why not find something else quiet that reflects the poem's original subject? *Quiet as a pitchfork on Easter morning*.

Activity

Write a poem composed entirely of clichés.

clichés

For a more complete list of clichés, see the following web sites:

- http://www.clichelist.net/
- https://www.englishclub.com/vocabulary/figures-similes-list.htm

You may also wish to check out some "Chandlerisms" online. Chandlerisms are novelist and screenwriter Raymond Chandler's playful turns of phrase and spoofs on **clichés.**

Additional Resources:

For a more complete list of literary and poetic terms, see the following web sites: Burroway, Janet. *Writing Fiction*. https://guidetonarrativecraft.weebly.com/chapters-1-3.html

and Glossary of Poetry Schools and Movements. The Poetry Foundation. http://www.poetryfoundation.org/learning/glossary-terms?category=schools-and-periods

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← Chapter Two: Welcome, Re…

Chapter Four: Voice →

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Chapter Four: Voice

The speaker is the bridge between the poem's experience and the reader. Like language, when voice works best, it becomes invisible, cemented to, part and parcel of the poem's experience. Tone of voice is responsible for creating trust between the reader and the speaker, and in enticing readers to lose themselves in the experience; it is responsible for letting a reader be enraptured by the poem.

In the introduction to the *2006 Best American Poetry* anthology, the judge for that year, poet Billy Collins, explains the key role that a poem's tone of voice played in determining which poems to place in the pile that left him "cold" and which poems to place in the pile that caught him "in their spell," those that he would eventually consider for inclusion in the collection. Collins begins by elucidating how the voice of a poem took on a bigger role once Modern poetry began to experiment with free verse:

> Once Walt Whitman demonstrated that poetry in English could get along without standard meter and end-rhyme, poetry began to lose that familiar gait and musical jauntiness that listeners and readers had come to identify with it. But poetry also lost something more: a trust system that had bound poet and reader together through the reliable recurrence of similar sounds and a steady dependable beat. Whatever emotional or intellectual demands a poem placed on the reader, at least the reader could put trust in the poet's implicit promise to keep up a tempo and maintain a sound pattern. It is the same promise that is made to the listeners of popular songs. What has come to replace that system of trust, if anything? However vague a substitute, the answer is probably tone of voice. As a reader, I

> come to trust or distrust the authority of the poem after reading just a few lines. Do I hear a voice that's making reasonable claims for itself—usually a first-person voice speaking fallibly but honestly—or does the poem begin with a grandiose pronouncement, a riddle, or an intimate confession foisted on me by a stranger? Tone may be the most elusive aspect of written language, but our ears instantly recognize words that sound authentic and words that ring false. The character of the speaker's voice played an indescribable but essential role in the making of those two piles I mentioned, one much taller than the other.

It is interesting that Collins refers negatively to the "voice of a stranger," as aren't all speakers of poems strangers to a reader? We do not know the poet, so how can we possibly know the speaker? Yet here, Collins suggests that there is something in us that does know something of the speaker, some credibility that "sounds authentic" rather than "ringing false," and this has more to do with tone of voice than subject matter. After all, who believes someone who doesn't sound trustworthy? It is like watching a play with bad acting—you can't lose yourself in the story or character, you cannot transport, you cannot release yourself to get "caught in its spell." We have trouble trusting our senses and giving our time to the speaker without suspicion, which acts as a barrier between the reader and the experience. It is similar to what poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge called a "suspension of disbelief," in a sense: We need to be willing to be wrapped up in a poem's experience, and if we're untrusting then we're not willing. Tone of voice develops from the many moves a poem makes and can be considered, in another way, the *stance* the speaker takes, the relationship between the subject matter and the speaker.

Trust vs. Truth

How do we gain someone's trust? We can build a reputation if we're, say, a journalist or reporter. We can create a history of trust with a friend or spouse. We can plead and swear on a Bible like we do in courtrooms,

walter white, ferris buller, life of brian poster

but even then there's no guarantee someone is telling the truth. Maybe you remember from your childhood or teenage years what you needed to do to be believed even if you were fibbing. Much of it had to do with details. The more specific the details of a story, the more convincing the story. If we look at film and television, we see entire narratives based on deceit and maintaining a lie. The AMC hit series *Breaking Bad* followed the life of Walter White who had to constantly work to keep his family from discovering that he was involved in the world of crystal meth. In the 1998 film *Shakespeare in Love,* Gwyneth Paltrow's character dresses as "Thomas Kent" in order to audition for a performance in which women are prohibited to perform. And in *Ferris Beuller's Day Off* (1986), Ferris has to deceive his family and teachers in order to keep from being caught for skipping school—after deceiving his mom by convincing her he was too sick to go to school.

Alternatively, in the 1979 Monty Python classic *The Life of Brian*, poor Brian Cohen, born on the same day as Jesus, cannot convince anyone he is not God's only holy son. We can ask how these characters convince other characters (or not) of their stories, but the real question in regard to creative writing is more along the lines of: why are we *the audience* so lost in these characters' lives and swept up in their stories? And how can we, as the speaker of a poem, make our audience feel with that same intensity when they read our poems?

Like the stories in these movies, poems do not have to be factual or even *based* on fact to earn the trust of a reader and ring true. The experience poems create can be either real or entirely made-up. The speaker must simply, as Billy Collins says, "sound authentic." The truth of a poem, like the truth in a

short story or novel, need not be based on the author's experience; it need simply be an experience that convinces us to lose ourselves in it and the voice that tells it.

Don't Try to Sound Poetic

One of the mistakes I see beginning writers make frequently is using archaic or unnatural diction, or word choice, in a poem. Words like *amongst, thou, thine, hath, thee, thyself,* or adding an *–eth* to a verb: *stoppeth, handeth,* etc. Archaic words like these standeth out as thy sore thumb. They are of a different time and generation. When we use them it feels to the reader as though we are putting on a cloak, disguising ourselves, creating a voice that is untrustworthy—again, not because the story may not be true, but because it sounds like the speaker isn't real. When we write, whether we write as ourselves or as someone we are pretending to be—like acting— we must sound like a real person.

Some of the thinking that is behind the use of archaic diction is that we feel that we need to sound poetic, so we use words that we are used to thinking of as being poetic. But the truth is that the reader comes to the poem wanting to be surprised by new uses of language, its music, its imagery, wanting to connect to a real speaker.

Pick up a literary journal or book of poems today and you will find poems that are conversational, friendly, confessional, reflective, meditative, or serious, but what they all contain is a speaker who is knowable, or as Collins explains, *authentic*. Of course, there are many schools and styles of poetry. Language poetry, for instance, isn't interested in a speaker's voice or expression, but rather places more of an emphasis on the reader's interpretation of how language is creating meaning in and of itself. A reference guide to schools of poetry can be found at The Poetry Foundation's web site.

Zen stones on beach pukaki lake

Balance Sentimentality and Emotional Risk

Without emotional risk, a poem can lack tension, energy, and lose the chance of producing insight. If a speaker isn't risking something in a poem, then why is it being written? It's like getting into a car and driving nowhere. The poem is the vehicle we climb into as a reader and we want the driver to take us somewhere. Whenever we express ourselves and share our feelings, just as whenever we hop into a car and drive, we take a risk.

William Wordsworth referred to a poem as "a spontaneous overflow of emotions…reflected upon in tranquility." His definition suggests that a poem contains two possible sources of tension: one triggered by the poetic event (either real or imagined) that caused a surge in sensual and emotional intensity almost like a chemical reaction; and a second source (either real or imagined) that transpires when the speaker applies reflection, thought, or ideas to the

first event and the reaction. The second part takes place after time distances an intellectual perspective from a frenzy of emotions. There is what we can call the first occasion for the poem—the event and the instantaneous reaction of the body—and then the second occasion: the speaker's reflection which aims to make meaning of it all. In the first part, tension is caused by what could be considered a chemical reaction between the event and the speaker's reaction; and in the second part it is a speaker's thoughts, ideas, reflections which can cause tension. At one of these two points of entry, there must be some form of duality or complexity. If the poem arises from the first part, the poem will tend to be dramatic or *narrative* and focused on the sequence of events. If the poem arises from the second part of the equation, the poem will tend to be *meditational* or *lyric*, focused on the poet's thoughts, perceptions, and feelings. Either way, the poem must still contain concrete, detailed images which anchor the sentiment of the speaker to an event, for if there isn't the anchor, the poet risks drifting off into a world of over-sentimentality.

Beginning writers, attempting to instill intensity in a poem, often lapse into over-sentimentality, exaggerated or overly dramatic emotions without just cause for them. As Oscar Wilde wrote, "A sentimentalist is one who desires to have the luxury of an emotion without paying for it." Over-sentimentality results in sappy, clichéd writing, and an inauthentic voice. *Sentiment,* a speaker's emotional state, is not the same thing as over-sentimentality. All speakers have some sort of emotional stance, or sentiment, in a poem—in fact, sentiment is required to produce a knowable speaker to whom a reader can relate. And this sentiment—this abstraction we as readers will be made to feel—must arise from the concrete particulars that justify the level of emotion produced.

In the following examples, the text falls victim to over-sentimentality:

1. When I found out about Charlie's new girlfriend, it felt like my heart exploded into a billion pieces. I cried so much I thought my tears would drown me. I would never love again.

2. The poor, innocent, homeless boy tugged at my skirt. It wasn't his fault he had no shelter, but the cruel winter and its roaring wind didn't care about the fragile boy's body or soul. It howled like a demonic coyote about to devour a frail fawn smelling delicate flowers for the first time.

Many times oversentimentality results from a focus on telling rather than showing, as is the case with the first example which tells us what the speaker was feeling rather than show us through actions or descriptions. The image of the heart bursting into a billion pieces is cliché and is used in place of a fresh image. The word "never" is extreme and unbelievable. In fact, when we write we want to avoid words with ultimatums as such—final, never, always, all, none. Usually they are simply not true and difficult to imagine.

In the second example, the writer uses extensive images to play on the reader's emotions. Note the use of adjectives—small, innocent, cruel, poor, demonic, fragile, delicate. Remember that adjectives tell instead of show. The example is so over the top that as readers we begin to feel emotionally bullied by the writer.

So, what to do? You cannot have a poem dodge sentimentality entirely; otherwise, your speaker will be robotic. But, one must be careful not to indulge in extremities and exaggeration either. There is a balance between the solipsistic rant, complaint, or laud, and the raw, sarcastic, angry expression: for example, "Go fuck yourself with your atom bomb" (Ginsberg); "Boy, do I love America" (Dockins); "I hate them as I hate sex" (Gluck). It's all about balance and anchoring the sentiment in concrete images and daring to expose a speaker or character's vulnerability, their humanity.

Left and right brain concept with colors music and science flat vector illustration

Use Contrasts

To balance over-sentimentality and emotional risk, take a cue from fiction technique and try to work in contrasts to maintain balance. If a character is a mean, selfish person, try to find or invent an occasion in their life when they were vulnerable. If a character is generous and giving, try to find or invent a time when they weren't. The contrasts will add tension and complication and make the character or speaker seem more human. You can see this contrasting

and complicating approach made successful in film, television, and fiction where sometimes the main character may be despicable, but we readers or viewers can't help but feel pity, empathy, or some sort of hope for him or her. In *Breaking Bad,* Walter White is a selfish liar whose drug making causes the deaths of numerous people. Yet when we see him hold his newborn, share a touching moment with his disabled son, undergo chemotherapy, or express over and over his reason for making meth—to support his family—we can't help but soften our criticism of him.

Let Objects Become Symbols

When your poems confront a speaker's intense emotion, whether from a real or imagined experience, one thing you can do to stay grounded in real emotion is to turn to images and objects which can become symbols for emotion. Return to Jane Kenyon's poem "What Came to Me." Here is an example of speaker who feels an overwhelming sense of grief, but the poem focuses on the gravy boat and that drop of gravy to evoke emotions. The object becomes a symbol of grief.

When experiencing loss or healing from grief, what do people do? We often turn to people, objects, and actions for comfort—the company of our children, a cup of tea, handfuls of birdseed in the birdhouse covered with snow. At the same time, objects can deepen the grief—a pair of empty slippers under the bed, untouched knitting needles in a basket by the couch, the still mobile of stars and planets dripping from a nursery ceiling. These images set a mood for the poem and evoke emotions without the poet having to turn to abstractions and oversentimentality.

Create Distance

When emotions run high, turn down the diction and distance the speaker from the emotion. Rather than rely on hyperbole to describe the overwhelming, indescribable sense of emotion, turn your camera's eye elsewhere, cool the

feelings. Sometimes pulling away creates a contrast that makes the poem more emotional, as odd as that sounds. In the following poem, Kim Addonizio uses this approach:

EATING TOGETHER

I know my friend is going,
though she still sits there
across from me in the restaurant,
and leans over the table to dip
her bread in the oil on my plate; I know
how thick her hair used to be,
and what it takes for her to discard
her man's cap partway through our meal,
to look straight at the young waiter
and smile when he asks
how we are liking it. She eats
as though starving—chicken, dolmata,
the buttery flakes of filo—
and what's killing her
eats, too. I watch her lift
a glistening black olive and peel
the meat from the pit, watch
her fine long fingers, and her face,
puffy from medication. She lowers
her eyes to the food, pretending
not to know what I know. She's going.
And we go on eating.

For five lines, we interpret "going" as maybe implying that the friend is leaving for another appointment or going home. When the friend leans over and dips her bread into the oil on the speaker's plate, the action can seem like an inconvenience or intrusion. But the mood changes as we discover the friend is losing her hair and is eating as though she is "starving." We begin to put pieces together until we understand that what's "killing her" is cancer. Still, even with this knowledge, the tone of the poem remains distant, the speaker objectively describing the scene and actions through imagery. The food is described as "buttery" and "glistening," which gives the food beauty and a sense of indulgence. In contrast, the friend's face is "puffy from medication," which strikes us as being unnatural. Although the speaker never says the words "death," "cancer," "loss," "miss," or "love," the cool tone and images create these emotions in us as though the loss of her friend's life is so devastating that the speaker cannot bring it to words directly. Like the tone, she remains distant from the fact of her friend's impending death, which can be seen as the poem ends not on "She's going," but on "we go on eating." They go on eating as if nothing is different or wrong. They go on eating because that is life.

In a poem of the same title, Li-Young Lee also adopts a distant tone in the

beginning that shifts midway to something warmer:

Poetry Breaks: Li-Young Lee Reads "Eating Together"

Eating Together

In the steamer is the trout
seasoned with slivers of ginger,
two sprigs of green onion, and sesame oil.
We shall eat it with rice for lunch,
brothers, sister, my mother who will
taste the sweetest meat of the head,
holding it between her fingers
deftly, the way my father did
weeks ago. Then he lay down
to sleep like a snow-covered road
winding through pines older than him,
without any travelers, and lonely for no one.

Young Lee. Reprinted with the permission of The Permissions Company, Inc., on behalf of BOA Editions, Ltd., www.boaeditions.org.

For the first five lines, the focus on food sounds almost like a menu description or a recipe. The speaker's tone is distant as we are given the images of food and who is eating. It isn't until we reach the eighth line that states "the way my father did" that we feel a sense of absence and longing. The next line surprises us in that the father only disappeared "weeks ago." We understand that this is a recent loss, and possibly death. The poem affirms that the speaker's father "lay down / to sleep," a metaphor for death. And that, further, he lay down "like a snow-covered road / winding through pines older than him, / without any travelers." The snow evokes cold and the death that comes naturally in winter, and the pines place the father in a world that the old and ancient occupy, alone "without any travelers." Yet, the poem ends with a tone of acceptance and satisfaction, an affirmation that the speaker's father is "lonely for no one." Though the speaker and his family feel loss, emphasized by the assonance of the emotional "oh's" in the last phrase "lonely for no one," his father is content and not lonely. This last phrase offers complex feelings, both uplifting in acceptance and painful with mourning. There are two worlds now—life and death—and being "lonely for no one" translates differently in each world. Like Addonizio's poem, Lee's poem doesn't contain the words "death," or "sadness." Only a cool tone that arises partially from the imagery produced by a speaker who stands outside the experience of the poem, the eye of the camera an observer rather than a confessionalist.

Activity

Write your own poem titled "Eating Together" in which you rely on images and a distant tone of voice to evoke a strong sense of emotion. Begin by thinking for five minutes about an emotional event you've experienced. This event could be anything as long as it affects your memory and emotions strongly. Then, write the poem without speaking about or

referring to the event. Simply try to write a poem that details imagery related to the theme of "eating together." How do your memories cause you to charge the language?

In the following poem, Albuquerque Poet Laureate Michele Otero writes about an issue about which she feels strongly, though she does not tell the readers what to feel or think about the events described in the poem.

THE CHEERLEADERS

November 1960
federal marshals drive
a six-year-old girl to school
in New Orleans. Road
lined with women waving
Bibles and placards
like pom-poms. The girl
thinks it must be Mardi Gras.

The cheerleaders
they call themselves
stand behind barricades. One carries
a black doll in a wooden coffin.

Looking back, Ruby Bridges
says, "They never saw
a child."

§

April 2014
morning in Nogales
or Brownsville,
a six-year-old wakes
on concrete in a heap
of other boys, dark
limbs tangled in Red Cross
blankets and donated sheets.

The boys from Guatemala City
Tegucigalpa
San Salvador
board
buses to Murrieta,
Dallas,
Birmingham,
New Orleans,
Las Cruces,
St. Louis,
Springfield – doesn't matter
where they go. Cheerleaders
block buses, wave
American flags, as if to say
"Welcome."

Michelle Otero in Her Own Words:

> In 2014 unprecedented numbers of unaccompanied children from Central America were arriving at the US/Mexico border, having traveled more than two-thousand miles across Mexico. The children were bused all over the country to be processed by Border Patrol and then turned over to Immigration and Customs Enforcement. The mayor of Murrieta, California, called on people to fight the transfer of immigrant children to the local detention facility. Protesters met a busload of children with signs reading “go home” and “keep illegals out.” The scene reminded me of other times in our country’s history when ideology has outweighed compassion, when we’ve failed to see children as children. My heart remains broken for what Ruby Bridges and the children on those buses must have felt at having so much anger directed at them.

Your Voice

As

young man shouting

readers and students, you may have heard someone refer to a writer and their "voice." In many situations, we are able to spot a seasoned writer's voice by noting the subject matter, diction, tone, form, and other aspects of style. It is similar to how we recognize a familiar voice in a crowded room, and then again, it is not the same at all. With writing we miss the timbre of a voice, the auditory sound as air jets passes through the speaker's unique body and vocal chords.

Still, in writing, there are many ways to use grammar, syntax, and style to create a "voice." Some beginning writers get caught up in the mission to find or discover their voice. But this is not such an important thing to worry about at any stage of writing—just write. Write about what you know. Write about what you don't know. Experiment. Play. Don't think, just write. Your style will naturally evolve, and if you write long enough, it might even change.

Your voice depends on a variety of elements that make up the poems:

Subject Matter:

What do you write about? What don't you write about? Sharon Olds writes frequently about her father; William Heyen about the Holocaust; Mary Oliver about nature and animals. These subjects are not all that these writers choose to write about, but they do have a heavy, repetitive presence in their collections. What interests you and often becomes the focus of your poems? It's okay for these to change, too. William Wordsworth wrote about nature when he was young, and much more about God as he aged.

Tone and Mood:

Are your poems serious? Humorous? Dark? Inspirational? When we read Billy Collins we expect to smile and laugh. How do your poems make us feel, generally?

Diction:

Perhaps the most influential element that creates voice and tone is *diction*, a term we use for "word choice" or the vocabulary used in a piece of writing. There is a range of diction— formal, informal, conversational, slang—and the words we choose reveal the emotional coloring of the speaker and the stance of the speaker in relation to the subject. There are no two words that mean the exact same thing—regardless of what a thesaurus tells you; synonyms are simply related, not exact variants. Diction can also reveal a speaker's range of knowledge, education, culture, and regional influence. Do you say sneakers or tennis shoes? Soda or pop? Write a list of synonyms for the following words:

- Vulgar
- Obsolete
- Peeved
- Enthralled
- Picky
- Dizzy
- Grass

Choose one of these lists. What are the differences in meaning, nuance, implication?

Syntax and Grammar:

Working hand in hand with diction is syntax, which refers to the order in which words are arranged. We make decisions every day about diction, prepare for phone calls by deciding what to say and how. Syntax is *how* we deliver our thoughts. If we have to tell someone something important or participate in an intense or touchy conversation, we might even rehearse how we are going to say something to someone before we do.

There's a difference between telling someone, "I don't think we should see each other any more" and "I don't love you." What we choose to say creates

our character in more than one way. Some of what's related to syntax and grammar are sentence length, fragments, and active or passive voice.

Types of Images:

Like subject matter, writers tend to favor certain images or image types. Read through Michael Burkard's collected poems and you'll find frequent uses of trains, rain, and shadows. Some poets' bodies of work are filled with birds, or flowers, or astronomical metaphors, or images of the body. What images do you gravitate toward? Do you frequently use similes or metaphors?

Form:

By simply looking at a poem on the page we may be able to identify a poet. Emily Dickinson's short poems with stanzas and lines of equal length. Norman Dubie's willingness to mix different stanzas and line lengths—a couplet followed by a sextet (six-line stanza), followed by a single line that stands on its own. e.e. cummings's abandonment of punctuation and capitalization. Are there forms and structures you like to use? Do your lines tend to be long or short?

The combination of all these elements determines your style and contributes to the formation of your voice.

Activity

Choose a poet you like and identify what patterns you see in their poems in regard to the above elements. What does the poet frequently write about? What images are used? Is the mood and tone similar in their poems? What forms are frequently used? Next, try to imitate this poet's style by rewriting one of your own poems to adopt the techniques. What different types of moves are you making that you normally don't?

Persona

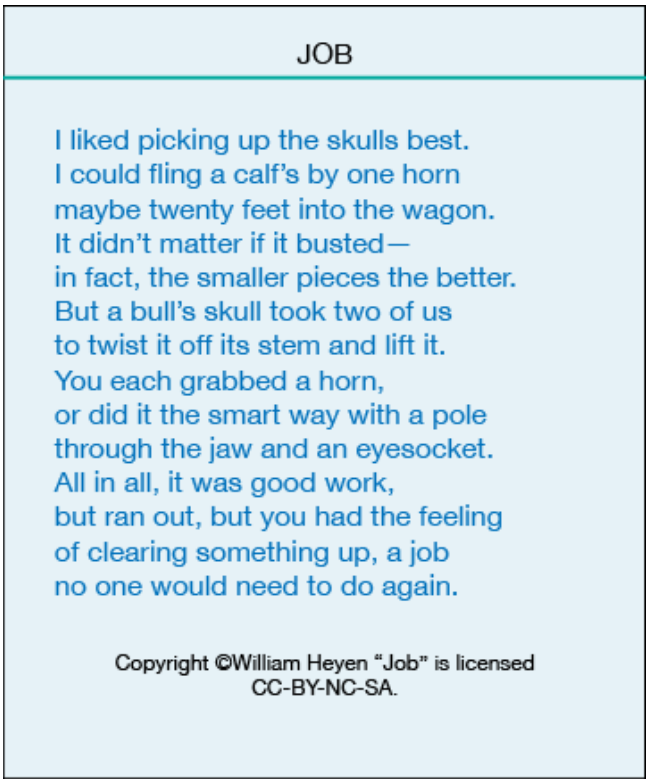
"A Poet is the most unpoetical of any thing in existence," wrote John Keats, "because he has no Identity—he is continually in for—and filling some other Body." In a letter to his brother, Keats famously wrote of the concept of "negative capability," which he described as "when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason." A type of cognitive dissonance in which one can peacefully hold two opposing thoughts in the mind at once, Keats' negative capability is what allows us as poets to imaginatively and empathetically muse upon the subject of our poems, or to enter the world of another, to speak from an imagined experience as if it were our own. In a persona poem, the poet adopts the perspective of a character or speaker in a specific situation. The poet steps outside his or her own body and into the body of this imagined speaker.

Adopting a persona widens a poet's range of subject matter. It allows us to explore different subjects and points of view. Rather than only writing from our experience, we can invent a new character or speak from a person in history or in literature. In his book-length poem *Shannon,* Campbell McGrath speaks from the perspective of the Lewis and Clark Expedition's youngest member Shannon when he goes missing in the prairie for over two weeks. Based on history, McGrath fills in the events and details no one could ever know. Speaking as Shannon, he writes:

> The rest of the day the country shimmers
> In a haze, these buffalo
> Have no fear of me
> Their eyes loll & moon in the grass
> & I must shout to start them from my path
> & hurl a stick at one brute
> Oblivious as if I were invisible
> Or he aware of my absolute helplessness.

William Heyen, also inspired by history, in his book *Crazyhorse in Stillness*, speaks from many personas. In the following, he depicts the plight of the buffalo by writing in the voice of an anonymous man hired on the prairie

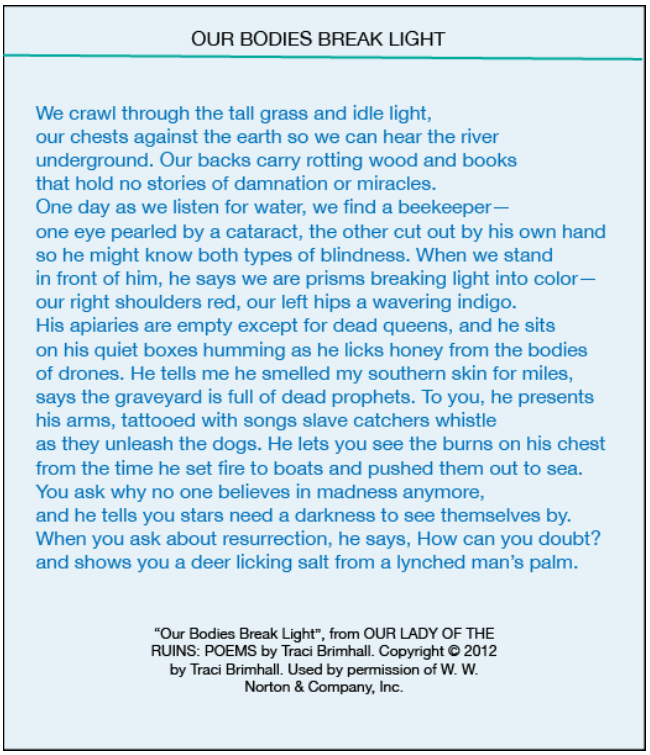
around the time of the Battle of Little Big Horn:



JOB

I liked picking up the skulls best.
I could fling a calf's by one horn
maybe twenty feet into the wagon.
It didn't matter if it busted—
in fact, the smaller pieces the better.
But a bull's skull took two of us
to twist it off its stem and lift it.
You each grabbed a horn,
or did it the smart way with a pole
through the jaw and an eyesocket.
All in all, it was good work,
but ran out, but you had the feeling
of clearing something up, a job
no one would need to do again.

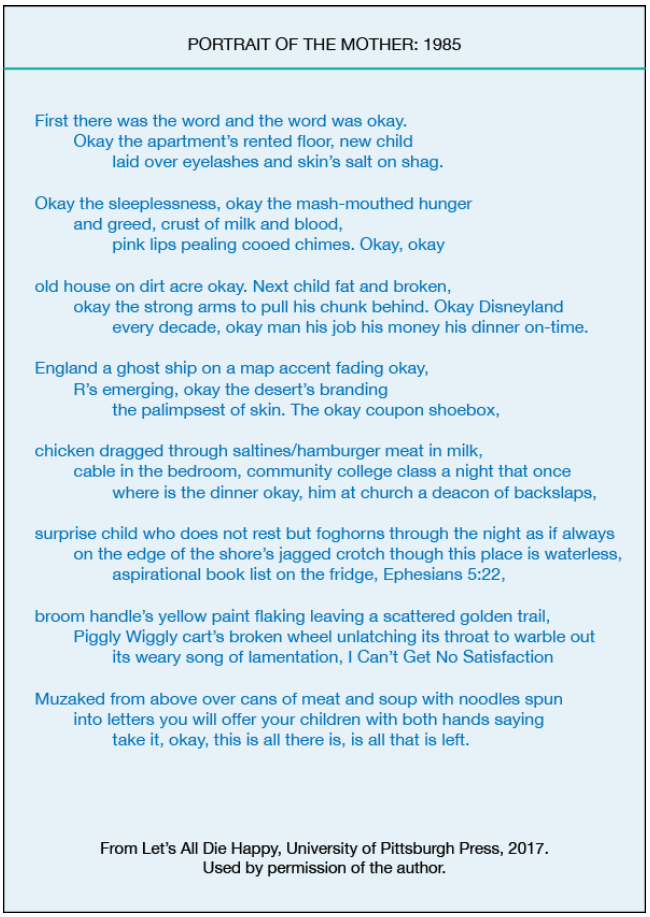
Should you not be so ambitious to write a hundred-page persona poem, or a full collection based on a handful of specific characters in American history, consider writing from the voice of a character with your main focus on theme or circumstance. Here is a poem by Traci Brimhall, whose poems in the book *Our Lady of Ruins* speak from the personas of multiple women ravaged by war:



OUR BODIES BREAK LIGHT

We crawl through the tall grass and idle light,
our chests against the earth so we can hear the river
underground. Our backs carry rotting wood and books
that hold no stories of damnation or miracles.
One day as we listen for water, we find a beekeeper—
one eye pearled by a cataract, the other cut out by his own hand
so he might know both types of blindness. When we stand
in front of him, he says we are prisms breaking light into color—
our right shoulders red, our left hips a wavering indigo.
His apiaries are empty except for dead queens, and he sits
on his quiet boxes humming as he licks honey from the bodies
of drones. He tells me he smelled my southern skin for miles,
says the graveyard is full of dead prophets. To you, he presents
his arms, tattooed with songs slave catchers whistle
as they unleash the dogs. He lets you see the burns on his chest
from the time he set fire to boats and pushed them out to sea.
You ask why no one believes in madness anymore,
and he tells you stars need a darkness to see themselves by.
When you ask about resurrection, he says, How can you doubt?
and shows you a deer licking salt from a lynched man's palm.

Read these two portrait poems by Erin Adair Hodges, "Portrait of the Mother: 1985" and "Self-Portrait as Banshee":http://www.pleiadesmag.com/poem-of-the-week-erin-adair-hodges-2/ in which she takes on personas that arise from the speaker's own experiences in the world, seen and thought through from a new angle.



PORTRAIT OF THE MOTHER: 1985

First there was the word and the word was okay.
Okay the apartment's rented floor, new child
laid over eyelashes and skin's salt on shag.

Okay the sleeplessness, okay the mash-mouthed hunger
and greed, crust of milk and blood,
pink lips pealing cooed chimes. Okay, okay

old house on dirt acre okay. Next child fat and broken,
okay the strong arms to pull his chunk behind. Okay Disneyland
every decade, okay man his job his money his dinner on-time.

England a ghost ship on a map accent fading okay,
R's emerging, okay the desert's branding
the palimpsest of skin. The okay coupon shoebox,

chicken dragged through saltines/hamburger meat in milk,
cable in the bedroom, community college class a night that once
where is the dinner okay, him at church a deacon of backslaps,

surprise child who does not rest but foghorns through the night as if always
on the edge of the shore's jagged crotch though this place is waterless,
aspirational book list on the fridge, Ephesians 5:22,

broom handle's yellow paint flaking leaving a scattered golden trail,
Piggly Wiggly cart's broken wheel unlatching its throat to warble out
its weary song of lamentation, I Can't Get No Satisfaction

Muzaked from above over cans of meat and soup with noodles spun
into letters you will offer your children with both hands saying
take it, okay, this is all there is, is all that is left.

From Let's All Die Happy, University of Pittsburgh Press, 2017.
Used by permission of the author.

Erin Adair Hodges in Her Own Words:

> "Portrait of the Mother: 1985"
>
> As a relatively new mother at the time I was writing "Portrait of the Mother: 1985," I was working through what I imagined to be my own mother's experiences with young children in order understand our very different perspectives on how parenting fits into one's life, or as is often the case with women, takes it over. Much of my work is also concerned with Christianity through a lens of apostasy, doctrines of male dominionism as viewed by a feminist. The poem all came because of the first line, which made me laugh but also seemed to capture this idea that some live the lives they do not because they choose it but because they believe it has chosen them—that desire has to be sacrificed at the altar of mother-martyrdom.
>
> "Self-Portrait as Banshee"

> While “Mother” was a product of long-simmering interests, “Banshee” was more about engaging in play, starting with a scene and seeing where it wanted to spin. Once I got to the speaker offering her Highland ancestry, I realized I had an opportunity to bring in one of my favorite spectral creatures: the banshee. That’s important, though: I didn’t start off with what became the guiding image or centering image. I discovered it through drafting, which is what we as poets must do. We must sublimate our agendas to the poem’s own imaginative will.

Point of View

When we write we do so using one of three points of view:

First Person ● I/We ● *I went to the store to buy milk.*

> Most poets begin writing in first person, taking their own experiences as subject matter. The first-person point of view is present in memoir, the personal essay, and in autobiography, and it allows us to be very close to not only the speaker’s observations, but also with their thoughts. This is the point of view used in a persona poem or a dramatic monologue.

Second Person ● You ● *You went to the store to buy milk.*

> When we use this point of view, we may be addressing a particular person in the poem, or we may be addressing the reader. We may even be talking about the speaker, attempting to make the reader imagine being the “I” which is really the “you.” This perspective can make the reader a character and it can also create a deep sense of connection between the reader and the speaker.

Third Person ● He/She/It ● *Her daughter went to the store to buy milk.*

From third-person perspective, we can control the distance from which we observe the character by being an omniscient, limited omniscient, or an objective observer.

Additional Resources:

Oliver, Mary. *Rules for the Dance.*
http://maryoliver.beacon.org/2009/11/rules-for-the-dance/169

Longenback, James. *The Art of the Poetic Line.*
https://www.graywolfpress.org/books/artpoetic-line

← Chapter Three: Images

Chapter Five: Architecture →

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Chapter Five: Architecture

In poetry, there are three units of architecture, or structure: words, lines, and stanzas. As with all forms of writing, words comprise the most basic level of form. But what makes poetry unique as a genre is verse—lines—which work as both a unit of sensibility and music. Lines assemble into stanzas, or "rooms" in Italian. Sometimes poems can have sections, too, where stanzas are confined yet relate to one another, and sometimes poems can break from line and stanza into what we call prose poems, which we will discuss later.

The Line: Rows

Originally, poetry was used as a way to remember stories, which were delivered orally by a speaker or "the poet" to an audience. The units created *verse,* which in Latin translates to "line," "row," or "furrow," musical measures that were easier to remember. Poetry existed before writing; and even after writing was invented most people could not read. Poetry has been a way throughout human existence for people to pass on history, news, entertainment, and wisdom from one generation to the next. With the spread of literacy, the function of lines began to take on more complexity, increasing auditory and visual impacts. By the twentieth century, typeface allowed poets to place visual form at the center of their art.

It is apt that "verse" translates to "row" or "furrow," words we also use when speaking of gardens and farms (and also to the lines on our foreheads when we brood!). Think of each line of poetry you write as a row in your garden that is the poem. Every garden is different and the plants in it do not simply lie atop the surface; roots go deep and flourish from the nutrients in the soil. In a poem,

those nutrients are the knowledge and emotions of the poet which, like in a garden, we do not see. Instead we see emotions and ideas transformed linguistically into imagery and music. In this analogy, words are the plants and flowers that the poet/gardener has chosen, and they are rooted into the earth, into history, into what came before.

Words cannot detach themselves from their meanings and nuances. Each is a seed fallen from a mother plant. Poetry, the garden in which generations of words may flourish, gives opportunities for words to evolve. It is why the poet is known as the "keeper of language," giving words to the unspeakable, naming the unnameable.

In our gardens, the line is a unit of measurement different from that of sentences. A line can ignore syntax and grammar to create interesting effects. For instance, a line can end on a verb and suspend the object onto the next line. This move can increase speed, or the pace, of the poem, as the reader is propelled forward to complete the thought. The line break can also create an image or idea that can transform when the reader reaches the next line. For example, in Bruce Snider's poem "Epitaph," the word "alive" creates one meaning that changes with the turn to the next line:

> … I could sense
> him down there, satin-lined,
> curled like the six-toe cat
> we'd found bloated in the creek, alive
> with lice and maggots.

As readers we think at first that the cat is alive, only to find that it is alive but with "lice and maggots." The effect comes from the use of an enjambed line, a line that does not end with punctuation. This enjambment is referred to as *hard* enjambment because it has so much of an effect and impact on the poem's reading. Enjambed lines can suggest complex meaning, create images or emphasis, and control the music, or prosody of the poem. In contrast, when a line ends with a form of punctuation, or with a complete phrase, we refer to those lines as end-stopped.

Deciding where to break a line can be determined by a number of things:

rhythm, rhyme, emphasis, pace, or the way a poem looks on a page. Classic forms predetermine the form a poem takes, and include rules concerning meter, rhyme, and repetition. Some forms like the Shakespearian sonnet include the element of a turn, or a volta, in which there is a marked change in the speaker in thought, emotion, or rhetoric. Forms are fun to experiment with and assert pressure on the writer in interesting ways that result in surprises that wouldn't occur otherwise.

Today, a lot of poetry is written in free verse, or *vers libre* in Latin, not requiring the poet to follow any prescribed rules of form. Robert Frost famously referred to writing free verse as "playing tennis without a net." And as you saw in the previous chapter, Billy Collins has noted the way free verse poems have come to rely on tone of voice to hold it together. Free verse does not mean, however, that there is no pattern of rhythm or sounds holding a poem together, necessarily; rather it means that the design of the poem is the poet's own invention.

End-Stopped Lines and Enjambment

In the following poem, "Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry, Ohio," James Wright keeps his lines syntactically intact and uses almost entirely end-stopped lines. Read the poem via the Poetry Foundation. https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47733/autumn-begins-in-martins-ferry-ohio

The pauses at the ends of Wright's lines are natural in speech and adhere to the formation of phrases, the units of sentences. Incorporating enjambment, Wright could've altered the music, meaning, and emphasis of this poem if he had started:

You can see in this example how the
speaker's thinking is emphasized more
than in the original because now the
verb, "think," falls at the end of the

> In the Shreve High football stadium, I think
>
> Of Polacks nursing long beers in Titonsville.

line. This formation also sets up a delay for the reader to find out what the speaker is thinking about. If this were the first line of the poem, we'd initially have more of a focus on the speaker and his thinking, his brooding. Instead, the first four lines of the original end with a place—stadium, Titonsville, Benwood, and Wheeling Steel. In addition, the punctuation enforces more of a pause at the end of the line than the break already does. We sense the separation of the places, yet their connectedness through the stanza that joins them, as well as the last line of the stanza which unites the Polacks, Negroes, and watchman through an action: "dreaming of heroes." The collective action suggests that the speaker, part of this larger community, is also dreaming of heroes.

The only line not end-stopped with punctuation in the poem happens in the last stanza: "Their sons grow suicidally beautiful," and this difference, as any change does, makes the line stand out. Even though there's no punctuation, this line is not forcefully enjambed, as Wright continues to adhere to syntactical units:

> **Possessive pronoun (Their)—noun (sons)—verb (grow)—adverb (suicidally)—adjective (beautiful)**

And because he does, there is little if any jarring with the break to "At the beginning of October."

Overall, the end-stopped lines and syntactical intactness of the lines moves the poem slowly, one step it seems at a time until it reaches its sum: "Therefore," at which point the poem loosens its pace and speeds up just for a bit, as if the sons begin to "gallop" or run, as the line itself runs over into the next.

At the end of another one of Wright's poems, "A Blessing," enjambment is used to surprise the reader with an image that changes as the penultimate, or second to last, line gives way to the final line:

> Suddenly I realize
> That if I stepped out of my body I would break
> Into blossom.

The hard enjambment between "break" and "blossom" creates an initial image of breaking in which the tone is harsh, violent, a loss, a break in need of repair. But the last line changes the tone with the image of a body breaking into blossom rather than simply breaking.

In contrast to Wright's poem, the following poem by Aimee Nezhukumatathil employs mostly enjambed lines that ignore syntactically complete units in this poem about the explorers Meriwether Lewis and William Clark:

LEWIS AND CLARK DISAGREE

Because Meriwether ate the last berry
without consulting William. Because

the prairie dog only let William feed
it dried corn. Because the Nez Perce

gave one a necklace of purple quartz
and not the other. Because Osage oranges

gave Meriwether hives. Because a grizzly
chased William into an oak tree, left him

high for hours. Because "Someone" tucked
buffalo chips into Merriwether's knapsack

when he wasn't looking. Because after walking,
rowing, swimming, climbing, trotting, pulling,

cutting, all they really wanted was a name
for a fruit one found sour, the other, so sweet.

The form is almost the exact opposite of Wrights': ten enjambed lines followed

by two endstopped, then an enjambed line, then an end-stopped line. In this poem the lines break sometimes on the first word of the next sentence. If we were to layout the lines in terms of sentences, we would be left with an almost bullet-pointed list of reasons for why “Lewis and Clark Disagree” and they would look like this:

> Because Meriwether ate the last berry without consulting William.
>
> Because the prairie dog only let *William* feed it dried corn.
>
> Because the Nez Perce gave one a necklace of purple quartz and not the other.
>
> Because Osage oranges gave Meriwether hives.
>
> Because a grizzly chased William into an oak tree, left him high for hours.
>
> Because “Someone” tucked buffalo chips into Meriwether’s knapsack when he wasn’t looking.
>
> Because after walking, rowing, swimming, climbing, trotting, pulling, cutting, all they really wanted was a name for a fruit one found sour, the other, so sweet.

Because, because, because, because, because. Instead, verse allows Nezhukumatathil to tone down the repetition of “Because” while also allowing her to manipulate rhythm and layer meaning. Take, for instance, the following lines:

The break after “left him” allows the
image and idea of abandonment to
linger before its meaning evolves into

> … Because a grizzly
> chased William into an oak tree, left him
> high for hours. Because "Someone" tucked
> buffalo chips into Merriwether's knapsack
> when he wasn't looking. Because after walking,

the complete thought "left him high for hours." The next two lines use the break to emphasize the alliteration of "tuck" and "-sack," which even continues beyond that couplet to the next with "walk." "Walk" and "Tuck" also being verbs, we are propelled forward to the next line by action. As for meaning, we come to "tuck" and think: tucked what?

With lines, generally the first and last words will take on extra emphasis, and in "Lewis and Clark Disagree" they have multiple effects. Some lines begin and end where they do to emphasize meaning: "left him" and "when he wasn't looking" suggest tension that feeds back to the relationship between Lewis and Clark; abandonment and sneakiness aren't marks of kindness. We read "left him" and think how terrible! We turn to "when he wasn't looking" and think, oooooh sneaky.

Like Wright's poem, this poem changes its pattern, moving from enjambed lines to endstopped lines. The last sentence of the poem is strung out over four lines and arranged in a way so that the acoustics develop the feel of a burden or a long list:

> … Because after walking,
>
> rowing, swimming,
> climbing, trotting, pulling,
>
> cutting, all they really
> wanted was a name
>
> for a fruit one found sour,
> the other, so sweet.

Listen to how the rising pitch in the first line gives way to a list of actions that propels us into

the penultimate line:

> . . . walking, [↑]
>
> [→] rowing, swimming,
> climbing, trotting, pulling,
> [a big pause]

There is a long pause between “pulling” and “cutting” produced from the break of momentum in the list of actions. Nezhukumatathil could’ve placed all the verbs on one line to create an entirely different feel:

walking, rowing, swimming, climbing, trotting, pulling, cutting

But instead, in order to keep the inflection and pitch varied, she rearranges words on a line differently, regardless of their syntactical relationships.

Activity

Choose a poem from the Poetry Foundation and erase the lines by placing the poem into complete sentences. Rewrite the poem experimenting with different line breaks. How much of a difference do your new lines make? What happens to tone? Images? Mood? Music?

Association:

Sometimes the glue that holds a free verse poem together is the writer’s own

associations and connections between ideas and imagery. Association can provide a glimpse of a mind in action, can create surprise, whimsy, and a sense of getting an "inside view" of a writer's (or speaker's) thought-process. If the associative leaps made in a poem are too obscure that can create a sense of distance—as being locked out of a private reference– rather than intimacy for the reader. CNM Instructor Rebecca Aronson reflects on the associative process in writing the following poem: https://plumepoetry.com/prayer-written-on-a-wide-veranda-on-a-comfortable-couch-in-sewanee-tn/

"Prayer Written on a Wide Veranda on a Comfortable Couch in Sewanee, TN" Rebecca Aronson In Her Own Words

This poem's title gives its context; I was at the Sewanee Writers' Conference in the summer of 2018, a wonderful, magical place, and for our last meetings as a workshop my group had agreed to share new drafts, based on one or a combination of the writing prompts we had given one another. I sat down in a comfortable chair on a veranda during an hour when most people were off doing something else, and I wrote. I had been thinking a lot about my parents and their health, and about conversations I'd had with my father a year previous about his illness and the end of his life, whenever that would come. I was thinking, too, about my own physical self—my body and all its betrayals—along with my desires and ambitions and constant balancing which pushes one obligation or connection to the side so I can focus on another, and is always causing writing to teeter precariously on the very periphery of my life. The poem came out in an associative rush, pulling together several disparate lines of thought, including my gratitude for having time in that beautiful spot in Tennessee.

I revised it some—I always over-write my first drafts—but the structure and associations remain as they were. A snapshot of a moment for me, a kind of time capsule of concerns. I haven't always written poems that were autobiographical (or not very much so, at any rate) or particularly narrative, but as I get older I find my poems reflect and clarify more of my real concerns, my actual experiences. Not strictly, and not without a fair amount of license and

association, but enough so that they are useful to me in a different way than in the past.

Prayer Written on a Wide Veranda on a Comfortable Couch in Sewanee, TN" was published in *Plume*: Issue #92 April 2019 and in *Poetry International,* Poems of the Spirit: a selection of poems, edited by Luke Hankins, May 29, 2019, and used by permission of the author.

Stanzas: Rooms

Once the lines of our poem begin to find their length of breath, the next structural concern is how (and if) to break the lines into stanzas. In classic forms stanza lengths are predetermined. For example, a ballad is written in quatrains, or stanzas containing four lines; a roundel has three stanzas; and a villanelle five **tercets**, or stanzas containing three lines. But in free verse, the poem's stanzas are determined by the poet. There are no rules when it comes to deciding what kind of stanzas to use in a poem and usually any reason that seems to intuit itself to the poet is justification. The decisions are based on personal taste with consideration to how it looks on the page, how it affects rhythm and pacing, and what it emphasizes in the poem. Like many moves in poetry, stanzas should be organic to the poem and not feel forced or hokey. And like many of the techniques of writing poetry, knowing what to do comes with practice and fine-tuning our attention to language and the effects of poetic elements.

Like rhythm and line length, there is a nomenclature that permits us to talk about stanza length. These terms are used to speak about metrical verse, as well as free verse:

- Couplet: a stanza of two lines
- Tercet, or Triplet: a stanza of three lines
- Quatrain: a stanza of four lines
- Cinquain, or quintain, or quintet: a stanza of five lines
- Sextain, or sestet: a stanza of six lines

- Septet: a stanza of seven lines
- Octave: a stanza of eight lines

What Stanzas Do

There is no way around the fact that stanzas, which dictate the way space is used on the page, create unity and separation. Even if the motive is to break a poem into stanzas to make the poem easier to read on the page—a huge chunk of text can be intimidating and heavy—or even if the motive is to control the music of the language by adding longer pauses—breaking a poem into stanzas invites the ideas of division and unification into the poem.

Just like the rooms of houses, walls say "This is the den" or "This is the dining room." Rooms help us create space and define the tone of that space.

Like walls, stanzas in poems can suggest connection, or confine ideas, images, and sounds to their own space while still sharing the same roof. Punctuation and other devices in the last and first lines of a stanza suggest whether the doorway is open or whether it contains a titanium door.

There are endless ways to organize stanzas and infinite decisions that can be made in the process of doing so. Usually stanzas are built on more than one idea, for more than one reason (like all aspects of a poem). Lines are part of stanzas, and words are part of lines. These three elements—words, lines, and stanzas—work together to cause all sorts of effects from creating music to drawing parallels between ideas and images. There is no way to provide a comprehensive review of what stanzas do, but the following examples will offer a small sampling of what stanzas *can* do.

Organize space and time

In Lee's poem, the first stanza is delivered in the present tense and the

TO LABEL THE PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE:

In a room full of books in a world
of stories, he can recall
not one, and soon, he thinks, the boy
will give up on his father.

second brings us to the future with "lives far ahead."

"A STORY"

Already the man lives far ahead, he sees
the day this boy will go. Don't go!
Hear the alligator story! The angel story once more!
You love the spider story. You laugh at the spider.
Let me tell it!

(Li Young Lee, from "A Story")

To illustrate differences in location:

THE MILE

My grandmother crowns the hill,
her headlights lathing the dark,
a farm route

through rye then cotton
then the red and gold of wheat,
the scrub oak crowding

a little nameless river
where fog holds to low places.
Who would have seen the tractor

aimed down the highway by a boy
his first summer behind the wheel
with no lights but the holy
somnolence of a cowboy radio?
The next car over the rise
is my father

blind into the fog.
There is so much to talk about
at this moment,

so many lines of cause and effect
trembling taut into that gully.
How does my father choose,

with his mother's ribs broken,
his new wife moaning from the ditch,
to carry the limp body

of someone else's child
a mile over night fields
toward the insinuation of a roof?

Everyone is bleeding and starlight
drizzles over the summer wheat.
The poem holds them there

long enough to trace the flight

of an owl
from a cedar's black minaret

its wings underlit by brake-lights.
Which of you, dear reader,
is in the next Oldsmobile

to clatter over the bluff
shouting help into your CB radio?
Which of you opens the front door

weeping
to wrap your unconscious boy
in quilts? Do you kill

the man
who carries him?
In most endings I am never

born. In most,
you buy my family's farm cheap
at auction. Who among you

is rushing the ambulance
past the county line at mile 67
when the tire blows? The story

moves through telephone wires
at the pitiless speed of rumor:
when my father reaches the house

with the boy expiring in his arms,
a white rectangle of light
and grief

seers his eyes forever.
In the cave of my mother's
body

I listen to the first fire.

Indicate shifts in a poem's mode or voice:

Stanzas can mark transitions between narrative and lyrical modes, descriptions and questions, and shifts in tone or perspective.

A shift in voice or address:

DINNER OUT

We went to either the Canton Grill
or the Chinese Village, both of them
on 82nd among the car lots
and discount stores and small nests
of people waiting hopelessly
for the bus. I preferred the Canton
for its black and bright red sign
with the dragon leaping out of it
sneezing little pillows of smoke.
And inside, the beautiful green
half-shell booths, glittery brass encrusted
lamps swinging above them.

What would I have?
Sweet and sour?
Chow mein with little wagon wheel shaped
slices of okra and those crinkly noodles
my father called deep fried worms?
Fried rice?

Among such succulence, what did it matter?
We could eat till we were glad and full, the whole
family sighing with the pleasure of it.
And then the tea!
All of this for about six bucks, total,
my father, for that once-in-awhile, feeling
flush in the glow of our happy faces
and asking me, "How you doing, son?"

Fine, Dad. Great, really, in the light
of that place, almost tasting
the salt and bean paste and molasses, nearly
hearing the sound of the car door
opening before we climbed in together
and drove and drove,
though we hadn't far to go.

In each stanza we hear a shift in voice. The first opens in a narrative mode as we are given a place and time, a description of the street on which the restaurant the speaker and his dad go to eat. In the second stanza, the voice shifts into an interrogative mode, asking questions about what will be ordered. Though the third stanza also begins with a question, this is a different type of question than what is posed in the second stanza. Here, the voice becomes lyrical and introspective: "Among such succulence, what did it matter?" In the last stanza the voice shifts to answer the question posed by the dad in the end of the third stanza and in this way, the first line of the last stanza directly addresses the dad. In Howell's poem each stanza is used to mark a slight shift in voice.

A shift in thought or a resolution:

As in Howell's poem, in Collins' poem there is a shift in the voice's pitch. But in "Litany," the stanzas emphasize moves in the thought process that build upon the ideas established in the preceding stanza. You can follow these turns of thought by the transition words that begin them: "You are"..."However, you are not..." "It is possible that you are..."

LITANY

You are the bread and the knife,
the crystal goblet and the wine.
You are the dew on the morning grass
and the burning wheel of the sun.
You are the white apron of the baker,
and the marsh birds suddenly in flight.

However, you are not the wind in the orchard,
the plums on the counter,
or the house of cards.
And you are certainly not the pine-scented air.
There is just no way that you are the pine-scented air.

It is possible that you are the fish under the bridge,
maybe even the pigeon on the general's head,
but you are not even close
to being the field of cornflowers at dusk.

(Billy Collins, from "Litany")

Create emphasis on individual images:

PASSOVER: THE INJECTIONS

Clouds pass over, endless,
black fruit dripping
sap from the branches
of lightning.

We lie down in the field,
thousands of us,
never mind the rain.

Soldiers come toward us,
groups of three or four.
The wind opens their long coats.
Underneath, their uniforms are black.

They bend over to the babies.
The babies cry,
for a little while.

"We are living in Biblical times,"
a woman says.

Rarely is there one reason for the way stanzas are arranged. In the above excerpt, the stanzas isolate images, but they also organize space and actions. Each stanza is end-stopped, further emphasizing the divide between the fields,

the prisoners, the soldiers.

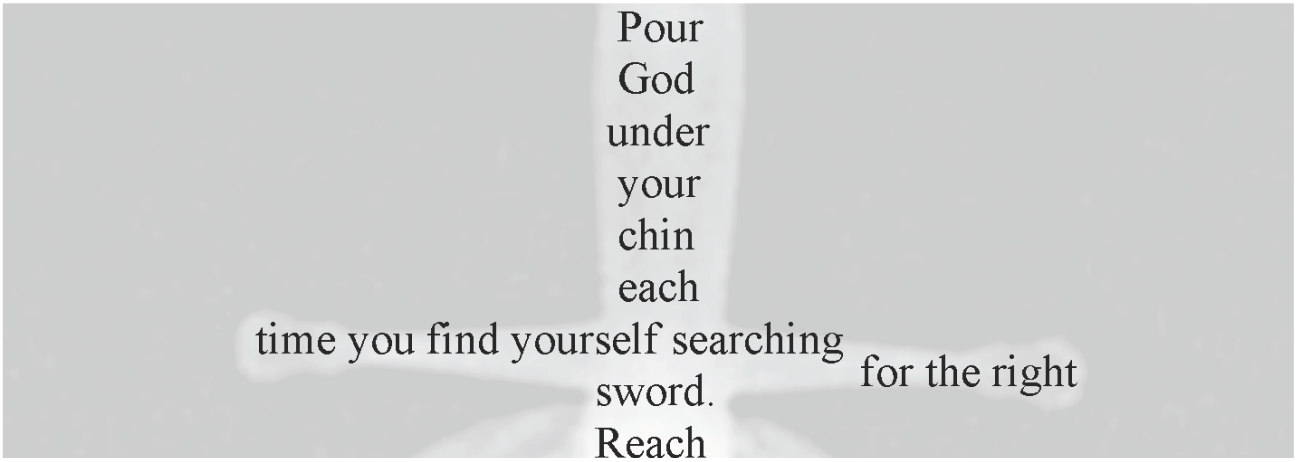
ON ENJAMBMENT

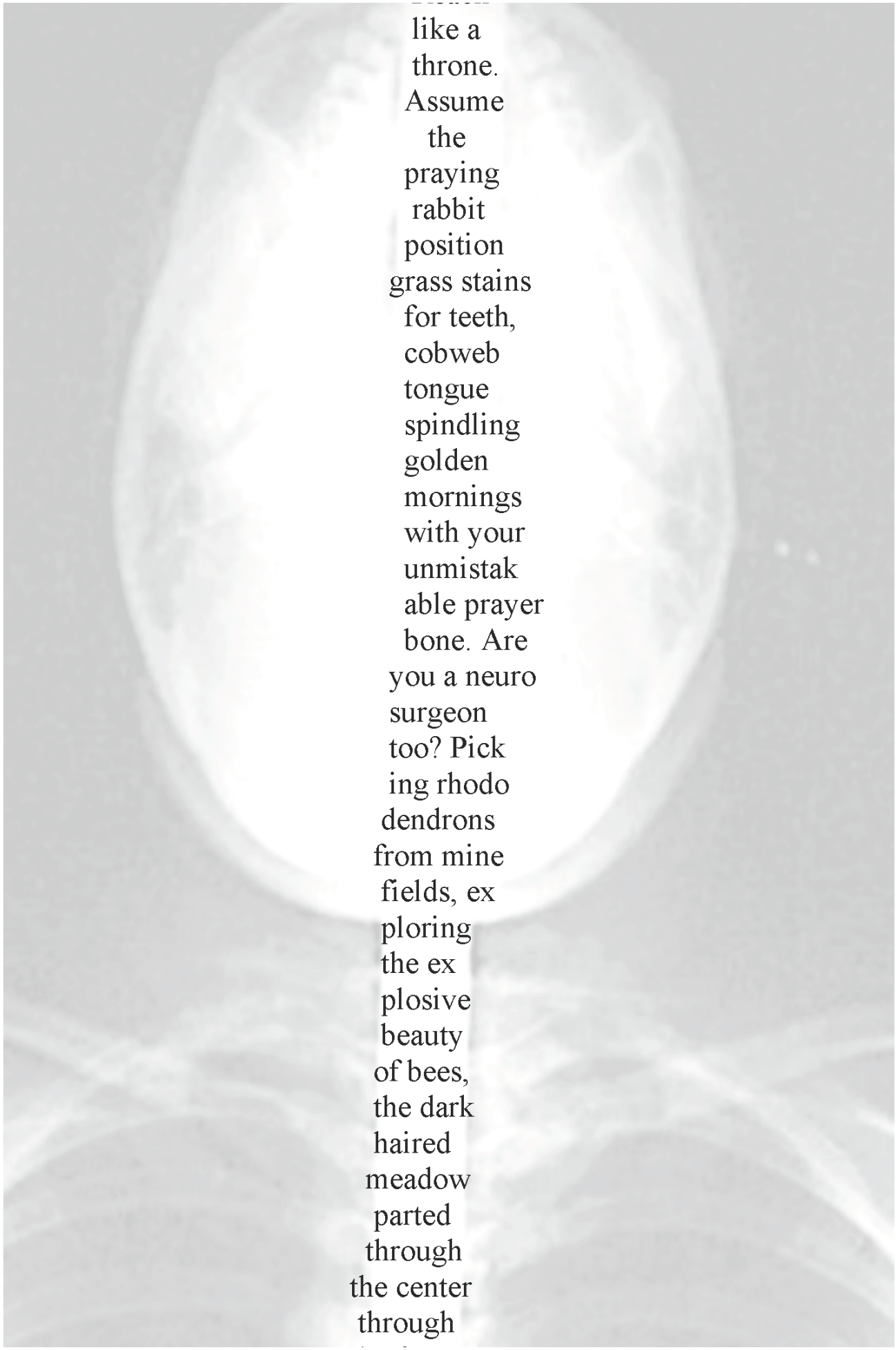
Even the tumbleweed
is a stowaway sneaked in
with the grass seed, given
an easier-to-say name. It became
American. We are lonely
when it stumbles by, but it's just
a weed. We made it
a thing sadder than itself,
like a nursing home lunch.

(Bethany Schultz Hurst, from "Settler")

The stanzas used by Hurst accentuate the way the enjambment affects images and sounds. Each stanza break makes the line break even harder. When we end the first stanza, we are left with the idea of sharing or giving something away. There is connection: "Even the tumbleweed / is a stowaway sneaked in / with the grass seed, given." It sounds thoughtful. It sounds like we are receiving —"given." But moving to the second stanza, the meaning changes: "given // an easier-to-say name." This happens again in the transition from the second to third stanzas with the meaning of "just" changing from the idea of justice or fairness—"but it's just"—to something different: "but it's just // a weed." The beginning of both the second and third stanzas undercut the sentiment we are left with at the end of the preceding stanza and the way the stanzas are formed emphasize this change.

Create an image with the words on the page

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beauty
of bees,
the dark
haired
meadow
parted
through
the center
through

the future's
palsied
horizon.

Draw attention to other patterns like repetition

In the following examples, one poem ends each stanza similarly and the other begins each stanza similarly:

AGE

They grow ethereally, the wild
Roses on the garden-trellis:
O—silent soul!

The crystal sun grazes through
The cool vine-leaves:
O—holy purity!

With courteous hands an old man offers
Ripened fruit.
O—glimpse of love!

THE FIRST POTTER'S ADVICE

If you rub too eagerly
and the head falls to your feet,
you can hollow its skull
and fill it with seeds.

If the eyes are dull
like your clay-covered fingerprints,
it's best to bend it to a turtle's shell
and fill it with water and hot stones.

If the mane starts to curl
like a hawk's talons
before it flies, bite your tongue,
and push the lion to the hearth.

(Tom Holmes, from "The First Potter's Advice")

The deeper we go into the craft of poetry, the more we find elements to be connected. Stanzas cannot stand independently from choices made about music, line, and diction. Building on the components learned in this chapter,

the next two chapters will introduce you to the particulars of sound and then some forms.

Additional Resources:

Pinsky, Robert. *The Sounds of Poetry*.
http://us.macmillan.com/thesoundsofpoetry/robertpinsky

← Chapter Four: Voice

Chapter Six: Acoustics →

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Chapter Six: Acoustics

Even before you were born, within your mother's womb, your body recognized patterns of sound. It began with the beat of your mother's heart, the swishing of her blood. Rhythm is primal. It is comforting, and it can be startling. When rhythms break, they wake us. When rhythms extend, we become entranced. Rhythm is integral to poetry and a mark of what poetry actually is. In learning to interpret poetry's structures and sound patterns, our ears attune finely to tone, cadence, pitch, rhythm, and silence in free verse poems. In formal verse, we employ a particular language to help us talk about rhythm.

Meter: Length and Rhythm

In metrical verse, lines can be divided into units of length and rhythm which we refer to as **feet**, and each foot's syllable into a stress. Each foot contains either two or three syllables (see below). You may have seen the symbols used to indicate this: ˘ ˈ : the curve marks an unstressed foot, the slash a stress. In the following words, the first syllable is stressed and the second is not: **Te**nnis. **Fic**tion. **Mus**ic. In the following words, the first syllable is unstressed and the second is stressed: Un**lock**. To**night**. A**gainst**. Using this method of dividing a poem's lines into feet and stresses is called scansion**.**

Metrical Lines

Monometer**:** A one-foot line

> | *Therefore*

Dimeter**:** A two-foot line

| *Therefore,* | *dolphins*

Trimeter**:** A three-foot line

| *Therefore,* | *dolphins* | *broke through*

Tetrameter**:** A four-foot line

| *Therefore,* | *dolphins* | *broke through* | *happily*

Pentameter**:** A five-foot line

| *Therefore,* | *dolphins* | *broke through* | *happily* | *and leapt*

Hexameter**:** A six-foot line. Also called Alexandrine when purely iambic.

| *Therefore,* | *dolphins* | *broke through* | *happily* | *and leapt* | *into*

Septameter**:** A seven-foot line

| *Therefore,* | *dolphins* | *broke through* | *happily* | *and leapt* | *into* | *daylight*

Octameter**:** An eight-foot line

| *Therefore,* | *dolphins* | *broke through* | *happily* | *and leapt* | *into* | *daylight* | *in a flash*

Metrical Feet

Iamb ˘ ˈ a light stress followed by a heavy stress

- and leapt

Trochee ˈ ˘ a heavy stress followed by a light stress

- dolphin

Dactyl ˈ ˘ ˘ a heavy stress followed by two light stresses

- happily

Anapest ˘ ˘ ˈ two light stresses followed by a heavy stress

- in a flash

Spondee ¯ ¯ two equal stresses

- broke through

If we put these terms together, we can begin to scan lines:

Iambic tetrameter**:**

Whose woods | these are | I think | I know

His house | is in | the vil | lage* though

(Robert Frost from “Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening”)

*Note that feet can break in the middle of words.

Iambic pentameter**:**

The world | is too | much with | us late | and soon

(William Wordsworth from “The World Is Too Much with Us”)

Trochaic Octometer:

Once up | on a | midnight | dreary, | while
I | pondered, | weak and | weary,

Over | many a | quaint and | curious | volume | of for | gotten | lore—

(Edgar Allan Poe from “The Raven”)

Scansion contains many words that allow us to speak in a specific way about verse. When a line of poetry adheres to a pattern the poem has undertaken, it is called **pure**. But often poems are what we call **impure**. These poems break from the pattern—not to switch to a different meter, which can happen as the examples above show—but to alter the pattern altogether.

Impure Dactylic dimeter**:**

Hickory | dickory | dock

Iambic trimeter**:**

The mouse | ran up | the clock

In the above example, the first line is impure. Here is another example of an impure rhythm, but one that follows another named pattern: catalectic:

Trochaic tetrameter:

Tyger! | Tyger! | Burning | bright

In the | forests | of the | night

(William Blake from “The Tyger”)

These lines by Blake are catalectic because the final foot is cut off. It also contains lines that end with a stressed beat in what we refer to as a **masculine** beat. If the last beat were unstressed, we’d refer to it as **feminine**.

The art of scansion is both scientific and subjective. This specialty language allows us to examine poetry in a calculated way, but there are times when the degree of stresses sound different to different ears.

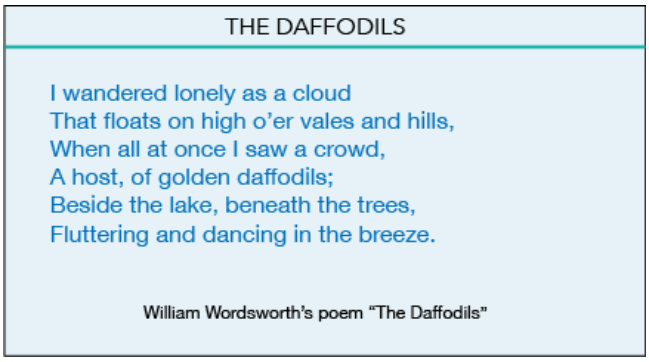
There are many good sources on scansion and I want here to simply provide the basic language you may use to speak about poems, and to understand the detailed rhythms of your own poems. Scansion can be useful in discovering where language goes slack by identifying words that produce less energy, like prepositions. It can also allow you to identify places in poems that move you, allow you to hear what patterns you are drawn to as a reader and writer.

Music and Rhyme

In addition to line length and rhythm, we also categorize lines by rhyme, especially in formal verse where an extended pattern is maintained. You most likely have been rhyming from an early age. Children’s books written by writers like Shel Silverstein and Dr. Seuss have delighted both children and adults with their rhyming stories. Rhyme makes language memorable and pleasurable. In both formal verse and free verse, rhyming is elemental. In formal poetry it occurs more frequently as end-rhyme, when two or more words that end lines rhyme. In free verse, the rhyme is more likely to be **internal,** not necessarily occurring at the end of lines.

Let’s take a look at an excerpt from William Wordsworth’s poem “The Daffodils”:

Here we can see the first and third



lines rhyme; the second, fourth and sixth; and the fifth and sixth. There is a definite rhyme scheme. When we refer to the rhymes in this stanza, we diagram the rhymes with matching letters like this: ABABCC.

I wandered lonely as a cloud (A)

That floats on high o'er vales and hills, (B)

When all at once I saw a crowd, (A)

A host, of golden daffodils; (B)

Beside the lake, beneath the trees, (C)

Fluttering and dancing in the breeze. (C)

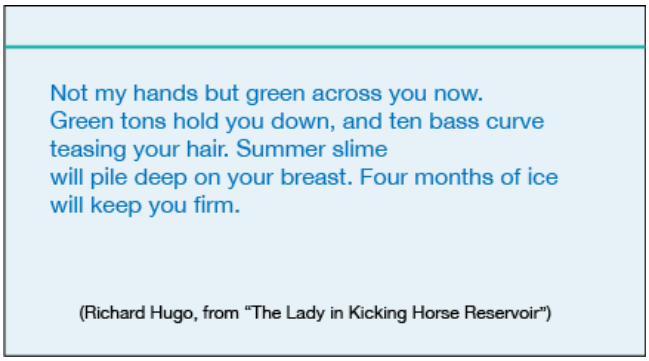
The letter changes whenever the rhyme changes, and whenever a new rhyme is introduced you add a new letter.

Philip Levine "They Feed They Lion,"

In the poem "They Feed They Lion," rather than end-rhyme, Philip

Levine utilizes internal rhyme. Read the first stanza via this link http://www.ibiblio.org/ipa/poems/levine/they_feed_they_lion.php .

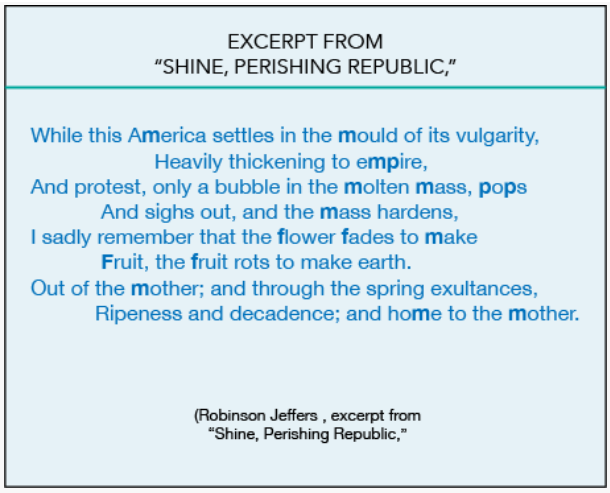
In this example, Levine uses rhymes that are both internal and slant, or off, rather than exact: sacks, black, shafts; butter, tar. Even the numerous occurrences of "out" paired with "creosote"creates a kind of slant rhyme. Here is another example:



In this example, the second line contains a slant internal rhyme: "ten" and "ton," which also rhyme with "hands" in line one. These sounds are tightly woven and where there isn't rhyme, per se, there is **assonance**, similar vowel sounds, or vowel rhyme: green, tease, deep; and slime, pile, ice.

Activity

Go to the entire Levine poem "They Feed They Lion" and perform a close reading with your ears. Note places of assonance and rhyme. How do these patterns affect your reading of the poem? How do these sounds work to create the poem's tone of voice? Like assonance, a term we use to describe vowel sounds, we also have terms that refer to the sounds that consonants make. Alliteration is a term used to describe a series of sounds consonants make at the beginning of or in the middle of words. In the following excerpt from"Shine, Perishing Republic," Robinson Jeffers employs several uses of alliteration:



In these first two stanzas of the poem, Jeffers' use of **m**, **p**, and **f**, create three strains of alliteration. In addition to alliteration, we can further label the **f** sounds as an occasion of consonance, what Edward Hirsch defines as "the audible repetition of consonant sounds in words encountered near each other whose vowel sounds are different"—flower-fades-fruit: flow-fay-frew.

Activity

The poet Mary Ruefle writes what she calls "erasure" poems where she will use whiteout to erase portions of—most of—a text to create her own poem. Find an old novel or purchase a book of prose at a book sale and try her approach. Choose to keep words you like the sounds of. Make chains of alliteration and assonance. Devote the next page to rhyme. Erase half words if you feel like it. You can also access digital versions of books made to disappear as you click away on the Wave Books website http://erasures.wavepoetry.com/sources.php

Line Length

If you simply browse the poems included in any anthology, you will see all types of shapes on the page. The length of the line is one of the most important decisions a poet makes about a poem, and the decision usually comes to define

a poet's style. Robert Creeley's poems use short lines. C. K. Williams, long. Most poets write somewhere in between. The decision of how long to make lines can be driven by a number of factors, but mostly it is chosen by prosody, the musical component of the language that projects the speaker's voice and breath. As we've seen in the last chapter, where we choose to break lines also has a tremendous effect on the poem's tone and meaning. One of the elements that determine line length is the character of the language in which you write. English contains many iambic patterns that often sound most right on a line between four and five feet long. Lines one foot long are barely poems at all; it is difficult to create tension or musical phrases with only two beats per line. Lines with four feet are frequently used to tell stories, as is the case often with Robert Frost's poems. Longer lines lend themselves well to conversational tones, like that of Denise Duhamel's, or in lyric poems like Larry Levis's. Some poets like Allen Ginsberg and Charles Olson, who wrote about it in his essay "Projective Verse," considered a line to be a unit of breath. Olson writes:

> And the line comes (I swear it) from the breath, from the breathing of the man who
>
> writes, at the moment that he writes, and thus is, it is here that, daily work, the
>
> WORK, gets in, for only he, the man who writes, can declare, at every moment, the
>
> line its metric and its ending—where its breathing, shall come to, termination.

There can be no denial of the essential relationship between the poetic line and breath. Or between any carefully constructed writing and the pace at which it's read. Just look at Olson's passage and his use of commas, which causes us to stagger through the sentence. Poetry is an oral art which comes fully to life when read aloud. Lines are instructions for how often and how long to pause. Like sheet music, the lines guide our pace, emphasis, and silence. If you were to

read short-lined poems, however, taking a new breath at each line's start, you'd sound like a panting dog. So, there is some room for interpretation on Olson's assertion. Nonetheless, breath and line are intertwined, as you will see from the following examples.

As we read through these, note the different line lengths and their effects:

THE EYE

Here from this mountain shore, headland beyond stormy headland plunging

like dolphins through the blue sea-smoke

Into pale sea—look west at the hill of water: it is half the planet: this dome, this half globe, this bulging

Eyeball of water, arched over to Asia,

Australia and white Antarctica: those are the eyelids that never close; this is the staring unsleeping

Eye of the earth; and what it watches is not our wars.

(Robinson Jeffers, from "The Eye")

In this excerpt from Robinson Jeffers' poem "The Eye" we see the different effects that long and short lines have on the breath. The first lengthy line is full of images beyond the human—the headlands, the mountain, the shore, the dolphin, the smoke. In a long line like this we are given a sense of being overwhelmed as the images keep building and drawing out the breath until we are breathless. Compare this line to what follows two lines below: "Eyeball of water, arched over to Asia." If you read both out loud you can feel how the length changes the way you use your lungs: long breath, short breath. The effect of the shorter line is like a quick glance—the eye open from the Pacific coast to Asia.

Activity

Click on the following link to take a look at the first four lines of Allen

Ginsberg's poem "Howl." https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/49303/howl Knowing that Ginsberg considered a line to be a unit of breath, it is easy for us to read the lines the way they were intended. In Ginsberg's long lines we sense overwhelming frustration, exasperation, and urgency. There is the sense that the speaker has so much to say that he cannot contain himself, that he cannot take a breath deep enough to capture all of his thoughts. What happens when you read the last line here out loud? Try it if you haven't. What happens is that you need to speak quickly, and this creates a voice of desperation—perfectly appropriate given the subject matter of Ginsberg's great generational poem "Howl." The title itself, taken from a line in Walt Whitman's great poem "Song of Myself," https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45477/song-of-myself-1892-version reflects the tone that Ginsberg's lines create.

THE MESSENGER

In the strange house
In the strange town
Going barefoot past the parents' empty room
I hear the horses the fire the wheel bone wings
Your voice

(Jean Valentine, from "The Messenger")

Rather than breaking the line after words or phrases to create a pause, many poets incorporate white space into the line itself. Here, the spaces in line four visually mimic the footsteps referred to in line three, as well as create the pacing—as though the steps being taken are slow. Notice that the phrase "Your voice," which is part of the list in line four is moved to line five. That means there must be some difference between the effect created between the phrases with white space and those created by line breaks. It seems that the pauses between the list in line four are slightly shorter, more staccato, than the pause created between "bone wings" and "Your voice." The more poetry you read, and the more poetry you write, the more you will begin to identify the subtleties of these techniques.

LINES

On our first date, instead of holding my hand, my future-husband looked
at my palm. *Here's your fame line your heart line the lucky M*
he said *you were in danger but you are coming out of it now.*
He said it like he meant it, the way the old women in the Philippines
had taught him. *Now make a fist these two little lines under your pinky*
these are the two kids you'll have.
My sister keeps waiting
for her third baby. She has three lines. Three kids, that's what the palm reader
at Rocky Point told her. *You'll get married next year*
and you'll have three beautiful daughters. My sister laughed and said
I'll get a second opinion because she was just a junior in high school
and sure she was going to college.
On our first date my future-husband
traced
the lines on my palm with his finger and I closed my hand around his
because it tickled. *If the pad near your thumb is fleshy*, he said,
it means you're very passionate. His own palms were chubby and pink,
his brown fingers tapered and elegant. He wore a silver and turquoise ring.
He said, *You'll get married only once*
but later there'll be an affair.
Now that we're married, he can't find that wrinkle of infidelity.
Our palms change, he tells me, especially our right palms
that mutate through our behavior. He examines the bunch of tiny xs
that look like windshield frost, the wishbones, the spider webs,
the triangle dragon teeth.
My sister will most likely have that third baby.
My husband sees those three lines though my sister groans,
Two are enough. Her oldest is already fourteen, and my sister
is finally able to start taking classes at the community college.
My husband says to make everyone feel better: *I was only kidding*
I don't really know that much about predictions.
That night we all go
to Rocky Point which isn't as fun as it used to be, which is going bankrupt,
my sister says, like everything else in Rhode Island. The rollercoaster
is broken down, the cars off the tracks, lying on their sides
like cows. And hanging from the booths' roofs, giant Tweety Birds and Pink
Panthers,
the cuddly neon elusive ones that hardly anyone ever wins.

One of the most conversational of contemporary poets, Duhamel speaks to us like we are a long-time friend. Her voice is energetic though the lines are long. And in this poem she varies line lengths drastically but keeps to an overall pattern so it still looks uniform on the page. Once again, like other poems we've

looked at, the form reflects and enhances the subject: the lines on our hands that palm readers use to predict our future. As we read the poem, we read the lines as though we are scanning a palm. In addition to the visual echo, the spaces also create pauses that mimic the way a fortune teller speaks: slowly, interpreting, considering—"He said, *You'll get married once* / [space] *But later there'll be an affair*." The space also creates suspense and drama. In this excerpt, there is one line on which only one word sits: "trace." It is the only line in the poem that contains one word. What is the effect? Why this word?

Activity

Activity

Follow the link to Gwendolyn Brooks' poem "We Real Cool." https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/we-real-cool This short poem accomplishes a lot with its short lines and enjambment. Reflecting the theme of rebellion, each line ignores standards of syntax and ends on a word that actually starts the next sentence. The enjambment places a stress on the word "We" and therefore emphasizes the will of the speaker to identify the group.

What else do you think this poem accomplishes with its lines? If the poem is laid out so that each sentence falls on its own line, what happens to the poem's energy? Music? Tone? Or what if you place one-and-a-half sentences on each line? Try rearranging the lines differently again and see what the effect is.

Alternatively, try another excerpt from above. Break "Howl" up into short lines, Duhamel's poem into medium lines. Experiment with how line affects music and emphasis in meaning. Try it in one of your own poems.

Additional Resources:

Skelton, Robin. *The Shapes of Our Singing*. *http://www.amazon.com/The-Shapes-Our-Singing-Comprehensive/dp/0910055769*

Strand, Mark and Eavan Boland. *The Making of a Poem*. *http://books.wwnorton.com/books/The-Making-of-a-Poem/*

← Chapter Five: Architecture

Chapter Seven: Experimenti… →

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Chapter Seven: Experimenting with Forms

In this chapter you will be introduced not only to common forms, but also to lesser-known forms, with the intention that you will experiment with forms while writing your own poetry.

Abecedarian

In this form, the poem works its way through the alphabet, each line beginning with the letterfollowing the first letter of the previous line. There are also Abecedarians which have entire stanzas that begin with one letter, such as Carolyn Forche's long Abecedarian, "on earth." There are no restrictions on meter or rhyme. The following example demonstrates the abecedarian form:

LAKE AFFECTED

April 11th and out my Michigan window: no surprise, really:
Blizzard. The small sidewalk trees sag under fluff and sky.
Cindy says she can't take it, this weather. She misses
Dallas, the blue bells, has had enough of the lake's snow globe
Extending its stay beyond this season's home opener, yellow
Flowers and late night light for late nights
Grilling. Her hand opens back toward Texas like a beauty queen's,
Her eyes bat their long lashes: Take me back old friend, holy hell,
I am sorry. But everyone has different needs
Jig-sawing their bellies. Pieces of life floating down like, well, you
Know. Kevin, I'm leaving messages like lightning on your machine.
Lying in bed this morning I couldn't sleep. Snow
Makes electric champagne of my nerves, pops me open, twists me until sweet
Nostalgia curls me up with a book, squeezes poetry from my skull, seduces me to
Ogle over young faces in old pictures, re-alphabetize my library, boil
Potatoes until my kitchen windows steam. I burned yesterday's leftover
Quart of coffee reheating on the stove. But I didn't care, all
Restless as I was and hungry for everything no longer
Snuggling in my shoes or my bed, which is to say, bodies from the past.
Time, oh time and time again time
Undoes more than the elastic seams on lingerie, but like that—
Very much like that, the things that make us sexy
Wear away. And when it snows like this I want to melt until
X-rays show me one white dot, unique, branching out, stuck,
Yearning for others like me that will have a ball balling with me something
Zesty as an orange, ready to be thrown at the world.

Aubade

Partner to the serenade, which focuses on evening, the aubade is a poem about the morningor dawn. There are no restrictions on line, meter, or rhyme. Here is one by Traci Brimhall:

AUBADE WITH A BROKEN NECK

The first night you don't come home
summer rains shake the clematis.
I bury the dead moth I found in our bed,
scratch up a rutabaga and eat it rough
with dirt. The dog finds me and presents
between his gentle teeth a twitching
nightjar. In her panic, she sings
in his mouth. He gives me her pain
like a gift, and I take it. I hear
the cries of her young, greedy with need,
expecting her return, but I don't let her go
until I get into the house. I read
the auspices—the way she flutters against
the wallpaper's moldy roses means
all can be lost. How she skims the ceiling
means a storm approaches. You should see
her in the beginnings of her fear, rushing
at the starless window, her body a dart,
her body the arrow of longing, aimed,
as all desperate things are, to crash
not into the object of desire,
but into the darkness behind it.

Ballad

Before written language, folk ballads were used around the world to transmit stories—often tragic—from one generation to another. The word "ballad" has its roots in the Latin word *ballare,* meaning "to dance," evidence of the rhythmic qualities of the form and its frequent recital to musical accompaniment. Although written in many variations, the ballad is today most commonly written in quatrains and A B C B rhyme. The first and third lines contain eight syllables, while the second and fourth lines contain six. According to Robin Skelton, the most common rhyme scheme is iambic tetrameter alternating with iambic trimeter. The following is a ballad by Muriel Rukeyser:

1. **Read** Ballad of Orange and Grape on PoetryFoundation.org

2. Listen to Muriel Rukeyser read the poem here.

Blank Verse

A form that lends itself well to a meditative voice, blank verse is written in iambic pentameter lines that do not rhyme. The Poetry foundation contains numerous examples, including links to those written in 10-syllable lines traditional of epic poems such as John Milton's *Pardise Lost.*

Ch'i-Yen-Shih

In this Chinese pattern, each line contains seven monosyllabic words with a caesura after eachfourth word. The rhyme scheme is comprised of the pattern A B C B.

CAPTURED

In the low grass, a girl holds
a bright pink shell washed to land
by high white waves. Her toes grow
like a tree's roots in the sand.

Cinquain

Adelaide Crapsey established this unrhymed iambic form, which consists of a five-line stanza with the syllable count 2 4 6 8 2. Here is an example of one titled "Amaze"and another called "November Night."

Daina

This Latvian form consists of a quatrain of trochaic octometer lines with feminine endings.Although there are no end rhymes, alliteration and internal rhymes are common. The examplebelow breaks form in the last line and adds a stressed foot for effect.

CATHOLIC SCHOOL

Every Friday early morning
we would march to church all wearing
navy beanies nuns pulled down our
heads like muffins. We preferred them

sideways, some French painter's fancy
style. But always Sisters reaching
over pressing God's will into
bodies, taming young girls from the wild.

Elegy

An elegy is a lament for the dead and contains the character of sadness and loss. Mark Strandand Eavan Boland explain that an elegy "mourns for a dead person, lists his or her virtues,and seeks consolation beyond the momentary event." It is considered a public poem thatwhen done best, according Strand

and Boland, sets the customs of death in a particular cultureagainst the decorum and private feelings of the speaker.The following is by the poet William Heyen:

ELEGY FOR WILT THE STILT

October 12, 1999. Remember the date.
As of this autumn day at century's end,
God's fortunes in heaven have changed.
He's drafted and signed Himself a center.
Wilt the Stilt is dead.

Wilt the Stilt is dead before George Mikan,
first of the big men,
dead before Bill Russell,
before Kareem Abdul Jabbar,
before Moses Malone, before Shaquille O'Neal

who might have taken Him
to His own promised land.
God could wait no longer
for his franchise player,
so Wilt the Stilt is dead.

In Philly, his high school rims shiver with applause.
In Kansas, his college rims rattle with applause.
Globetrotter and NBA nets rip themselves in homage,
and in the silence of a hundred gyms
in the dead of night backboards

shatter in adulation and remembrance as, now
Wilt the Stilt ducks his head
under the transom of heaven,
as God reaches up to shake hands
with his new acquisition,

to welcome Wilt home among the constellations
of His cosmic league.
Wilt bows, vows to work hard,
to settle down with one woman,
to earn his minutes here with sweat,

to balance power and finesse,
even, on occasion, to pass the ball
out of the low post. God smiles,
cheerleaders leap, spread legs, and tumble,
for today the Stilt has joined them in death.

Ekphrasis

Ekphrasis (poetry that describes or responds to visual art) occurs in many forms. Though it is traditionally in response to painting or photography, it can be in response to any kind of art at all (dance, theater, sculpture, music, and

on.) New Mexican poet Lauren Camp, in her essay on poetry and art, explains, "The ekphrastic tradition of writing about, or describing, art comes from the early Greeks. The word *ekphrasis* (or ecphrasis) can be broken down to *ek*, 'out,' and *phrasis*, 'speaking.' Speaking out. Over and over, writers have used art to speak their words… to empower their words." Here is a poem by Lauren Camp in response to a photograph by Ansel Adams.

Read excerpts of Lauren Camp's essay here: Excerpts from Lauren Camp Ekphrastic essay

Exquisite Corpse

This form, invented by the Surrealists, is fun to write in a group. Each person writes two lines,then folds the paper so the next person writing can see only the second line; the next personwrites two more lines and folds the paper so that only the second line is visible; and so on.

Activity

Work with a partner and play another Surrealist game called "If This, Then That." Eachperson writes without knowing what the other person is writing. The first person writesa phrase on one side of a piece of paper that begins "If…" and then passes the paper to his or her partner. Without looking at the "If" statement, the partner then writes a statementbeginning "Then…" Here are some examples that make it hard to believe thatthese were random—but they were! You'll be surprised how the collective unconscioussometimes aligns:

If school is cancelled tomorrow… then girls will dance under umbrellas in the rain.

If turkeys made honey… then no would ever have to go to bed without supper.

> If you heard a sound and didn't know what it was... then the neighbors would beknockin' at your door.

Ghazal

Typically dealing with subjects of love and separation, the ghazal is a form with Arabic rootsconsisting of rhyming couplets of the same syllabic length and a refrain. As explained on theAcademy of American Poets website:The ghazal is composed of a minimum of five couplets—and typically no more than fifteen—that are structurally, thematically, and emotionally autonomous. Each line of thepoem must be of the same length, though meter is not imposed in English. The first coupletintroduces a scheme, made up of a rhyme followed by a refrain. Subsequent coupletspick up the same scheme in the second line only, repeating the refrain and rhyming thesecond line with both lines of the first stanza. The final couplet usually includes the poet'ssignature, referring to the author in the first or third person, and frequently including the poet's own name or a derivation of its meaning.

Here is an example of one by Patricia Smith:

Read Hip-Hop Ghazal at PoetryFoundation.org

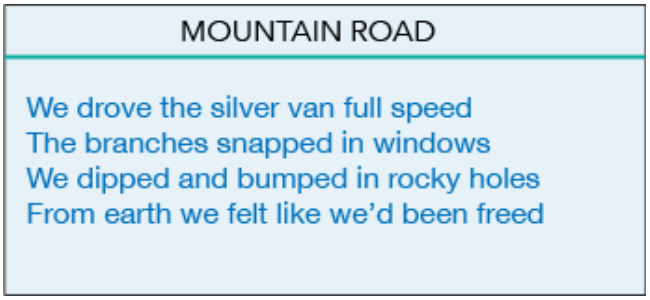
Haiku

This well-known Japanese form is three lines long and comprised of unrhymed, unmeteredlines with a 5 7 5 syllable count. Traditionally, the haiku's subject matter relates to nature orseasons.

MOTHER'S DAY
One Sunday in May Mothers answer mothers' calls We are all children

Italian Quatrain

The four lines are written in iambic pentameter and rhyme A B B A.



Activity

Write an Italian quartet, then develop it into a Petrarchan sonnet (see below).

Katauta

In this three-line poem with the syllable count 5 7 7, the first line poses a question that thenext two lines attempt to answer in an intuitive, immediate way. Try answering with the first image that pops into your mind.

> What's in my future?
> The budding heads of tulips
> Fragrant, red-lipped, and
> sealed.

Pantoum

Originating in Malaysia, the pantoum was adapted by French poets. It consists of an unlimitednumber of quatrains in which the second and fourth lines of

each are repeated in the first andthird lines of the next. The first and third lines of the first stanza become the final stanza's second and fourth lines. There can be some variation. For instance, the first line of the poem maybe the last.

The following is an example by Melissa Rhoades:

DUTCH EAST INDIA COMPANY

Back home, my new wife makes fine lace. I keep
a scrap of her work in my brine-soaked breeches.
Black waters pitch and the hull creaks
as I head for spice stores at Malacca's beach.

The scrap of her work in my brine-soaked breeches
is soiled from these sickened months
of heading for spice stores at Malacca's beach.
The taste of molded hard tack licks my tongue

and soiled from these sickened months,
we had to leave nine scurvied men with the Boers.
The taste of molded hard tack licks all our tongues
and the Captain won't say when next we moor.

Although we left nine scurvied men with the Boers,
we're all bleeding gums, thin skin, and fleas.
The Captain still won't say when we moor
and some dirty dogs talk of mutiny.

But for all our bleeding gums, thin skin, and fleas
sweet land comes, a line on the horizon.
Now, no dogs talk of mutiny,
not with palm trees visible from our galleon.

Sweet land! Malaya fills the horizon.
Scrabble at the riggings, keen to anchor.
Palm trees look heavenly from the galleon.
Once ashore, we drink till we slur,

scrabbling around port, keen from anchor.
Sweat runs down our backs. In the shade
we sprawl out, still drinking in a slur.
At dusk, I thrust into a dark-skinned maiden,

sweat running down our backs in the shade.
Black Malacca reeks of nutmeg and mace.
Again, I thrust into the dark-skinned maid
and moan. Back home, my new wife makes fine lace.

Pregunta

This Spanish form was practiced by poets of the court in pairs during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. One poet asks a question or series of

questions in one form and the secondpoet, matching the form, answers. The topics usually related to love, philosophy, or morality.

> **Q: If two loves want one heart**
> And the heart thrums both loves' strings
> How long before one parts
> From two and chooses a single fling?
>
> **A: Since no hearts be alike**
> If no love presumes a thing
> You may wish to keep arms wide
> And see what each day brings.

Activity

Alternatively, it might be fun to experiment with different topics and be loose and spontaneouswith the answers and with the form. The Surrealists were great at inventingthese types of games. http://www.purselipsquarejaw.org/surrealist_games/

Pair up and in the style of the Surrealists, have one person write aquestion and the other write an imagistic answer without knowing what the question

Q. How do I know if I love her?

A. The shutters will fly off the house.

Q. How do I know when to tell her?

A. A row of blackbirds a choir on a wire.

Q. How will I know when to ask her?

A. Her open hand and the light lifting from it.

Prose Poem

The prose poem, which can be any length, isn't broken into verse, but contains many of theelements of poetry: figures of speech, musical language, internal rhyme, repetition, condensedsyntax, and imagery. There is some debate over the form, as there are some poets who do notconsider the form a poem, per se, but something more akin to flash fiction, or at least a genreof prose rather than verse. Either way, it is a cross-genre form—half prose, half verse—and funto experiment with.

An influential revivalist of the form was Robert Bly, who said in an 1997 interview that theform is part of an evolution in human democracy: from gods to heroes to everyday humans;from sacred culture to aristocracy to democracy; likewise, from sacred chants in which "allwords are signs" to metered poetry to free verse to prose. Additionally in the interview, Blyspoke about his feeling of freedom and "safety" in writing prose poems: "The most wonderfulthing about the prose poem is that nobody has set up any standards yet."

The following poem is by Russell Edson, known as "the godfather of the prose poem." As afather of the form, Edson provided one of the form's common characteristics: strangeness. Hissubjects tend to be odd, surreal, and humorous. The figure of the ape is one that appears frequently in his poems.

APE AND COFFEE

Some coffee had gotten on a man's ape. The man said, animal did you get on my coffee?
No no, whistled the ape, the coffee got on me.
You're sure you didn't spill on my coffee? said the man.
Do I look like a liquid? peeped the ape.
Well you sure don't look human, said the man.
But that doesn't make me a fluid, twittered the ape.
Well I don' know what the hell you are,
so just stop it, cried the man.
I was just sitting here reading the newspaper when you splashed coffee all over me, piped the ape.
I don't care if you are a liquid, you just better stop splashing on things, cried the man.
Do I look fluid to you? Take a good look, hooted the ape.
If you don't stop I'll put you in a cup, screamed the man.
I'm not a fluid, screeched the ape.
Stop it, stop it, screamed the man, you are frightening me.

Here is another example by Devon Moore:

MOTION SICK

I was five but the woman thought I was seven 'cause that's how old you had to be to be an unaccompanied minor, so that's what my daddy told me to say, so then I was an unaccompanied liar catapulting through the clouds and later I told my daddy, "I saw a lightning bolt," and he said, "Yeah, right," and I said, "Why?" and he said, "Cause I thought you said you saw an angel," and I said, "No, a lightning bolt," and we were quiet.

I was up in the clouds looking for angels and the nice stewardess offered me hot chocolate instead of pop, and maybe it was the turbulence or my open hands, but the next thing I know the scalding hot was all in my lap, and I was crying loud, but that's not the worst of it 'cause then I was standing in the front row butt naked from the waist down, just a simple small hairless vagina for all to see.

I was in the terminal on a layover, but I still thought every man I saw with black hair and a moustache might be my father, and I tried to go to them but the stewardess grabbed me back and said, "No, this is not your stop," so she sat me down on a chair and told me not to move and left me for what felt like hours and I had to pee so bad but I couldn't move 'cause I was still hoping that my daddy might surprise me and show up before his time.

I was chewing the bubblegum my mommy got me for popping ears when I started throwing up Dramamine and I might as well have been the plague or the grossest thing she'd ever seen 'cause the woman sitting next to me leapt out of her seat and pointed and said, "She's sick," which was true, but I cried anyways and then my new coat that had a detachable outer layer smelled like throw-up, so the stewardess put it in a plastic bag, which was the first thing they handed my father when he got to the airport.

Here is an example of a prose poem by Albuquerque poet Jenn Givhan.

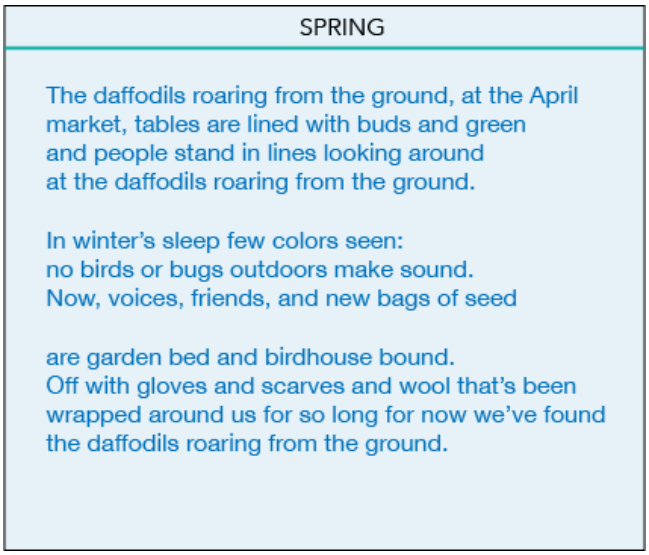
I AM DARK / I AM FOREST

I carried a bowl of menudo into the forest / I carried my bisabuela's tripas not daring ask whose intestines I carried / con cilantro y radish y cebolla chopped fine / I carried the sewing machine they'd slip-stitched her to in the garment district downtown / I carried the forest crackling against asphalt where her chanclas burnt & melted so I carried her too / I wore no red / I bore no basket / there was no forest but an avocado tree in the backyard of the house they made her / sell to get her Medicare for her diabetes shots / I carried her sugarwater / a hummingbird great-granddaughter I carried her flickering / her black & white-screened / I carried her face / the scars her warped esposo left / her granddaughter / carried those wounds through the womb / not wolf but blue-eyed man / I stirred the menudo / my belly the pot / scalding into the forest I carried / & that tree I chopped down chopped into a boat & carried my mother & my bisabuela across the chile-red sopa the blood-water broth / named her daughter / what forest have we made for her I cannot see / I carried darkness into the forest & sliced it out

Roundel

The roundel is an English form consisting of eleven lines in three stanzas with no set meter.The first part of line one repeats at the end of the first stanza and again as the last line of poem.The half line also forms the rhyme pattern and is

indicated here as R for “refrain”: A B A R–BA B–A B A R.



SPRING

The daffodils roaring from the ground, at the April
market, tables are lined with buds and green
and people stand in lines looking around
at the daffodils roaring from the ground.

In winter’s sleep few colors seen:
no birds or bugs outdoors make sound.
Now, voices, friends, and new bags of seed

are garden bed and birdhouse bound.
Off with gloves and scarves and wool that’s been
wrapped around us for so long for now we’ve found
the daffodils roaring from the ground.

Sestina

The sestina consists of five sestets culminating in a final tercet called an envoi, also called atornada. The six words that end each of the lines in the first stanza repeat throughout thepoem in the following pattern:

1. A B C D E F
2. F A E B D C
3. C F D A B E
4. E C B F A D
5. D E A C F B
6. B D F E C A
7. (envoi) E C AorA C E

In addition, the envoi also repeats the words that end lines B D F in the first stanza. Thesethree words can go anywhere in interior of the final tercet’s lines.

Here is an example by Chad Sweeney:

MICHIGAN SESTINA

Believe me, I've tried to understand winter.
It grows out from no root and no
seed, yet sways like a meadow toward the mind,
shifts and sways on its white stem and is
a figure of uncertainty over hills of sleep,
where aging factories gesture to a train

and mills are shuttered over river ice. The train
crosses a bridge from Michigan into winter,
its silos and tobacco fields framed by sleep,
inscrutable and nine hells down. No
horses center the pastures, and the sky is
its own pasture, a drift of snow over the mind.

Three crows motionless on a fence, in the mind
are moving, crossing the windows of the train
like Japanese characters whose sense is
effortless, a calligraphy of winter
whose shifting figures evoke a No
theater, three masks in a theater of sleep.

But the land draws its own lessons from sleep,
the heaping of frozen images in the mind,
Polish teachers in a birch grove and no
one to bury them, shoved from the train,
the faces of the dead occupy the whole winter,
one borderless nation of snow. Memory is

unable to bury them—what was and what is,
and what never was, heaped together in sleep.
History erects a statue to winter,
a wolf leaves its tracks across the mind,
the train and the memory of the train
arrive on one line, though no

station is there to greet them and no
one is getting on or off. Is
it a manner of irony pulls this train
west toward Chicago with its cargo of sleep?
My forehead against the window doesn't mind
closing its one eye against winter,

the train moves deeper into memory, no
train and no winter, but one crow is
changed in sleep to the Japanese character for mind.

Activity

Make a list of six words you absolutely love. Then write five sentences that include allof the words. Then, write five more. Then write ten more. Then use these six words towrite a sestina!

Sonnet

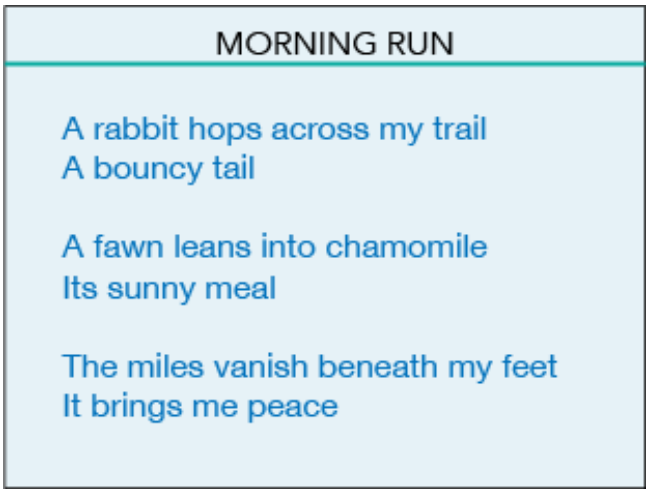
Although there are several versions of the sonnet, each has fourteen lines and contains a volta,or a turn in thought, which can sometimes be indicated with the words “but” or “yet.” In contemporary poetry it has become common for poets to compose sonnets with differing rhymeor meter, or with none at all.

> **Shakespearian**: Comprised of an octet and a sextet, this sonnet is composed in iambicpentameter and rhymes A B A B–C D C D–E F E F–G G. The volta appears eitherbetween lines eight and nine or between lines twelve and thirteen.
>
> **Petrarchan**: This sonnet contains two stanzas: one octet that rhymes as A B B A–A BB A, and a remaining sextet with varying rhyme schemes. The volta occurs betweenthe stanzas.
>
> **Spenserian**: This sonnet modifies the Petrarchan to contain a rhyme scheme of A B AB–B C B C–C D C D–E E.

Garrison Keiller featured Billy Collins‘ parody of the form on *The Writer’s Almanac*.Listen to Billy Collins read it.
https://www.poetryarchive.org/poem/sonnet

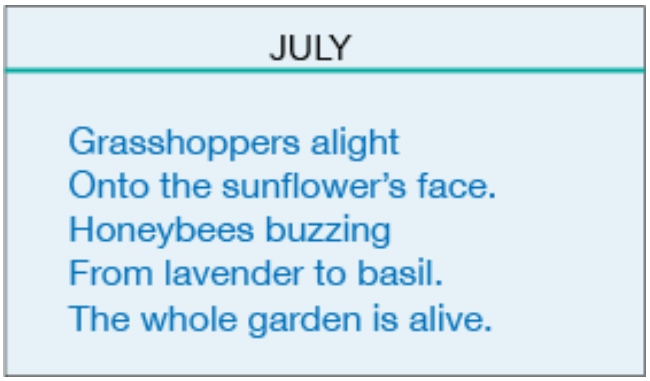
Split Couplet

Composed of two lines, the split couplet contains a first line in iambic tetrameter and a secondin iambic dimeter; the two lines should rhyme. Another variation is to write the first line iniambic pentameter.



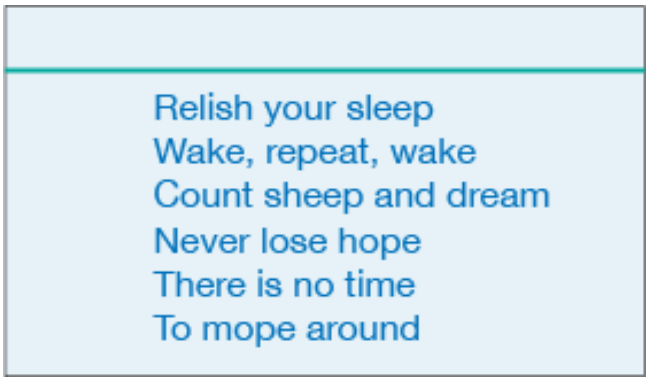
Tanka, or Waka

This Japanese form, which focuses primarily on nature or strong emotions, consists of fiveunrhymed, non-metrical lines with the syllable count 5 7 5 7 7.In Waka, lines one and two, as well as three and four, form complete sentences, as does thelast line.



Than-Bauk, or Climbing Rhyme

This Burmese form consists of three four-syllable lines, with rhyme falling on the fourth syllableof the first line, the third syllable of the second line, and the second syllable of the thirdline.



Experiment with different syllable lengths that integrate the same climbing rhyme pattern.

Villanelle

This French form consists of five tercets and a final quatrain. The first stanza's first and thirdlines repeat in an alternating pattern as the last line in the subsequent stanzas. In the final quatrain,the two lines that have been repeating throughout the poem form the final two lines ofthe poem.

The following villanelle was written by Victor James Daley. It is title is simply "Villanelle":

VILLANELLE

We said farewell, my youth and I,
When all fair dreams were gone or going,
And Love's red lips were cold and dry.
When white blooms fell from tree-tops high—
Our Austral winter's way of snowing—
We said farewell, my youth and I.

We did not sigh—what use to sigh
When Death passed as a mower mowing,
And Love's red lips were cold and dry?

But hearing Life's stream thunder by,
That sang of old through flowers flowing,
We said farewell, my youth and I.

There was no hope in the blue sky,
No music in the low winds blowing,
And Love's red lips were cold and dry.

My hair is black as yet, then why
So sad! I know not, only knowing
We said farewell, my youth and I.

All are not buried when they die;
Dead souls there are through live eyes showing
When Love's red lips are cold and dry.

So, seeing where the dead men lie,
Out of their hearts the grave-flowers growing,
We said farewell, my youth and I,
When Love's red lips were cold and dry.

"Villanelle" by Victor James Daley is in the Public Domain.
For more examples, please see the The Poetry Foundation.

Additional Resources:

The Poet's Billow. **www.thepoetsbillow.org**

← Chapter Six: Acoustics

Chapter Eight: Revision →

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Chapter Eight: Revision

Beginning writers tend to write first drafts and call them final drafts, but as we know by now, writing a poem—or writing anything, for that matter—is a process that takes time. On rare occasions, a poem will pour forth finished in its initial draft, but the large majority of the time each poem will need to be revised. Whether you change four words, four stanzas, or one period, it is all part of the process of revision.

The origin of the word "revision" is the Latin *revisonem,* meaning "a seeing again." When we revise, we see our poem again, which is to imply that we see it differently. The more time that lapses between our writing of the poem and when we look at it again, the more objectively we will see the poem. Imagine writing a poem and not looking at it for ten years. Ten years is time enough to truly see the poem differently because you are literally a different person looking at that poem. You've had new experiences that have influenced your person and your understanding of poetry. What you wrote ten years ago is different than what you would write now. Write long enough and you will have the experience of returning to a poem and not even remembering writing it, asking, "Is this mine?"

When we write and revise poems, sometimes we grapple with the emotional tendency to protect or defend our work, which can hamper changes that could improve our poems. With distance, we see a poem objectively; we are therefore able to make changes that improve the poem because we've forgotten how much work went into the poem in the first place. Our memories and feelings that the poem may touch on have also changed, and we may no longer consider certain parts crucial to the poem.

Waiting ten years to revise a poem you wrote yesterday may be the easiest way to bring anew eye to the poem, but it's not very practical. As writers, we need to also be our best readers, capable of seeing weakness and capable of the bravery it takes to make the big changes to our poems when necessary—even when that means cutting our favorite lines, even when it means slashing the stanza we labored over for a month. This chapter will address ways to improve your ability to see a poem anew and will provide you with methods and tools to make the most of revision.

Three Goals, Four Elements

In her book *The Practice of Creative Writing,* Heather Sellers identifies **energy, tension, and insight** as being essential goals for any good piece of writing. These three characteristics make writing entertaining to our wit, rewarding to our spirit, and pleasurable to our senses. When writing lacks these things, the language goes slack, the purpose becomes hazy, and the reader disengages from the text. All three characteristics are necessary in engaging the reader and holding the reader's attention. We don't ever want our reader to be bored or confused. By identifying these three important characteristics, Sellers also illuminates the main goals writers have when revising. We ask questions and revise our poems in order to increase the energy, the tension, and the insight. And we do so by tending to four main elements: **clarity, language, structure, and speaker.**

To achieve energy, tension, and insight, the following questions may be asked in regard to each element:

1. ## Clarity

- Is it clear to the reader what this poem is about?
- Is it clear to the reader who the speaker is and to whom the poem is being addressed?

Is it clear to the reader where the poem is taking place / what its setting (location, time) is?
- Can diction be more precise?
- Are images clearly seen?
- Does the procession of images / the order in which they occur make sense logically?
- Are there places where expansion is needed?

2. Language

- Does the poem contain any clichés?
- Is the language fresh and surprising?
- Are there any places where the energy of the language goes slack?
- Are there any Latinate, multi-syllabic words that can be replaced with more Germanic, sense-inducing words?
- Is the language musical and entrancing?
- Are there places where assonance and alliteration can be increased?
- Are there any places where assonance, alliteration, or rhyme make the poem sound too sing-songy?
- Am I using too many articles and prepositions, which sap energy?
- Is any repetition of words ineffective?
- If using end-rhyme, are there places where the rhyme feels forced instead of natural and organic to the poem?
- Are there occasions where the syntax is so artificial that it could be classified what we might call “Stereotypical Indian speak”? (E.g.: You write poem good.) How about “Yoda speak”? (E.g.: Writing a poem are you?)
- Are there any uses of archaic language?
- Have I examined each word and verified that it is needed?
- Would any nouns work better as verbs?

3. Structure

- Do the lines create a pace appropriate to the poem's subject?
- Do line breaks make the most out of image and emphasis?
- Do the lines maintain energy or cause it to slack?
- Does each character in the poem belong?
- Is the opening of the poem surprising, alluring, and energetic? Does it make the reader want to keep reading?
- Does the ending of the poem "click shut" like a box?
- Can any content be removed?

4. ### Speaker

- What is the emotional center of the poem? Is it complex enough to create tension?
- Is the speaker's voice genuine in tone, or do some lines sound artificial?
- Are line lengths appropriate to the speaker's personality and voice?
- Is it clear what's at stake / what the risk is for the speaker of this poem?
- Is the tense (past, present, etc.) the most effective for the poem to produce energy?
- Are there places where the persona of the poem is explaining context instead of living in it?

Activity

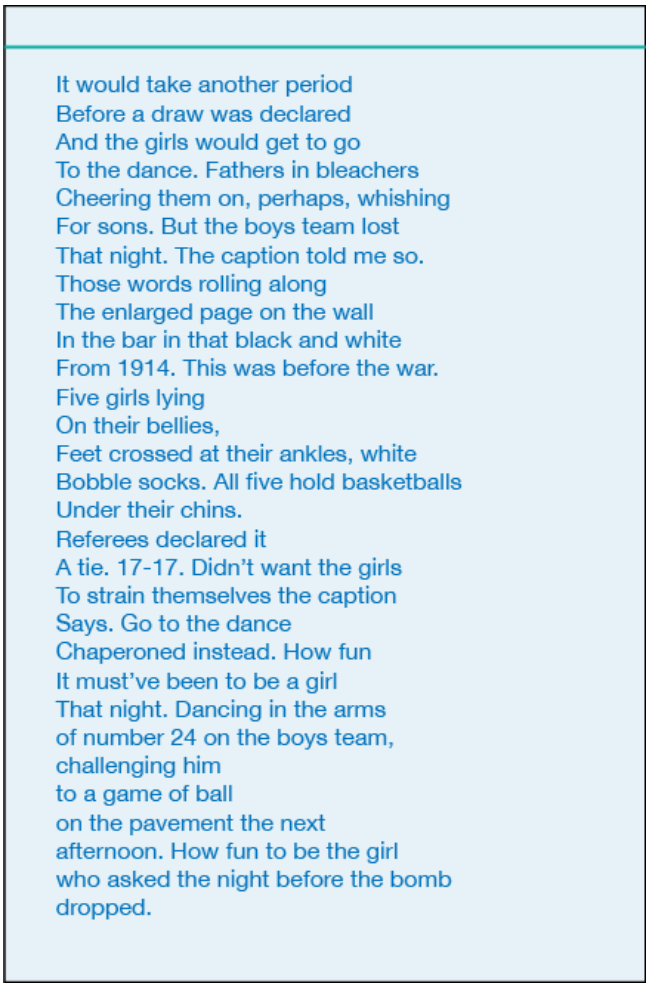
Diagram the intent of each line of one of your poems by writing what you hope the reader will experience from each line beside the line. How does each line advance the reader's experience of your poem?

A Revision Example

Sometimes where a poem ends up is not where you thought it would. As Naomi Shihab Nyehas said, sometimes you start to write about church and end up at

the dog races. You just never know—and that's the fun of it. The following is an example of a poem by Michelle Bonczec Evory, "19-19," and its stages of revision. When she lived in Washington State, Bonczec Evory often traveled to neighboring states. She explains:

> One weekend I was in Sandpoint, Idaho, eating lunch at a downtown pub, when I was caught by a black-and white photograph of a girl's basketball team. The girls, maybe eight of them, wore long skirts, bobby socks, and saddle shoes. Half of them lay on their stomachs in the front row with their ankles crossed behind them. The caption beneath the photograph, which appeared in a local newspaper in 1914, summarized the day. The girls had played a game that went into overtime, but the officials ended the game at a tie because there was a dance that night. This photograph became the trigger for my poem. Here is its first draft:



It would take another period
Before a draw was declared
And the girls would get to go
To the dance. Fathers in bleachers
Cheering them on, perhaps, whishing
For sons. But the boys team lost
That night. The caption told me so.
Those words rolling along
The enlarged page on the wall
In the bar in that black and white
From 1914. This was before the war.
Five girls lying
On their bellies,
Feet crossed at their ankles, white
Bobble socks. All five hold basketballs
Under their chins.
Referees declared it
A tie. 17-17. Didn't want the girls
To strain themselves the caption
Says. Go to the dance
Chaperoned instead. How fun
It must've been to be a girl
That night. Dancing in the arms
of number 24 on the boys team,
challenging him
to a game of ball
on the pavement the next
afternoon. How fun to be the girl
who asked the night before the bomb
dropped.

Bonczec Evory says:

When I look back on this poem, I can see the mental and artistic moves I was making in an effort to discover the bigger something to write about. I was clearly loosened up, non-judgmental. There is word play—"whishing"—as well as a feminist tone of sorts that begins with the thought that maybe the fathers of these girls wished (whished!) they were sons, which grows into: "Didn't want the girls / To strain themselves the caption / Says." I was very interested in what the climate would have been in regard to gender stereotypes. The poem reports on the actual photograph and my encounter with it, describing the girls in the photograph. Then there is an imaginative leap into what it might have felt like being one of these girls, and then the realization (as the writer) that 1914 would have been before the first World War. The poem is laced with sexuality and reproduction—the break on "period," the focus on couples at the dance. It also contains references to history, war, and gender issues. In addition, it is also has a setting and time. After writing this poem I remember taking a break, and when I returned to the computer I read the poem, printed it out, read it again, and started to crumple it up (I don't know why—I never do this). The poem seemed flat and cliché, forced, but as I crumpled it up I thought about the line "This was before the war," and I smoothed out the paper. That line —"This was before the war"—was musical. And I liked how the last two lines surprised with their hard enjambment: "the night before the bomb / dropped." I thought of the newspaper and the way we not only report information, but how we tell stories that begin to create history and identity. I thought about gossip and the way we spread those stories. And I thought of the way we imagine grandparents, grandchildren on their laps, telling family stories. I turned back to the computer and started to rewrite the poem from scratch. The following is the revision, with notes elucidating some of my thinking behind the decisions I made:

17-17	My aim here was for the title to allude to both the game's tie and to echo the sound of a year.

The game went into overtime that night.	The first line immediately sets the time and place, as well as the occasion for the poem.
The moon didn't stay to witness. On top	I pull the camera's eye outward, from the game to the moon and then inward to the mountain.
Of Mount Thoradour she couldn't wait to lose	Initially a word used to refer to the game, I heard in the language how "lose" is also frequently a term used when referring to one's virginity. The phrase echoes the themes of sport and sex already on my mind exposed in the poem's first draft.
Her virginity. This was before the war.	
Before he would leave her	Moving line by line, I tried to surprise myself with each turn of line. In this case, "leave her," like "lose" sounded like it go a different direction. I imagined how a man leaves his wife and children.
And a round belly, alone, until he	

returned,	
His left arm's ghost dangling along his side like a medal.	Stanza two and no figure of speech yet? Time for a simile.
He was lucky, he'd tell her, the scent of her hair Against his bruised cheek. The scent of her	This stanza zooms into the intimate moment between the couple. It also expands the senses to include smell.
Like oranges for the first time again. This Was before the dance where her little sister, who scored Four points in the game that night would sprain	The third stanza returns us to that one night, thinking about how so many lives circle one event. I kept diction in mind here, again stressing the sexual currents in the poem. And broke the line on "score," another word associated with both games and sex.
Her ankle while dancing with George Thyman, Her knee scraped red dripping from the split skin	Sounds like "hymen." That blatant. The next line's image continues along this theme.
But this was before photographic color.	The poem took this turn beyond

It kept her	my control. I guess I was thinking about newspapers.
Sister out for the rest of the season. The black	
And white their father took still hangs on the wall.	
Whenever her daughter sees the picture, her aunt's	I breach time and start to imagine the impact one night can have on a life.
Long caterpillar body flying up toward the basket,	
Her daughter remembers her mother pointing	In this stanza I can see myself holding my place in a sense, integrating the poem's logic, telling the story. You can see the language become clunky, but that's okay. The stanza lands an anchor for me so I can leap again in the next stanza.
To the photograph telling her that this was the night	
She decided to be, a spirit in her mother's womb.	
They had to get married to legitimize the child.	
Her sister came on crutches with Barry Lourdes.	

This was before women could vote, before blacks	Here I really take advantage of the repeating motif of time and history, using the phrase “This was before.”
Had rights. The last witch trial in New England	
Had not yet taken place or precedent in the lives	
Of witches’ daughters. That night	And we return again to that night. The camera moves in and out through time and space, from large to small, from large populations in history to an individual in history.
On the court, ball circling the rim of the basket, faltering,	The largeness of the previous lines calls for contracting back to the image of something specific.
Then rolling in, the whole world	
Felt right. She will remember this as she buries her sister.	

She will remember this as she buries her face	Again, listening to the language, I sense how “bury” is associated with not only body but “face,” as well.
In her sister’s husband’s empty sleeve, her niece	And this touches back to the soldier in stanza one.
Embracing the idea of the basketball that made everything	
Mean, everything possible, everything relate.	
This was before the war.	

As you see, much of the redrafting of this poem happened by listening to the language and making leaps while maintaining connections as I wrote. In the actual writing process, it is usually sound that drives my poems. Here, I needed to work slower and to pay attention to the logistics of the narrative as I invented family members through time and space. This attention to explaining resulted in using a lot of Latinate words whose main intent is to relay meaning. This second draft lay out the narrative. After reading this draft out loud, I immediately moved to a third draft to smooth out the sections where the language became clunky or Latinate. The poem went through one more revision, and then a workshop after it was basically finished. I remember several comments made in that workshop, but the suggestion that I took was to add a section in which we find out what happened to the missing mom. My professor had an issue with the metaphor of the body as a caterpillar scoring a basket, but I kept it as was because it made sense to *me*. The final version below was published in the

literary journal *Crazyhorse*.

19-19	1919 sounded more like a probable date given the subject matter.
The game went into overtime that night. The moon didn't	Pulling the moon up to the first line creates personification and contrast.
Stay to witness, having other places to be. On top Of Mount Thoradour she couldn't wait	I remember I was at a stage in my writing when I wanted to push strangeness and imagination. Here, the moon becomes a character in the narrative, too. The addition also creates a rhyme with "virginity" adding musical elements to the poem.
To lose her virginity. This was before the war. Before he would leave her	
Pregnant with Sierra, alone, until he returned,	Using names helps the reader stay grounded in a poem with many characters and references to them.

His left arm's ghost dangling from
his side like a medal.

He was lucky, he'd tell her, her hair

Against his bruised cheek. The scent
of her

Like orange groves for the first time
again. This

Was before the dance where her
little sister, who scored

The tying points in the game that
night would break

Her ankle while dancing with
George Thyman,

Her curious white bone pushing
through the skin

Of this world before being forced
back,

Sewn tight under the ivory-dry

I wanted to zoom in on something

cast. But this was before color. The black and white The newspaper took still hangs on their father's wall. Whenever Sierra sees the picture: her aunt's	and add an element of surprise and strangeness while echoing the theme of oppression in regard to women.
Long caterpillar body balancing up toward the basket, She remembers her mother pointing to the photograph saying *This was the night when the door to my womb unlocked*. When they married for Sierra, her sister came On crutches with George Thyman. This was before	The dialogue allowed me to smooth over the clunky language in the last draft, and make the moment of conception magical.

The last witch trial had taken place.
In dense forests

Skirts still fanned cautiously around
dark fires.

Camera zooms in and voila:
images.

And this was before the reunion,
before Sierra's

Mom would pull her blue Ford over
to the side of the road

I felt that adding a reason for Sierra's mom's disappearance would help the narrative. Plus it allowed me to integrate the theme of female oppression and violence even further into the poem.

To wait out the storm. It was before
the police would find her car

The next morning, empty, blood
still wet on the steering wheel's
rim,

Black windshield wipers, broken,
lying in the back seat.

This was when murder first entered
the town of Pulaski.

The newspaper ran a story on the
accident: Sierra's face

In color on the cover next to a
reprint of her missing mother.

This was before the picture of her
aunt that night on the basketball
court

Would fade. That night on the
court, ball rising from the arch of
her

Fingers, circling the rim of the
basket, wavering,

Then falling in, the whole world

Seemed right—she will remember
this feeling

When she buries the ghost of her
sister's body in an empty casket.

She will remember this as she
buries her face

In her brother-in-law's empty

sleeve, her niece embracing	
The idea of the basketball	These lines are a rewrite of language that didn't sound right to me: "everything / Mean, everything possible, everything relate."
That made everything possible, everything feel	
Secure. The way it fell through the chute, guided	The change to the ending came from following the lead of musical language. In developing the image I thought "guided by the net," but as I like to, I looked closer—"holes in the net."
By holes in the net. This was before the casket hit the ground.	
This was before the war.	That the casket enters is a poetic moment that I can only assume happened because of sound—net, basket, casket—and the love of the line "This was before." I was definitely in the zone.

Creating Your Own Aesthetic

The revision process of "19-19" reflects Bonzek Evory's own poetics at the time that she composed and revised it. If the first draft was given to any other poet, the revision would be completely different. As you begin to revise your poems, the most useful approach you can take is to be aware of the decisions you are making and understand why you are making them. I hope you will see the above examples as one of many ways one may approach a poem.

Additional Resources:

The Poet's Market. http://www.writersdigestshop.com/2015-poets-market

Poets and Writers. https://www.pw.org

NewPages.com https://www.newpages.com

Reading Your Poems to an Audience

Moyers, Bill. *The Language of Life*. *http://billmoyers.com/series/the-language-of-life-with-billmoyers-1995/*

The Library of Congress Archive of Recorded Poetry and Literature. http://www.loc.gov/poetry/recorded-poetry/

The Geraldine R. Dodge Poetry Video Archive. http://www.dodgepoetry.org/archive/video/

Poetry Everywhere with Garrison Keillor. PBS. http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/poetryeverywhere/

← Chapter Seven: Experimenti…

Additional Activities and Exe… →

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Additional Activities and Exercises

Writing poems

Free Verse:

Find two or three sentences of prose from a book, newspaper or magazine. Now transform this prose into poetry, by inserting line-breaks in the text in order to highlight whatever you consider most important or interesting. A line can be as short or as long as you want. You can change the original order of the sentences, but not the order of the words of any one sentence. As a mercy, you can repeat one line once. You are allowed to cut out words, but not add any.

- One of the lines, or a word from one of the lines, could be the title.
- Order the lines to direct the reader's attention.
- Does any particular line immediately suggest itself as an opening or final line?
- What strikes you as the most important section? This should be your focus. Let the words tell you what the poem is about.
  (from *What Is Poetry*) http://www.open.edu/openlearn/history-the-arts/culture/literature-and-creative-writing/literature/what-poetry/content-section-0

Free-write:

Part I: Make a list of five to seven things on which you are an "authority." You might be an authority on video games, getting speeding tickets, astrology, jewelry-making, baking bread, gardening, or shooting pool, etc.

Part II: Now choose one of those things and make a list of fifteen to twenty-five words that are specific to that particular activity. Words that people use when engaged in that activity that might otherwise be absent or infrequent from conversation.

Part III: Now do a five-minute freewrite from the prompt, “I Remember the Last Time It Rained” using as many words from your list as possible.

Free-write/roll questions:

a. What is something you would do if you didn’t care what anyone thought?

b. What’s something you’ve lost that you wish you still had?

c. Six minute, six word Sestina exercise

d. Abstract to Concrete-Asbstract words: turn them into concrete images (sound, sight, taste, smell, feel)*hope, doubt, fear, loneliness, passion, desire, faith, mystery, anger, joy, hatred, fear, ecstasy, growth, pain, calm, homesickness, resentment, patience, loyalty, freedom, bitterness, love*

e. What would you like to be for a day (inanimate)? Imagine you are an inanimate object: a planet, a mountain, a shoelace, a lake, a mirror. Write from the perspective of that thing. Explain what it is like to be you.

f. Faking It

g. What is your best survival skill?

h. What is something you would go back and do differently if you could?

i. What is something kind that someone has done for you that you will never forget, but that they may not even remember.

j. Make a new year resolution today—what would it be?

k. Getting at Metaphor

- Metaphor is not just a game that poets play, but it is a basic tool of human comprehension. We understand things as we understand the relationship between things. This exercise comes in three parts:

- First, use a two minute freewrite to describe the object in your group (each of you, individually) ***without*** making any comparisons of one thing to another. Read this aloud to one another, and point out where people have ended up making comparisons.
- Now, take this same object and conduct a five minute freewrite in which you use it to describe either: 1.) something you are afraid of, or 2.) one of your parents. In other words, indulge yourself in comparisons.
- Write a poem in which you are describing or explaining the object, but, really, you are writing about what frightens you or one of your parents. If time permits, discuss this process in your group.

l.List of five things that really matter to you—Explore one of them in a freewrite, why does it interest you, what is your experience with it, why does it matter, how would you like others to feel or think about this issue or situation?

m.Put together a form with twelve requirements (one from each student)—closing exercise, write that poem.

n. Five Easy Pieces

- imagine a person you remember or know well
- imagine a place where you find them

five sentences:

- describe the person's hands.
- describe something they are doing with the hands,
- use a metaphor to say something about some exotic place
- mention what you would want to ask this person,
- the person looks up or toward you, notices you there gives you an answer that suggest he or she only gets part of what you asked

o. Mystery: What is something that you wish you could know that you will never know (my dad's stories—was my grandfather an Irish mobster—did my lipstick fall in the toilet)

p. Dramatic Monologue: write a monologue from the perspective of one of the characters: What does my character want? Do they like or dislike anyone here? If they could speak their mind what would they say? Would they rather be anywhere else?

(the previous exercises are from Felecia Caton-Garcia)

Some Poetry Workshop Guidelines:

First, read each poem twice (at least). Once to get the general gist, mood, and feel of the thing, then again to begin the process of deep noticing.

Your job as a reader in a workshop is to help the writer see their own poem clearly. What you would do if it were your poem is not important—you have your own poems to write, but this is someone else's poem, and so you want to try to understand what their project and intent is.

Provide written and spoken commentary for each work-shopped poem. Be specific. Answer the questions of "why" and "how" as often as you can. Write on each other's poems to show where you are responding to exactly.

Consider these areas:

- **form**: what patterns do you notice? This might include line lengths, stanza lengths, repetition, rhyming, meter or rhythm. Does the form suit the content, in your opinion? Why or why not?
- **imagery**: are there sensory descriptions and details? Are they clear? Concrete (as opposed to abstract)?
- **language**: how has the poet used simile or metaphor? Is there word play? What is the diction like? (conversational, formal, slangy, regional?) Do the words seem carefully chosen? Why or why not?
- **intent**: what do you think the poet wants to achieve with this poem? How do you know? In what ways does the poem succeed in its purpose, and in what ways does it fall short?
- **questions**: what do you want to know, after reading this poem?
- **trouble spots:** where are you lost, confused, uncertain, or uninterested? Why?
- **favorite moments**: what words, phrase, lines, images, ideas, etc., appeal to you? Why?

(from Rebecca Aronson, adapted from multiple workshops and sources)

← Chapter Eight: Revision

Reading Aloud →

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Reading Aloud

Listen to the following poets read their poems and identify the approaches they use to pull you into their worlds:

Poetry Everywhere: "Tornado Child" by Kwame Dawes

Matthew Dickman, "Slow Dance"

Bob Hicok, "Calling him back after layoff"

Li Young Lee, "The Gift"

Shara McCullum, "Psalm for Kingston"

Naomi Shihab Nye, "One Boy Told Me"

Sharon Olds, "I Go Back to May, 1937"

Activity

Many of the poems above are taken from the PBS site "Poetry Everywhere." Browse the site and sample even more readings. Which poets are you drawn to? Why?

If we look at the characteristics that mark good readers, we frequently find these traits:

1. Confidence
2. A voice loud enough to hear
3. A slow to moderate pace
4. Heightened inflection, cadence, and intonation
5. Eyes lifted from the page

← Additional Activities and Exe…

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