



# **Naming the Unnameable: An Approach to Poetry for New Generations**



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*MICHELLE BONCZEK EVORY*



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ISBN: 978-1-942341-49-9 ebook

978-1-942341-50-5 print

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This publication was made possible by a SUNY Innovative Instruction Technology Grant (IITG). IITG is a competitive grants program open to SUNY faculty and support staff across all disciplines. IITG encourages development of innovations that meet the Power of SUNY's transformative vision.

Published by Open SUNY Textbooks, Milne Library (IITG PI)

State University of New York at Geneseo,  
Geneseo, NY 14454

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# Reviewer's Notes

STAN SANVEL RUBIN

This may be the most original and comprehensive text I've encountered for beginning poets. *Naming the Unnameable* is distinguished from "how to" books, or books intended to open a "creative path." It embeds its philosophy in its shrewd pragmatics, offering enthusiasm and encouragement in the guise of real world advice and an abundance of specific ways to think and do and be as a writer. The student is encouraged to learn by doing, but—and this seems crucial—is stimulated to be a more informed and thoughtful reader as well. *Naming the Unnameable* demystifies the fear of doing and the fear of failing by accepting both as givens and providing multiple tools for getting past them. Rich, accessible connections are made throughout. Encouragement begins at the welcoming Introduction. The chapters on Voice and on Revision are masterful. The final chapters on publication and public reading—topics always in student minds but rarely discussed in books—treat their potentially intimidating subject matter as satisfying realities, and give clear, common sense guidance. While attending to craft, the text offers a wealth of practical encouragement and fresh ideas—such as the suggestion to assemble a personal anthology of "bad" (unappealing) poems, or links to rejection letters garnered by ultimately successful writers. The whole is structured to be *useful*. The range of examples and commentary is shrewdly arranged to display a diversity of possibilities the reader is invited to assess, interact with, and respond to in his or her own way. The diverse poems discussed are held up not as shining models to revere, but as the products of various dedicated practitioners, and the author addresses the student writer as if she/he might be one. An exemplary technique is the way the author pairs accomplished poets of very different aesthetics and then uses her own voice to create a dialogue, so that the poet cited is not "the" authority. This opens a space for the student's response. *Naming the Unnameable* should find an enthusiastic reception by the instructor in the classroom, and certainly by student writers outside it as a personal resource well suited to the digital and information-saturated 21st century environment. The links alone are invaluable for a poet at any level, undergrad or graduate.

The author has done admirably the requisite sifting, focusing and contextualizing that enables the student to go further with a new sense of purpose and possibility.

*Stan Sanvel Rubin has taught poetry writing to undergraduate and graduate students for more than thirty years. He retired in 2013 as founding Director of the innovative Rainier Writing Workshop Low-Residency MFA program at Pacific Lutheran University and was the long-time Director of the SUNY Brockport Writers Forum and Videotape Library and the Brockport Summer Writing Workshops. He is a recipient of the SUNY Chancellor's Award for Excellence in Teaching. Author of four full-length collections of poetry, he writes regular essay reviews of poetry for the national journal, Water-Stone Review.*

## Reviewer's Notes

BRUCE SMITH

When Emily Dickinson was asked where she thought poetry came from she replied “Philology and Cherubim.” Michelle Bonczek Evory’s book seems to hold both language and angels in mind with the clear emphasis on the poem being delivered from sources both immediate and accessible.

*Naming the Unnameable* strikes the right tone for students and for instructors in that it enters the “poetry mind” in the act of making. It’s a creative writing text. It’s not interested in interpretation but the making of original poems. The text is clear in its goals, and its emphasis is with process and discovery oriented learning rather than, say, historical or critical learning. The preface states that it connects both to the “now” and to “the knowledge of what came before so we feel connected to poetry’s tradition and participate in its lineage.” Clearly the emphasis is on the now, the practitioner’s immersion in the craft and the making of poems from personal experience. The emphasis is on “spontaneity and freewriting.” I’m convinced that Michelle Bonczek Evory knows her stuff and I’m persuaded that she’s in touch with the New of the title’s New Generation.

*Bruce Smith was born and raised in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He is the author of six books of poems, The Common Wages, Silver and Information (National Poetry Series, selected by Hayden Carruth), Mercy Seat, The Other Lover (University of Chicago), which was a finalist for both the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize, Songs for Two Voices, and most recently Devotions, a finalist for the National Book Award, the National Book Critics Circle Award, and the LA Times Book Prize. He received the 2012 William Carlos Williams Award. His work has appeared in The New Yorker, The Nation, The New Republic, The Paris Review, The Partisan Review, Poetry, The American Poetry Review, and many others. Essays and reviews of his have appeared in Harvard Review, Boston Review and Newsday. He teaches at Syracuse University.*



## *Preface for Instructors*

I have approached the act of writing poetry from a practitioner's perspective, and as it is first and foremost an act of play, I have provided strategies and detailed practices that nurture and maintain creative states necessary for all stages of writing. First drafts are approached with an emphasis on spontaneity and freewriting. Revision is practiced with an open mind toward possibility. To balance the nature of poetry's need for spontaneity, I have placed an equal emphasis on the need for discipline and the benefits of reading widely and deeply to understand poetry's roots. In an effort to foster insight into what poetry actually is and what it does, I have included philosophical perspectives, linguistic origins of key terms associated with poetry writing, and the understanding of poetry expressed by a variety of American poets. I believe it is important for students to master both sides of the poetry writing equation—the ability to create and be in the now, and the knowledge of what came before, so that we may feel connected to poetry's tradition and participate in its lineage. In an effort to foster the skills, patience, and joy that comes from reading poems, I have included a chapter entitled “How to Read a Poem” that opens the book. For how can one write a poem if one cannot read one?

Throughout the book there is an emphasis on the five senses and honing our powers of attention and observation, which allow us to be finely attuned with the images and the language of our poems. I have integrated approaches for writing poetry from other genres—not just from poets—as writing poetry benefits from approaches used in writing fiction and nonfiction, as well as in the other arts like acting. In addition, I have detailed approaches for the entire life of a poem—from freewriting a first draft to submitting poetry for publication to reading poems out loud to an audience. I have approached the writing of poetry in the classroom as an act that focuses on the reader, with the intention of making the poem something to be shared with an audience. Included is an appendix with links to digital sources and recommendations for print sources that can enhance and deepen learning.

In writing this book I faced the challenge of not being able to include every poem and poet and essay and exercise and resource that I love and know could help students to learn and professors to teach. It is a project that I could've kept expanding and revising for the rest of my life! I have worked the best I could to produce a book that I believe offers effective advice for student poets and provides access to an incredible wealth of poetry that will teach and inspire. I

imagine this book working in tandem with a professor's favorite poems and resources. In order to provide students with a holistic understanding of the life of poetry, you might consider teaching this book in partnership with a full contemporary collection of poems, a copy of a recent literary journal, attendance of formal readings by published poets, and scheduled times for students to read formally to each other.

I hope this book on craft serves you and your students well, and that you, too, discover new poets and pleasures as you make your way through it.

## *Introduction: Our Natural Right 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 the dramatist and poet Percy Mackaye, “with imagination and the artistic instinct. Life stamps these out—and in only a few cases, those we call geniuses, do they rise, and become sculptors, artists, poets—great creators.”

### Discussion

What kind of artist were you when you were young? Did you paint, color with crayons, build things with blocks? What kind of 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 Mackaye 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 Mackaye says, “an artist”?

Answering this question is actually quite useful for us as 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 of the obstacles 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. The Merriam-Webster dictionary provides the following definition of “[play](#)”:

“ a : recreational activity; *especially* : the spontaneous activity of children  
 b : absence of serious or harmful intent : [jest](#) <said it in *play*>  
 c : the act or an instance of [playing](#) on words or speech sounds

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.

Imagine children playing. See two girls in a pink bedroom sitting at a tea table surrounded by stuffed animals. One of them wears a tiara. The other has wrapped a scarf around her head pretending to be a unicorn. The princess sips her tea and speaks of how warm the sun is on her shoulders, how the warmth turns everything blue into diamonds. The unicorn responds, “This scarf isn’t working. I don’t look enough like a unicorn.”

In this example, the girl with the scarf has broken the spell of imagination necessary for play. It is no different than when we criticize our own writing while in a state of creating—of playing—only in this case we are saying, “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, and for some, a poem may never be finished. And this is okay. The creative process can be expressed in a literally endless variety of ways. For as many people as there are living on this planet, there are as many, if not more, ways of expressing creative impulses. It is my 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, I share with you what I have seen work for myself, 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

Whether you write by hand in a notebook or type on a computer, you will need a space dedicated to writing. If you write on a computer, then I recommend purchasing a notebook for in-class exercises and note-taking, as many professors do not permit laptops or tablets in the classroom on a daily basis.

### Something with Which to Write

Some poets prefer blue pens, some black. Some pencils. Whatever your choice, just be sure to bring it with you to every class.

### A Folder

You will need to purchase a folder or binder for this class in order to keep yourself organized, to collect handouts, and to store pages of poems printed out from this book to discuss in class.

### Crayons

Several of the writing exercises ask you to draw with crayons. So, if you don't have any, consider purchasing a small set. Coloring is making a major comeback—for adults—as it has been shown to be a practice that fosters relaxation, focus, and creativity.

### 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's advice is simple yet insightful. Even more, she is totally right that writers experience the feeling of failure almost “Every. Single. Time.” we write. One of my students recently asked me, “Once you have a master's degree and extensive experience, does writing become easier?” Oh how I broke his heart I'm sure when I said, well, not really. Of course mechanics become easier. And you find ways to organize yourself 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. For me, I shudder at the blank page, am overtaken by waves of anxiety. I feel physically uncomfortable, like my skin is crawling with ants, and it's hard to focus and sit still at first. All I want to do is check my Facebook page. But if I commit myself to the mode of writing, lighten my inherent self-criticism, and permit myself to try to find “flow,” it becomes pleasurable.

Not only is forgiveness a necessary part of the writing process in the sense that we cannot translate exactly what we hope to from our minds to a page, but also in the sense that good writing deals with sensitive, hard-to-describe, difficult-to-face subjects, and I therefore find forgiving myself for past actions, thoughts, and desires—for feeling the way I actually do—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 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 little 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 (a link to which can be found in the resource section of this book):

“ 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 such as writing, it is a necessity.

### **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.” And so, as he did then, I do so now.

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.”



# Chapter One: Getting Started: The Nine Muses

Throughout history, humans have credited poems and other forms of art as coming from somewhere mystical, mysterious, and divine. We've envisioned angels, muses, embodiments of inspiration who have been gracious enough to bestow upon us the moments of clarity and imagination from which our poems have crystalized. 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.](#)" And if you had a very specific type of poem you wished to write, you could call upon the Nine Greek Muses (Calliope for epic poetry, Clio for history, Erato for music, and so on) for inspiration. 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 Michelle Kwansy explains. 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 describes 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, I'd like to introduce you to nine alternative muses who have been known to grant poems:

1. Journaling
2. Collecting
3. Reading
4. Freewriting
5. Meditating
6. Moving

7. Keeping a Writing Routine
8. Creating a Ritual
9. Dreaming

## 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. But, actually, a poem begins way before we begin to compose that first line. As we move through our day, our mind sorts through experiences, sensations, feelings, images, and ideas and files them in our 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. It 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.

Although we only remember a small percentage with our conscious minds, research shows amazingly that our brains retain every single thing we do, say, hear, taste, touch, and feel. There are some people, in fact, who have what's called [hyperthymesia](#) who consciously retain a much higher percentage of memories than is normal, and for whom the condition poses difficulties. These people are able to recall specific details of a day in their life by simply looking at or hearing a date. They cannot forget even the minutest detail. Imagine being able to tell me what you ate for lunch on a random day, say February 8, 2002. Or what you wore on July 23, 2011. Our brain is an amazing organ. But it is not perfect. And it is not under our control. We cannot always make it do what we want.

Perhaps when you were younger you kept a diary. One with a tiny gold key or an attached ribbon to tie around it. I remember writing in one first when I was in fifth grade. It was blue and came with a tiny lock. I used to keep a record of the weather and what I did every day. Then I formed a crush on an eighth-grader and I began to record our encounters in the cafeteria and in the hallway. I became an observer, and began to feel desire. Later, maybe in seventh grade, the purpose of my diary grew. I began to record not only my observations, but also my feelings and thoughts, and eventually I wrote my first poem. Who knows how this happens. We begin to indulge in writing and expression and soon we fine-tune our ears to the music, to the [prosody](#), of language. We become ever more aware of the sensual power of language and tighten the connection between how we feel and how we place these feelings in words; between what we see in our mind's eye and what we describe through words on a page; between what words on a page describe and what we see in our mind's eye.

As we grow into adulthood, journaling takes on different uses than tracking weather and crushes—especially if we are writers, thinkers, creators. We might start our day writing as the

poet William Heyen has done for decades; it is such a necessary habit, he has said to me, that he cannot go a day without it. We might write down our dreams or initial thoughts for the day, our plans. We might reflect on yesterday's events or expound on our ideas for our next series of poems.

### Discussion

Keeping a personal journal is a basic practice encouraged in all sorts of writing and art classes. Why do you think that is? Have you ever kept a journal? For what purpose? Did it have an effect on your creative writing?

Keeping a journal works to encourage poems in mainly two ways. First, it provides us time to practice writing and to play with words, while at the same time it uncovers potential material to bring to our 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, and I'd venture so far as to 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.

Secondly, in many circumstances, keeping a journal can clear our heads of everyday concerns and frustrations—we can vent in our journals, unload our thoughts and memories that may be standing in the way of our imagination's flow. If we use the journal to essentially dump the itty-bitty concerns eating away at us, we clear the path for new thoughts and relax enough to forget our worries and play.

If you are a lover of objects, one of the joys of keeping a journal is being able to purchase an attractive book in which to write. I find the feel of the journal, the smell of its cover and its colors to be enjoyable. It makes me feel special. Perhaps it's the ten-year-old me still dazzled by my first diary, but perhaps you, too, will discover this pleasure as you begin to keep your own. Of course, today, it may be more practical for you to type on a screen. And if that works for you, then by all means let it. I have actually experimented with both and found each to have its own advantages.

### Activity

Purchase a journal or notebook and commit to writing in it every day for one week.

It might help to schedule this activity for the same time each day. If you would like to experiment with typing a journal instead, create a document folder for your journal and save your writing there. Either way, try to write in a place that is quiet and pleasing—a coffee shop, a library, a comfy chair on the front porch. At the end of the week assess how your journal is working for you. Are you writing with the intention to create poems? Or are you venting? Either way, how has journaling affected your imaginative flow? Your thoughts? Your actions?

## Collecting

A journal can be very useful in helping us to collect material for when we have time to and are ready to actually 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.

As mentioned earlier, 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—oh how many poets are surprised by pockets of words they find on napkins and pieces of envelopes!—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.

If carrying around a pen and paper is awkward, another way to collect ideas and tidbits is to send yourself text messages or emails. I have found recording myself on my iPod or cell phone also handy.

### Activity

Carry around a small notebook and 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 the dining hall. Write down a phrase you like from a poem or a story you read, 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 remember 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.

While having coffee, take your earbuds out and engage the world, mine it 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.

Many beginning writers make the mistake of trying to compose poems entirely in their heads, forgetting that as soon as we actually start writing the direction our words take are guaranteed to change. Keeping a collection notebook helps with these obstacles. Therefore, I encourage you to write little things down and to not think too much about them. Do not try to write poems in your head—this is not *writing* poems; it is thinking poems. Allow your full imaginative process to come forth when you can actually write.

## Reading

For many, the act of writing is wed to the act of reading. When I can't seem to get a groove on while writing, I read. 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. Usually it doesn't take long for me to be moved to write. Sometimes it does, and that's okay, too.

The poet Richard Hugo and I differ on the matter of reading. In his introduction to *The Triggering Town* he writes:

“ Many writers and many writing teachers believe reading and writing have a close and important relationship. Over the years I have come to doubt this. Like many others, I once believed that by study one could discover and ingest some secret ingredient of literature that later would find its way into one's own work. I've come to believe that one learns to write only by writing.

I do grant him the point that that one cannot simply become a good writer by reading and not writing. But, of course, one wouldn't be much of a *writer* if one wasn't *writing*. He continues:

“ I'm not trying to undermine the study and teaching of literature. Far from it. I think literature should be studied for the most serious of all reasons: it is fun. For a young writer it should be exciting as well.

I believe that a writer learns from reading possibilities of technique, ways of execution, phrasing, rhythm, tonality, pace. Otherwise, reading is important if it excites the imagination, but what excites the imagination may be found in any number of experiences (or in a lack of them). Reading may or may not be one.

Oh, pshaw, Mr. Hugo. I am here to tell you, dear students, that reading is, in fact, important to learning to become a good poet. It introduces you to approaches and moves that you oth-

erwise would not have imagined or made. It introduces you to a wider world of the poetic imagination. And it introduces you to the standards of good writing. It saves you time by giving you your predecessors' experiences to build upon. Imagine trying to learn any art with no knowledge of what came before. Imagine playing the drums or piano and aiming to compose a symphony, or being handed a pot and fork with the aspirations of cooking a soufflé but without ever having seen or tasted a soufflé before. 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, 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.

### Activity

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?

As an added more in-depth assignment, write a 100-300 word response to each poem explaining what it is about the poem that represents you. What have you learned about writing from these poems?

When we read in this way, we say we are “reading like a writer.” What does it mean to read like a writer? Well, for starters, it means we are *actively* reading, paying close attention to the decisions the poet made when composing and revising the poem as though we ourselves were the poet who wrote it. We consider the choices made concerning line, tone, image, diction, metaphor, form. We 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**?
- What does this title do for the reader's experience of the poem?

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

Here is an example of an imitation poem. After reading it and the imitation, discuss what similarities you see between the two poems line by line. The original poem is William Heyen's "The Tooth":

### **The Tooth**

After the beheading, they found  
the one gold tooth in Custer's mouth.  
They propped open his jaws,  
cut away his upper lip,  
& looked into the tooth in firelight.  
It was like a small television  
tuned to the news, & a white man  
in a white suit was already  
stepping down onto the moon.

*Copyright ©William Heyen. "The Tooth" is licensed CC-BY-NC-SA.*

### **The Bullet**

After the hanging, they felt  
a hard object in John Brown's arm.  
They sliced open his shoulder,  
  
dug into his flesh,  
& looked at the bullet under torchlight.  
It was like a zeppelin  
  
crashing into the earth, & a black man

dressed as a King was already  
rising from the flames.

### Activity

Using the above poem by William Heyen and my imitation as an example, 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.

Now, reading need not be limited to poetry or literature. In fact, it must 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 literature, I read cooking magazines, *National Geographic*, books about gardening, non-fiction books about many, many things—insects, salt, American history, mythology, religion, anthropology, crop circles, the topography of Montana. 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, Aboriginal Australians, astronomy, coral. Adopt this book into your writing life by committing to write a poem inspired by your new knowledge. Alternatively, you might collect images and words, phrases and ideas into your collection journal as described in the last section and integrate them into your poems.

## 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—it is 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.

When we freewrite we do not judge. We simply let what occurs to us in our minds come straight out to the page. If our minds go blank we may write, “I cannot think of anything to write my mind is blank,” and so on until a new direction arises. The main point, however, is to not edit as we write—good advice for whenever we write anything, as writing and editing are two completely different steps in the process. If we edit while we write we set up blockages. Rarely does any good writing take shape on a first try. As Ernest Hemingway so elegantly phrased it, “The first draft of anything is shit.” Instead, we must work our way through ideas and words and ways of explaining and showing, and then revise to find the best words in the best order. But first we must allow the seed to germinate in all that fertile soil to which Hemingway so eloquently refers, and tend to its sprouting and growth.

But I am already ahead of myself. Freewriting does not have to result in a poem. Rather, it is one step in the process of coming to a poem. You may do a freewrite exercise and simply feel more relaxed without any desire to sift back through what you wrote, like writing in a journal. And that’s fine. As Elbow explains:

“

Practiced regularly, it undoes the ingrained habit of editing at the same time you are trying to produce. It will make writing less blocked because words will come more easily. You will use up more paper, but chew up fewer pencils.

It is, in a sense, an exercise. Like playing scales on the piano or running sprints. 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. To put it simply, it is a type of play.

I like to think of the results of freewriting as blocks of clay we can shape. A block of clay may become a beautiful sculpture, but much work need be done before it emerges and is smoothed into art. So it is with our writing. You can’t give up or place the pressure of perfection on the beginning stages of creation. Give it time and attention and the poem will naturally evolve.

#### Activity

Choose from one of the following 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?

## 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. It 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 easier into the mind and the body permits the mind to enter a flow state.

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, we do not enter these states 100 percent of the time.

So, what can we do to improve our chances of finding flow? If you are a runner, you train daily. You run sprints, lift weights. You keep an encouraging voice in your head and a positive attitude. Not only do you prepare your body when you are exercising on the trail or at the gym, but you also prepare at rest, at home, at work. You regulate your diet watching what you eat and drink. You monitor your stress. You track how long and well you sleep. Well, what if you don't want to be better runner, but a better writer? How do you train? Like with any sport, instrument, or art, you train not only on the field, but off of it, as well. Med-

itation, yoga, prayer are all ways that we can quiet our minds and make focusing easier when we write.

In order to meditate, you do not need to join a class or buy a yoga mat. You do not need to join a church. But you can do any and all of these things if you wish. Whatever works for you. In its simplest form, meditation is focused attention. Conscious movement, conscious stillness. Awareness of your thoughts and acceptance of them. It is, according to Wikipedia, “an internal effort to self-regulate the mind in some way.” It may be done sitting, standing, reciting a mantra, practicing silence, or it may include rituals and objects like prayer beads. In short, “there are dozens of specific styles of meditation practice, and many different types of activity commonly referred to as meditative practices.”

### Activity

Quiet the room and dim the lights. Sit on the floor cross-legged or lie comfortably back on the floor with a pillow under your head and a pillow under your knees. Close your eyes. Breathe deeply in through your nose and into your belly. Your belly should feel relaxed and puff out with your breath. Now, hold the breath in for three seconds, and release the breath slowly as you exhale through your mouth. Repeat five times.

Return to a more relaxed breath: in through your nose, out through your nose. Picture a place of peace you know well. Somewhere where you have felt relaxed and whole. Perhaps it is on top of a mountain or beside a river. Perhaps it is on a towel at a beach. Imagine yourself there. Feel the air, the sun. Smell the water, the trees.

Starting with your forehead, tense your muscles, hold for a count of five, and release. Next, your eyelids. Move down your body like this all the way to your toes. Keep breathing deeply. Move to the cheeks, mouth, neck, shoulders, and so forth. Stay focused on your breath, your body, your peaceful place.

If your mind wanders or nags, it's fine. Let it, but listen from a distance. You are not attending to that now. Attend to your breath, your body, your peaceful place. Those other thoughts will be there later; you can let them go for now. Only your breath, your body, your place. Stay here for a while, 5-10 minutes.

Then, begin to wiggle your toes, flex your feet. Move your muscles slowly up from the soles of your feet to the crown of your head. Open your eyes. Take your time rising. When you stand, reach your arms to the sky, stretch. Refocus.

You can perform this basic meditation exercise whenever you feel the need to refocus, relax, or you can perform it upon waking. For a more in-depth exploration, I recommend visiting your local bookstore or library, or checking out a site like Wikipedia and surfing the net for meditation web sites that interest you and provide you with ideas for practice.

## 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. It is reported that he 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. Simply carry a notebook with you to collect images or ideas. Given the power of rhythm as observed by Stevens and Hirsch, it is no surprise that in my own experience I tend to leave hiking trails with ideas for poems. Surrounded by the trees, mountains, rocks, and mosses, by the river and birdsong, the skitter of small mammals, my mind consistently falls into a writing rhythm on the trail.

I'm not sure if this is due to the new heightened awareness to health in this country, but I know many writers who run 5Ks, 10Ks, half, and even full marathons. Maybe we naturally like to punish ourselves (writing can be so hard!) or maybe all of the oxygen in the brain is good for the imagination. Either way, creating opportunities for your mind and body to speak with one another is a proven way to inspire writing, and it's good for your health.

### Activity

Go for a walk around your neighborhood and observe the day. What is happening outside your home? What are the neighbors doing? What is newly sprouted or drooping? Dictate what you are seeing in your mind and imagine it in rhythm with your steps. If you are a runner, do the same when you go for a jog in the park. If you mutter something of interest do not be afraid to stop and jot it down.

## Keeping a Writing Routine

In order to be a good writer you should follow these rules:

- Always write at night.
- Always write in the morning.
- Always write in the afternoon.
- Write everyday for 15 minutes.
- Write everyday for three hours.

- Write on weekends all day long.
- Write only with blue pens.
- Write only with black pens.
- Always type your first drafts.
- Use only pencils.

Whatever your preference, whenever you write, it can be helpful to you as a writer to have a routine. Like physically training your quadriceps 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.

### Early Birds

When it comes to creating a routine, the poet William Stafford and many others will argue that writing in the morning is best. In his *Contemporary Authors Autobiography Series* essay, Stafford explains that in the early morning hours “something is offering you a guidance available only to those undistracted by anything else.” And he should know, as it is a practice he’s kept for over fifty years.

I remember when I was a graduate student at Eastern Washington University and the poet Jonathan Johnson committed himself to working in the morning. He was a full-time professor with a young daughter and wife. I remember him explaining that it was the only time when he could devote himself fully to the process, before the other things in his life asked for his time and attention. The morning has its advantages. It’s before one is bogged down with responsibilities and also a time when the subconscious mind is closest to the conscious: upon waking. Writing in the morning might offer you deeper images and surreal subject matter.

Like Jonathan Johnson, [Henry David Thoreau](#) would also cast a vote for writing in the morning. In his book *Walden*, Thoreau praises and expounds on the high qualities of mornings and being *awake* both physically and spiritually.

### Lunch Poems

In 1964, Lawrence Ferlinghetti’s *City Lights* published [Frank O’Hara’s](#) collection of poems entitled *Lunch Poems*. Many of the poems were composed during O’Hara’s lunch hour while sitting in Times Square. Many were written in the moment and were focused on events happening in those moments. The tone of the poems is conversational and easy-going. Use [this link](#) to read an example of one.

I don’t think O’Hara only wrote during his lunch hour, but here it makes a point—write when you can, regularly. O’Hara built a collection of poems; maybe you can, too.

Another New Yorker who thrived creatively during the afternoon is [Walt Whitman](#). He would extend his own lunch hour, often not returning to the newspapers where he worked (there are multiple because he was frequently fired, perhaps for taking too many lunch breaks). Instead, he took notes for images of things he observed in the busy streets of Manhattan and all of its diversity and bustle.

### Activity

Write your own series of lunch poems. Every day for a week, break out pen and paper or a keyboard and write a poem or notes toward a poem about what's happening around you. Describe the people and what they do. Zoom in on the scents and sounds. Recreate what you're eating on the page through language. Make your readers' mouths water. Yum!

### Night Owls

Still, for others, it is easier to write at night, despite W. H. Auden's claim that "Only the 'Hitlers of the world' work at night; no honest artist does." And if you choose to give this a try, you will be joining [Bob Dylan](#), [Franz Kafka](#), and [Ann Beattie](#). Similar to morning, the night can be quiet and solitary. The rest of the world asleep, you feel focused on your poetry, your job and responsibilities for the day done. Maybe you collect ideas throughout the day and pour them into your poems at night. It all depends on you and what works best for your schedule and for your senses—people's bodies are different and run on different schedules. For more on the issue, check out Kathryn Schulz who extrapolates on her own experience as a night owl in her essay "[Writing in the Dark](#)" originally published in *New York Magazine*.

### Discussion

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? Include in this discussion your professor's experience. When does he/she write and how did he/she come to do so?

### 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. It is well-known but not known to what degree that Samuel Taylor Coleridge wrote poems while on opium. The poet William Heyen lights a candle before he writes. What-

ever the ritual, the purpose of it 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. . .

### Discussion

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?

### Activity

Create a writing space, or visit multiple coffee shops, changing what you write by where you write. For example, work on a series of poems about your travels at the kitchen table but write only about your relationships in the student union. Try this for a short period of time and note how the setting and ritual affect your mindset and focus.

## Dream

Whether it’s staring out a window and daydreaming or keeping a dream journal, exploring the strange images in our mind can also inspire writing, especially, if you’re an avid dreamer, those images we experience at night. When we dream, our brains make connections that our conscious mind does 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](#).) 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.” And just imagine what effect dreams had on *The Twilight Zone* writer [Rod Serling](#)?!

Throughout human history, cultures have relied on dreams for knowledge and insight. Some Native Americans, for instance, believed that their ancestors visited them in their dreams. The Greeks and Romans believed that gods and goddesses visited them in their dreams. Many

religions connected dreams with supernatural or divine intervention. And Sigmund Freud famously understood dreams to be an expression of our inner-most desires and fears.

In recent times, scientific research and experiments have shown that while our bodies sleep, our dreaming mind sorts through the day's stimuli not only organizing them, but developing them. In the article "While You Were Sleeping," Jennifer King Lindley explains how sleeping heals the body, enhances memory, reduces stress, and boosts creativity. Good news for poets!

John Steinbeck was right when he wrote, "It is a common experience that a problem difficult at night is resolved in the morning after the committee of sleep has worked on it." That "committee," explains Dr. Jessica Payne, director of the Sleep, Stress, and Memory Lab at the University of Notre Dame, consists "of billions of busy neurons examining patterns between existing knowledge and new memories to develop innovative solutions." She continues, "When you dream in REM sleep, the rational control center of the brain is deactivated. This produces an amazingly creative state, and you are able to come up with ideas that you would not be able to when you are awake."

This knowledge must have been known to the group of French writers and artists who, in the 1920s, began the [Surrealist Movement](#). Interested in turning away from logic and reason, the Surrealists turned toward the subconscious and the inexplicable. They were interested in dreams, freewriting, random selections of images and phrases from various places that when juxtaposed would evoke a strange, unfamiliar sense of knowing that could not be explained rationally. Their work is surprising, startling, captivating and contemporary poetry has been very much influenced by their approaches and aesthetic. The poem "The Painted Couple" by [Matthew Rohrer](#) is a good example of a recent use of surrealist technique:

### **The Painted Couple**

A couple paints themselves like the sky so no one will see them.  
 In this way they hope to stay in bed all day.  
 In the evenings, they walk as if invisible.  
 They are overjoyed.  
 No eyes to either meet or avoid on the sidewalk,  
 perhaps perfect solitude at last.

Everyone stares. A couple, naked and painted like the sky,  
 walk down the street holding hands.  
 They stop to look in the windows of stores.  
 They point at the shoes. They point at old beads.  
 The birds rouse themselves from their roosts  
 and fly at the couple.  
 Dozens of drowsy birds moving as one,  
 diving at the couple painted like the sky.

The postman stares from his left-handed truck

and the tavern proprietor stares from behind his stack of matchbooks  
 and their friends stare from a passing Volkswagen  
 and a teacher stares from a copy shop, over the lid of a copier,  
 and the policeman stares from his flashing car.

The couple who painted themselves like the sky  
 stand before the magistrate, in clothes.  
 He is speaking. His mouth opens and closes  
 under his wig.

Wisps of cirrus clouds slip out from under the man's cuffs.  
 the Pleiades rise and fall under her dress.

*"The Painted Couple", from A HUMMOCK IN THE MALOOKAS: Poems by Matthew Rohrer. Copyright ©1995 by Matthew Rohrer. Used by permission of W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.*

A couple painting themselves like the sky is, well, impossible in real life, but not impossible in a poem. It evokes the painting of [Rene Magritte](#), himself a surrealist, and known for painting people who look like the sky. It is easy to imagine this leap of the imagination arising from a dream. Note the strangeness of the image of the magistrate in the **penultimate** stanza: "He is speaking. His mouth open and closes / under his wig." This description is strange. The magistrate is described in a mechanical way that makes him feel distant, foreign. Rather than saying he "talks" or "speaks," we are given the image of his mouth opening and closing like an inanimate object "under his wig," which adds a further sense of fakeness or artificiality. These details create a surreal image in our mind's eye and make the magistrate feel cool and far away in the poem. Rohrer is a contemporary writer, but you can learn more about surrealism by researching writers at the roots of the movement such as [Andre Breton](#), [Stéphane Mallarme](#), and [Guillaume Apollinaire](#).

In addition to examining poems that use surrealistic techniques, you might also consider checking out art. One example of a piece of art, housed at the [MOMA](#) in New York, that strikes me personally was crafted by [Meret Oppenheim](#) after a conversation she had at a Paris cafe with [Pablo Picasso](#) and [Dora Maar](#), when Oppenheim was wearing a bracelet covered with fur. The result was a [teacup covered with gazelle fur](#). The MOMA web site is a great source for viewing surrealist and Modern art.

### 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.

### Activity

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

## *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 of 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 Rukeyser 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 Rukeyser describes as the “universe of emotional truth.” So how exactly does one listen with his or her emotions?

Reading is one of the most intimate forms of connection we can have with someone. We take their words—their breath—into ourselves. We shape the words with our own bodies and, too, give them life with our own breath. Reading poetry, we breathe in what a poet breathes out. We share breath. The words and their meanings become part of our body as they move through our mind, triggering sensations in our bodies that lead to thoughts. And through this process, we have experiences that are new and that change us as much as any other experience can.

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 I was an undergraduate at SUNY Brockport, my 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 it is how we read a poem that 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.

## Be a Good Listener

### Discussion

I’m willing to bet 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 we associate with good listening skills and share your experiences of people who demonstrate these skills. In contrast, what makes someone a “bad listener”? How can we relate these concepts to reading a poem?

Being a good listener requires many of the same traits as being a good reader. When we listen to someone speak, we listen to their emotions and ideas through meaning and tone, body gestures, and emphasized words. We do not judge. We do not interrupt. We may touch the speaker’s arm to express care. We certainly use facial expressions and gestures to let the speaker know we are listening and understanding, that we are advancing emotionally alongside them with each turn of the story. Before offering advice, condolences, or other reactions, we as listeners try to see their perspective and its complexities from their side. We take our identities out of the equation and place their concerns in the middle of our 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 readers, it is our role to listen to the speaker of the poem and to *embody* the words the speaker speaks with our own self as if we are the ones who’ve spoken. We as readers identify with the speaker, with the voice of the poem. We listen with what John Keats called a “negative capability,” meaning we are capable of erasing our 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 place of perspective, a place which can be physical and/or psychological. As we as readers move word to word, line to line, we must allow the universe of the poem to take root in our imaginations as if it is the only universe that exists. When we are open to the words' music and meaning, the poem has the potential to envelop our 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, as Rukeyser explains, because of the musical language, one 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

### The Title Matters

Reading a poem, we start at the beginning—the title, which we allow to set up an expectation for the poem in us. 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. How would you describe the tone of each of the following titles?

#### Discussion

Look at the following titles and discuss the reactions and expectations they create:

- Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Evening
- Happiness
- Wishes for Sons
- Riot Act, April 29, 1992
- Reckless Sonnet
- Pissing Off the Back of the Boat into the Nivernais Canal
- How Much Is This Poem Going to Cost Me?
- The Turtle
- A Blessing
- Girl Friend Poem #3

- Sex at Noon Taxes
- The Tree of Personal Effort

### The First Time Through

Upon a first reading, it's important to get an idea of what it is you are entering. *Read* the poem out loud. *Listen* for the general, larger qualities of the poem like tone, mood, and style. *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:

1. What is my first emotional reaction to the poem?
2. Is this poem telling a story? Sharing thoughts? Playing with language experimentally? Is it exploring one's feelings or perceptions? Is it describing something?
3. Is the tone serious? Funny? Meditative? Inquisitive? Confessional? Here is a list of tonal descriptors that may help you pin down what you're hearing:
  - Abrasive, accepting, admiring, adoring, angry, anxious, apologetic, apprehensive, argumentative, awe-struck
  - Biting, bitter, blissful, boastful
  - Candid, childish, child-like, clipped, cold, complimentary, condescending, critical
  - Despairing, detached, didactic, direct, discouraged, doubtful, dramatic
  - Fearful, forceful, frightened
  - Happy, heavy-hearted, horrified, humorous
  - Indifferent, ironic, irreverent
  - Loving
  - Melancholic, mysterious
  - Naïve, nostalgic
  - Objective, optimistic, peaceful, pessimistic, playful, proud
  - Questioning
  - Reflective, reminiscent
  - Sad, sarcastic, satirical, satisfied, seductive, self-critical, self-mocking, sexy, shocked, silly, sly, solemn, somber, stunned, subdued, sweet, sympathetic
  - Thoughtful, threatening
  - Uncertain, urgent

- Whimsical

These initial questions will emotionally prepare you to be a good listener. When we come to a text, though we release ourselves of any preconceived judgments, we do come prepared emotionally. Picking up a book of fiction is different than opening a book of nonfiction essays. Within us there is an ever-so-slight yet important preparation. Think about it. Although both nonfiction and fiction share similar writing tropes, how would you feel if someone told you that the nonfiction book you are reading—the one that brought you to tears—is not nonfiction, but actually fiction? Most people become upset. It feels like you've been lied to. To put it another way, think about how differently you prepare to engage with a performance depending on its genre. How do you set yourself up differently for a stand-up comic as opposed to an opera? Not only are the effects of the performance different, but the way we emotionally prepare ourselves to receive them is also different.

Let's begin to apply our approaches to the following poem by Stephen Dunn:

### **The Insistence of Beauty**

The day before those silver planes  
came out of the perfect blue, I was struck  
by the beauty of pollution rising  
from smokestacks near Newark,  
gray and white ribbons of it  
on their way to evanescence.

And at impact, no doubt, certain beholders  
and believers from another part of the world  
must have seen what appeared gorgeous—  
the flames of something theirs being born.

I watched for hours—mesmerized—  
that willful collision replayed,  
the better man in me not yielding,  
then yielding to revenge's sweet surge.

The next day there was a photograph  
of dust and smoke ghosting a street,  
and another of a man you couldn't be sure  
was fear-frozen or dead or made of stone,

and for a while I was pleased  
to admire the intensity—or was it the coldness?—  
of each photographer's good eye.

For years I'd taken pride in resisting  
the obvious—sunsets, snowy peaks,  
a starlet's face—yet had come to realize  
even those, seen just right, can have  
their edgy place. And the sentimental,

beauty's sloppy cousin, that enemy,  
 can't it have a place too?  
 Doesn't a tear deserve a close-up?  
 When word came of a fireman  
 who hid in the rubble  
 so his dispirited search dog  
 could have someone to find, I repeated it  
 to everyone I knew. I did this for myself,  
 not for community or beauty's sake,  
 yet soon it had a rhythm and a frame.

*"The Insistence of Beauty", from THE INSISTENCE OF BEAUTY: POEMS by Stephen  
 Dunn. Copyright © 2004 by Stephen Dunn. Used by permission of W. W. Norton & Com-  
 pany, Inc.*

Begin with the title: "The Insistence of Beauty." What does this title do to you? What kind of expectations and tone does it set up?

Perhaps you expect a poem about beauty, or because it is the "insistence of" you may feel determination, or like beauty is up against some other force. Or maybe you expect a poem about art.

Then ask and begin to answer these questions:

1. What is my first emotional reaction to the poem?
  - There is no one answer to this, obviously. But maybe you feel loss. Or hope. Or desperation. Or sadness. Or admiration. Maybe you're confused or feel a combination of these.
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: "The day before"; "I watched for hours"; "the next day." The speaker is sharing emotional reactions to something, as well as his actions to an event.
3. Is the tone serious? Funny? Meditative?
  - It seems serious, inquisitive, and confessional. It's not humorous and 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, we respond one way to the first two lines' image, and another way after its turn to the third line:

The day before those silver planes  
 came out of the perfect blue, I was struck  
 by the beauty of pollution rising  
 from smokestacks near Newark

In the second line, the phrase "I was struck" forms an image with what precedes before it can form an image with what follows. This second line leaves us with the image of the speaker being struck by something. It might be different for you, but because I am holding the image of a plane in my mind, a plane being a large and physical object, I immediately imagine the speaker being "struck" physically by an object. Therefore, we momentarily hold the image of being struck physically: "The day before those silver planes / came out of the perfect blue, I was struck."

But when we move to the third line, the image changes. The speaker is no longer struck by an object, but by an emotion or idea: the "beauty of pollution rising." Although we may think of pollution as ugly, here we are being told that it is beautiful. The word reverses our assumptions; maybe we see in our mind's eye the clichéd image of smog rising from smokestacks and ask, "How is that beautiful?" Or maybe we think about how smog makes the colors of sunsets more intense. Either way, the speaker is telling us that he sees pollution as beautiful even with all of its complications (it's harmful, smelly, ugly, etc.). Rather than leave us with only the speaker's judgement of pollution, the next lines create for us an image of that "beauty" so we can see it, too: "gray and white ribbons of it / on their way to evanescence." These last two lines help us make sense of the idea that pollution is beautiful. The ribbons evaporating maybe *are* somehow beautiful. If we disconnect our knowledge from the image so we do not think about how the ribbons are smoke, if we simply see the visual the smoke makes: "ribbons...on their way to evanescence," we experience what the speaker experiences: beauty. Or, perhaps, what the speaker sees as beautiful is the pollution disappearing. From this perspective, the speaker would see not the gray and white ribbons as beautiful, but the gray and white ribbons *disappearing* as beautiful.

Tonally, the words "perfect" and "struck" stand out for different reasons in the first two lines—one for meaning, one for sound. When something is "perfect" we feel admiration, maybe the need to protect it. Since nothing really is perfect, it also sounds a little romantic, subjective, or too good to be true, which may also produce tension as we know perfection isn't real, or doesn't last. The word "struck" is a harsh, violent, physical word. And ending the line on it emphasizes it even more. To be struck by something suggests shock, surprise, immediacy, and change.

In addition to these two words, the first phrase sets a tone, too, of expectation. We know something significant is being made of the planes because they are marking a day: “The day before those silver planes.” The event is important enough to refer to it in such a way. This is how we speak of big events. The day we were married. The day we went swimming. The day those silver planes came out of the blue.

The tone in the first stanza immediately produces a connection between the speaker and reader. We feel the speaker is disclosing something to us, or divulging something important. As we continue through the poem the speaker’s tone becomes inquisitive as he asks questions:

—or was it the coldness?—

that enemy,  
can’t it have a place too?

Doesn’t a tear deserve a close-up?

Is he asking questions of the reader? To himself? A bit of both? We journey with him on his seeking.

### Discussion

Read through Dunn’s poem and identify the rest of the images. Discuss how each image makes you feel. To what words or images is your attention drawn? What associations do you make from them?

### 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 question that is helpful to ask is: What does *x* remind me of? Or, what associations am I making? Usually the connections I would suggest making would be within the poem itself and the patterns it creates—between lines, images, repetitive words or themes, **diction** (word choice)—but in Dunn’s poem, before we can make connections within the poem, we are actually reminded of something outside of the poem. In the first stanza, the two planes near Newark and two ribbons evaporating may remind you of the iconic image of the September 11th attacks on The World Trade Center in New York City. This an **allusion** (an indirect reference) to that event, as suggested by the second stanza: “believers from another part of the world / must have seen what appeared to be gorgeous.” Making this connection provides us with a context for the poem’s occasion. Maybe we begin to ask, “How can the attacks on the World Trade Center and its subsequent collapse be seen as gorgeous?”

You may be wondering what happens if you didn’t make that connection. Will you misread

Dunn's poem? In a poem, allusions like this usually aren't usually necessary if the poem makes use of all the other elements of poetry successfully. And in Dunn's poem we are actually given enough, I would say, to have a sufficient experience if the allusion isn't made. In the poem the planes cause an "impact," believers elsewhere watch the "flames of something of theirs being born," the speaker watches "mesmerized," the media posts photographs of the fearful and "dead or made of stone" watching the events; then the poem focuses on the speaker's emotional reactions and thoughts regarding the event, and what thoughts it evokes within him in regard to beauty. The poem closes with the story of the fireman and his dog and the speaker's insights. Looking at it this way, maybe 9/11 is secondary in experiencing the poem. It's hard to be certain since I cannot *not* make the connection to the event personally, but perhaps it is possible that the allusion is not central to the poem's experience, since it is all of the other poetic techniques of the poem that create the sensual reaction in the reader.

Let's for a moment pretend that the poem isn't alluding to these events. This will leave us to focus on the private and unique universe of the poem and make connections within it. If we begin to make connections within the poem itself, one of the first connections we might make is how the ribbons in the first stanza appear beautiful to the speaker even though they are pollution, and how the flames in the second stanza appear "gorgeous" to the believers even though they are destructive. What does that suggest? The connection bridges the distance between the speaker and the believers, as they both have the capacity to see beauty in something harmful, in something that others see as ugly. This further suggests that beauty is subjective, though the ability to see it is universal.

You can see how making connections like this and asking questions about those connections can lead to insight into the poem's experience, as well as insight into the experience of being human. Here, Dunn's speaker has found similarities between himself and people who might be considered enemies. Beauty, we see, may be received and interpreted by our senses and not rely on context.

What other connections and patterns can we see? And what questions can these patterns raise in us? In the third stanza the speaker watches the collision "replayed"—be it on a television screen or in his mind—and admits to a desire for revenge. Later, in the last stanza, the speaker repeats the story of the fireman: "I repeated it / to everyone I knew." What does this suggest? He says "I did this for myself, / not for community or beauty's sake, / yet soon it had a rhythm and a frame." How are we to understand the impact of his repeating his story? If it is told "for myself," then what exactly is the speaker getting from this and how is it connected to the replaying of the collision? What might be meant by rhythm and frame?

In the fourth and fifth stanza the speaker makes a connection between himself admiring "the intensity" of the people in the photographs and between the photographers taking the photographs:

The next day there was a photograph  
of dust and smoke ghosting a street,  
and another of a man you couldn't be sure  
was fear-frozen or dead or made of stone,  
  
and for a while I was pleased  
to admire the intensity—or was it the coldness?—  
of each photographer's good eye.

The speaker asks, “Was it the coldness?” This seems to suggest a distance, or emotional coldness, in the voyeuristic qualities he is experiencing and the way photographers act as objective eyes for the audience. The photographers cannot act on their emotions or empathies, but instead to succeed, photographers in intense situations must shut down their responses and capture the moment visually, detached from their emotions. The speaker says that he admires this, “the intensity—or was it the coldness?— / of each photographer's good eye.” Perhaps he sees courage in the act of taking these photographs, or maybe he sees something admirable in the way a person can detach himself from an event in order to focus only on the image, the visual, the camera's eye with a “good eye” that can see art and capture it.

In the fifth and sixth stanzas, the speaker muses on how he's reacted to beautiful things in the past just as coldly as these photographers: “For years I'd taken pride in resisting / the obvious—sunsets, snowy peaks, / a starlet's face.” The pattern of “coldness” is established by several word choices here: “fear-frozen,” “coldness,” “snowy.” The words are used as physical description and emotional description. They are literal, and they are figurative. Our speaker then tells us how he discovered that images of “sunsets, snowy peaks, / a starlet's face,” too, have their “edgy” place. This is a little mysterious. Does “edgy” refer to the destructive, ugly yet mesmerizing collision and photographs he's been viewing? Is this suggesting that serene beauty and edginess are somehow closely related?

The speaker then introduces the idea of “the sentimental,” which he refers to as “beauty's sloppy cousin, the enemy,” and asks if it can have a place to also be appreciated. The word choice of “enemy” is interesting, as it echoes the relationship between the speaker and the believers from the beginning of the poem. What does this suggest about the relationship between enemies, and between the roles they play? The speaker ends the stanza with another question: “Doesn't a tear deserve a close-up?” The image represents sentimentality, beauty's “sloppy cousin,” but it actually could be another allusion, this time to a commercial by the Keep America Beautiful campaign, made in the 1970s at the start of the environmental movement. It is another reference that will not diminish the poem's effect on a reader if he or she doesn't know it, but it can add another layer of complexity if it is understood. In [the commercial](#), a Native American witnesses the pollution of a river as he paddles a canoe up the river, and as he turns to the camera, we zoom in on a tear slipping from his eye. The allusion echoes the pollution that the speaker found beautiful in the first stanza.

In the last part of the poem, the speaker confesses that he retells the story about the fireman hiding in the rubble “so his dispirited search dog / could have someone to find.” And that he retells it not “for community or beauty’s sake,” but for himself. Why would he do that? Why does it matter that he does? The story is moving. Who isn’t moved by the relationship between a man and his dog? Our focus shifts from all of the people who perished in the rubble whom the fireman and his dog cannot help, to the “dispirited” feelings of the dog that the fireman tries to help. It is almost as if all the devastating emotion we feel thinking about those people and their families, empathizing with them, transfers to the emotion we feel thinking about the dog, empathizing with the fireman who feels such empathy and emotion for the dog that he hides in the rubble so the dog can find someone. In this moment, the feelings the dog has become as important and as worthy as our own—a dog’s emotions equate with a human’s. If we can feel such strong empathy toward the dog, as the fireman clearly does, can we not also feel it toward our enemies? And are these feelings in any way similar to “revenge’s sweet surge,” referred to earlier in the poem? Are they maybe one side and the other, sloppy cousins of each other like beauty and sentimentality? Or is the dog and fireman story too sentimental to fall in love with? And if it is, doesn’t it “deserve a close-up” too?

### Look Closely at Diction

When reading a poem, you should always look up words you do not know, but sometimes it can help to look up words that you do know when they have more than one meaning, too. The last line of the poem may seem a bit mysterious: “I did this for myself, / not for community or beauty’s sake, / yet soon it had a rhythm and a frame.” A rhythm and a frame? What on earth does that have to do with anything? Is the speaker suggesting that beauty relies somehow on rhythm and a frame? We can begin by looking in the poem for other things that have rhythm and a frame. The poem itself, does, for starters. Poetry has rhythm. Speech has rhythm. And the images of the building collapsing repetitively have a rhythm too, as well as a frame if they are being shown on television, captured through a camera lens. But “frame” is a word with many meanings. If we look at the word “frame,” we find that it is a noun defined as:

1. a border or case for enclosing a picture, mirror, etc.
2. a rigid structure formed of relatively slender pieces, joined so as to surround sizable empty spaces or nonstructural panels, and generally used as a major support in building or engineering works, machinery, furniture, etc.
3. a body, especially a human body, with reference to its size or build; physique:  
*He has a large frame.*
4. a structure for admitting or enclosing something: *a window frame.*
5. usually, frames. (*used with a plural verb*) the framework for a pair of eyeglasses.
6. form, constitution, or structure in general; system; order.

7. a particular state, as of the mind: *an unhappy frame of mind*.

In looking at the above definitions, there are several that have resonance in relation to this poem.

1. a border or case for enclosing a picture, mirror, etc.
  - We frame art and other works of beauty, and the title of the poem is “The Insistence of Beauty.” What is the purpose of a frame in this sense of the word?
2. a rigid structure formed of relatively slender pieces, joined so as to surround sizable empty spaces or nonstructural panels, and generally used as a major support in building or engineering works, machinery, furniture, etc.
  - The World Trade Center, like all buildings, had a frame, which was destroyed in the terrorist attacks of 9/11. Were the Twin Towers a piece of art that had beauty and a frame? What did they represent symbolically?
3. a body, especially a human body, with reference to its size or build; physique
  - All people—no matter what their culture or nationality—and other living beings have frames.
4. form, constitution, or structure in general; system; order
  - a. Poems have form; society has systems; the United States has a Constitution; the 9/11 terrorist attacks were very orderly and systematic. How is beauty linked to order?
5. a particular state, as of the mind
  - A poem’s speaker has a state of mind, as does the reader; the events of 9/11 place us in a certain “frame of mind.” What frame of mind is the reader in? What frame of mind does the poem put the reader in?

The word “frame” adds layers of meaning that can contribute to our interpretations, reactions, and understandings of this poem, as the word relates to many of the poem’s themes: beauty, violence, love, destruction, storytelling, the visual nature of art, to name a few. Considering these definitions, we might follow our thoughts to conclude something like this:

“Frame” can refer to the building’s architecture, the human body, systems, and orders. We frame photographs—a single moment captured from time—and hang them on our walls. A frame lends support, gives something its shape. And rhythm? Our first rhythm: our mother’s heartbeat—rhythm is elemental and basic. It is the basis of music and poetry. The human body finds rhythms pleasing. Rhythms repeat themselves. The man telling the story of the fireman

and his dog creates a rhythm through its repetition; it becomes artful, monumental. It becomes an experience shared rather than isolated. It stands as a symbol, an allegory for the wreckage of person, animal, and city. Perhaps the retelling becomes its own type of architecture that listeners can enter, or the bones within someone, like the fireman, who in retelling this story finds strength and support.

### Discussion

What is your experience of this poem? How do you interpret its meaning? After discussing your reactions to the poem, discuss the specific approaches you used to come to your interpretation. What do you think is the most powerful part of the poem? What, if anything, confused you in its reading? Did that change once you conducted a closer reading of the poem? Did your interpretation align with mine in some places? Or are there sections in which it differed? Remember, there is no one way to interpret a poem. That's what makes discussing them so pleasing and rewarding.



## Chapter Three: Images

To put it 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 are how we translate the world into a text so that a reader may *experience*. If you are a creative writer, then 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 literally describe what the speaker *sees* in order to recreate the world of the speaker in words 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.

*Q. Where does poetry come from?*

*A. It comes from the imagination—*

Imagination. Imagine. [Image](#). This is the language of creative writing. What the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines as “a mental picture” which we as writers see through the mind’s eye. When we read writing, 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 form, its physical, concrete existence. 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 her 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 the thick mucus of her nose.

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

### Discussion

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 affect on the reader's intellect as the images resonate into symbols and create connections and suggestions. What affects 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? What others do you perceive?

*Q. How does poetry affect the reader?*

A. With sensations—

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 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 *supernatural*—they're natural to our bodies. Poetry enables us to use and sharpen them.

*Q. 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 actually 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.

## Types of Writing

### Activity

Relying only on your experience and intuition, take a look at the following passages of text and match each with its correct genre:

- A. Poem
- B. News article
- C. Novel
- D. Non-fiction essay
- E. Diary entry
- F. Text message
- G. Advertisement

1. \_\_\_ FYI, I’m running 18. ETA: 8:30.

2. \_\_\_ Lately I’ve been feeling really depressed. I don’t know if it’s hormonal or the weather or what. I just want it to go away. Not sure how to act in front of Jack when I feel like this. I don’t want to lie or be a fake, but I don’t want him to think I’m not fun to be around. So I’ve just been avoiding him—which is so stupid because now he’s gonna think that I don’t like him, which is totally not true. But I can’t tell him. God if he ever read this I would die! Kate is of no help either. She just makes me worry even more.

3. \_\_\_ In a speech on the Dartmouth campus in Hanover, N.H. to students, staff and alumni, Philip J. Hanlon, the president, said the college would create new spaces for social activity as alternatives to Greek houses, give faculty members more of a role in residential life and provide students more extensive training on preventing sexual assault. But much of his address was devoted to alcohol and the Greek system. “In the majority of alcohol-induced medical transports, it is hard alcohol — rather than just beer or wine — that lands students on a hospital gurney,” Dr. Hanlon said, and so “hard alcohol will

not be served at events open to the public, whether the event is sponsored by the college or by student organizations.”

4. \_\_\_ To the red country and part of the gray country of Oklahoma, the last rains came gently, and they did not cut the scarred earth. The plows crossed and recrossed the rivulet marks. The last rains lifted the corn quickly and scattered weed colonies and grass along the sides of the roads so that the gray country and the dark red country began to disappear under a green cover. In the last part of May the sky grew pale and the clouds that had hung in high puffs for so long in the spring were dissipated. The sun flared down on the growing corn day after day until a line of brown spread along the edge of each green bayonet. The clouds appeared, and went away, and in a while they did not try any more. The weeds grew darker green to protect themselves, and they did not spread anymore. The surface of the earth crusted, a thin hard crust, and as the sky became pale, so the earth became pale, pink in the red country and white in the gray country.

5. \_\_\_ Introducing the all-new 2015 Subaru Outback. At 33-mpg, it's the most fuel-efficient midsize crossover in America. Symmetrical All-Wheel Drive with X-Mode provides go-anywhere traction and stability. Being named a 2014 IIHS Top Safety Pick provides peace of mind. All to better help you explore the season. Love. It's what makes a Subaru, a Subaru.

6. \_\_\_

I erased you at mile 251.  
 Just pushed the mile counter and Poof,  
 you were gone. Like that. Zero. Not even a snowflake  
 on the car's warm rug. Not even an eyelash  
 mite. Earlier, we braked for a tabby  
 crossing the road and laughed. We licked  
 enchiladas from the crescent moons  
 of each others' chins. I might miss the taste  
 of your smoky breath, might think again of  
 your pale blue eyes, an unsure December sky,  
 your fingers, my waist, your thumb  
 on my hip bone, your unshaven face. How you told me  
 I was beautiful, how you told me you were willing  
 to stick all the way to the coast.

7. \_\_\_ My great-grandfather on my mother's side ran a drugstore in a small town in central Illinois. He sold pills and rubbing alcohol from behind the big cash register and creamy ice cream from the soda fountain. My mother remembers the counter's long polished sweep, its shining face. She swirled on stools. Dreamy fans. Wide summer afternoons and clinking nickels. He sold milkshakes, cherry cokes, old fashioned sandwiches, (what did an old-fashioned sandwich look like?). Dark wooden shelves. Silver spigots on chocolate dispensers.

There are, of course, numerous ways to identify which passage belongs to which genre. And I imagine that when you formulated your answers, you relied on multiple evaluations of tone, form, and diction. Clearly the use of lines—verse—indicates a poem. But now, go back through the passages and notice the use of images, or lack thereof. What do you notice? Where are images most prominent?

Here are the answers: 1.F, 2.E, 3.B, 4.C, 5.G, 6.A, 7.D.

Reviewing, you should see that the literary genres—poem, essay, novel, are replete with images. Whether it's the snowflake melting on a rug in the opening of my poem “The Hitchhiker” (6), or the sun glaring down “until a line of brown spread along the edge of each green bayonet” in John Steinbeck’s opening paragraph to his novel *Grapes of Wrath* (4), or “the counter’s long polished sweep, its shining face” in Naomi Shihab Nye’s essay “Mint Snowball” (7), we as readers enter the world of the text through its images which evoke our senses.

Not so in the case of the text message, diary entry, news article, or advertisement. Why is that? To understand these ways of writing, we should consider their purposes. What is the purpose of a text message? A diary entry? A news article? An advertisement?

**Text Message.** With the text message, its purpose is its one-time use of sharing information: In our above example, this person is going to be late and arrive around 8:30.

**Diary Entry.** With the diary entry, the information is more complex. Remember the differences between journaling and keeping a diary discussed in chapter 1? A diary keeps track of something—experiences, feelings, observations, and is usually kept private. Since the only intended audience for a diary is the writer him/herself, there is little if no attention given to how the writing will affect an outside audience. In fact, in the above example, the writer hyperbolically states that if Jack were to read her diary she would *die*.

**News Article.** In the case of the news article and advertisement, the point is to provide information. The news article by Richard Pérez-Peña informs *New York Times* readers by objectively and authoritatively summarizing information and naming sources.

**Advertisement.** The advertisement persuades you to purchase something; in this case, a 2015 Subaru Outback, which gives an overview of its attractive features and establishes ethos through mentioning its awards: “Being named a 2014 IIHS Top Safety Pick provides peace of mind.”

But when we look back at the 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, 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.

### Discussion

[Richard Hugo](#) once wrote that in a poem, “I caution against communication because once language exists only to convey information, it is dying.” What does Hugo mean by this? Does creative writing communicate? If so, how? If not, what does it do? Can this be phrased differently?

## The Purpose of Poetry

If you’ve taken a composition or freshmen writing course, you might recognize some familiar terms used above—summarizes, sources, persuades, ethos. All 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 Jonson 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 Woolamalo 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](#) and look again at Edward Hirsch’s definition of poem. How does this poem typify his explanation? Are there any ways in which it does not? Write 300-word response paper explaining how you see your selected poem in relation to Hirsch’s definition.

### “Show Don’t Tell”

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 phrase reminds me of the television show *Lassie* in which eleven-year-old Timmy’s collie named Lassie would run to tell Timmy’s family whenever Timmy was in trouble and needed rescuing. Timmy was curious and always getting into trouble. Timmy’s family couldn’t do anything to help him until Lassie did more than bark; Lassie had to show them exactly what was wrong by leading them directly to Timmy so they could *see precisely* what the matter was.

In this analogy, the language of your poem can either bark generally or lead specifically. And you do this with either general, abstract words that make a reader think, or you do this with specific, concrete words that allow a reader to see. 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 telling 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 oversized jar that my grandmother collects under her spice table to store homemade mango and spicy lime pickles.

(Aimee Nezhukumatathil, from “Gulabjmoon 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 beneath 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 angel  
who 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  
The fisherman travels smoothly in his blue skiff.

(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.

### Discussion

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 waterdrops” 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 counterintuitive, 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 through the images. 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  
 and keeping him safe  
 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.

### Activity

To prove the usefulness of concrete, sensory detail, and the failings of being overly abstract in one's language, especially in one's descriptive language, the poet Mike Dockins works with his creative writing students to describe the scene of a motorcycle accident. As a class, make a list on the board of various concrete (and sensory) images that a witness would observe. Telling the story with only concretes, and literally no abstractions, does the emotional level come across? If they do, how do they accomplish chaos, panic, fear, shock, terror, death?

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 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 to make, 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 but it takes our brains on an extended voyage of neural connections; 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 in the 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?

#### Discussion

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](#)” 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 a reader rather than evoke his or her 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. It 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 to me, 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. The following is a sampling of words and phrases that indicate a thought that can be developed into an image:

1. *Transitions:*

- *in conclusion*
- *furthermore*
- *however*
- *in contrast*
- *either way*
- *for the purpose of*
- *in short*

Here's an example followed by a revision:

- I was smart. In contrast, my brother was dumb.
- The same year I received straight A's on my report card, my brother tried to get high licking frogs from our dad's pond.

Reserve transitions like “in contrast” for expository writing classes. They cheat the reader by defining the relationships between things rather than letting the reader discover the relationships himself through details.

2. *The word “I” followed by:*

- *feel*

- *think/thought*
- *know/knew,*
- *consider*
- *suppose*
- *remember*
- *imagine*
- *wish*
- *wonder*

3. *The words:*

- *seem*
- *believe*
- *argue*
- *claim*

4. *The phrases:*

- *in my opinion*
- *in my mind's eye*
- *might have*

The above examples in 2, 3, and 4 are of what we call *filters*—because they filter the sensory experience of the poem through the speaker to the reader, rather than connecting the reader's senses directly to the experience of the poem. Look at the difference between the following:

- It seemed to me that the Northern Lights might have made the sky look on fire.
- The Northern Lights made the sky look on fire.

In addition to eliminating the middle man—the speaker—standing between the image and the reader, eliminating the phrases “It seemed to me that” and “might have” cuts unnecessary syllables, weak prepositions, and makes the voice sound more confident. It adds energy to the writing.

### Activity

Explore art books, or alternatively an [online painting database](#) or [photograph database](#), and find an image that entices you. Translate this image into words that produce images. Do not interpret the art. Only try to capture exactly what you see with your eyes. Pretend you are describing the painting or photograph to a friend who has never seen it. Be as detailed as possible.

### Activity

Close your eyes and envision in your mind's eye your childhood bedroom. Look around the room, in the drawers, in the closet. Try to remember colors, smells, textures. Then, using a box of crayons, draw your room on a sheet of paper. What details do you remember when you are drawing that you didn't remember before you picked up the crayons? Once the room is drawn, remember an event that took place in your room and conduct a free write with the intention of crafting a poem from the exercise.

## Zoom In, Zoom Out

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; he stays 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/cameraman/poet believes this is important to see.

Just as a cameraman must be present in her surroundings when filming, so too the poet must locate herself 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.

### Activity

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 I 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 *vacuum*:

*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.

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.

#### Discussion

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 work best rather 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.

I have, in the past, had 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, and I would never use the phrase “dumb-down” to describe the poetry writing process; 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 can 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](#), 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 fuerit 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.

*Laura Kasischke, "Confections" from Fire & Flower. Copyright © 1998 by Laura Kasischke. Reprinted with the permission of The Permissions Company, Inc., on behalf of Alice James Books, [www.alicejamesbooks.org](http://www.alicejamesbooks.org).*

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 than 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 *carmel* 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.

#### Discussion

Read the poem “Confections” and continue to discuss the effect of the figurative language. Explore the comparisons deeper: how is an infant a milky sea? How is chaos a pinch of joy, a bit of screaming? Continue through the whole poem and rank the effectiveness of each figure of speech.

When we use figures of speech in our poetry, we have the opportunity to invite a whole new layer of meaning into the poem. For example, returning to our *apple, blue, boat* exercise, we can use a simile or metaphor to invite images that affect the mood, tone, and meaning of our poems.

*Golden Delicious Apple . . . the size of a fist*

The image of the fist introduces an element of violence or determination into the poem. How would the effect of the metaphor be different if we changed it?

*The Golden Delicious apple was one of Zeus’ coins in that child’s hands.*

What ideas does this metaphor bring to mind that is different from a fist?

Now let’s look at the next example:

*Turquoise blue . . . like the sky on your wedding day*

We sense a happy mood with the mention of wedding, usually. The fact that it is the sky to

which the color is being compared lends a cosmic quality, something larger than us, something natural and yet familiar. Let's try something else:

*Turquoise blue like a young widow's eye shadow in winter.*

This description is sadder, chilling. The mention of widow and winter lends a clear coldness to the mood that a wedding day does not.

Lastly, let's try the boat:

*Sailboat . . . with ripped white sails waving in surrender.*

Similar to how Kasischke compared chaos to joy, one thing we can do is introduce abstract ideas like *surrender* when they are strongly supported by and partnered with concrete images that balance them out. In this case, the boat, sails, and waves are physical enough to hold up a word like *surrender*. If we didn't want to use an abstraction but still wanted to introduce the idea of surrendering we could just build the image:

*Sailboat with ripped white sails waving its shreds in the wind.*

Figurative language allows us to use concrete language to relate abstract ideas.

### **Featured Poet and SUNY Brockport graduate Mike Dockins and his Favorite Metaphor Exercise**

#### **THE FISHTANK 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. For a quick list, see the appendix in the back of this book.

#### **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 star,” 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 heard 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. For example:
  - When Marty's wife asked him to run to the store for milk, Marty said sure and pulled the keys to the truck out of his pocket. The trip would give her enough time to sneak the cake in from the garage and plant 45 candles into its sweetness.
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*.

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**.

#### Activity

Go back to one of your poems and find places where the language is stale or clichéd. Apply each of the above remedies to each cliché to invent options for a fresher read.

**Activity**

Write a poem composed entirely of clichés.

**Activity**

Rewrite the following clichés into fresh figures of speech:

- Home is where the heart is.
- Only the good die young.
- An eye for an eye.
- He has his head in the clouds.
- Clean as a whistle.
- Tough as nails.

**Activity**

Mix and match clichés:

- Home is where the good die young.
- Clean as the heart is.
- Tough as an eye.



## Chapter Four: Voice

The speaker is the bridge between the poem's experience and the reader, and similar to language, when it works best, it becomes invisible, cemented to, part and particle of the poem's experience. Tone of voice is responsible for creating trust between the reader and the speaker, in seducing the reader to lose him or herself 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 than 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 by being reliable. We can plead and swear on a Bible like we do in courtrooms, 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 simply need 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 stand 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. Unfortunately, most high school English classes expose students only to writers who are no longer alive, who wrote at a time when poetry was expected to be formal in form and tone. We read [Shakespeare](#), the [British Romantics](#) like Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, [Victorians](#) like [Robert Browning](#), and other writers from the 19th and 20th centuries neglecting the fact that today the United States is home to a thriving poetry scene and network of publishers. According to [R.R. Bowker](#), over 10,000 new books of poetry were published in 2012. After the push by 19th-century poets like Wordsworth and Coleridge, and by 20th-century poet Walt Whitman to write poetry that reflects the “common man” and common experiences, contemporary poetry's dominant style shifted to a poetry that possesses a less formal, distant, or elitist tone. 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](#) fine web site.

Part of the advantage of writing poetry in college is being able to expose yourself to new poets, living poets, including most likely the professor teaching this class. Do yourself the favor of reading widely and generously and you will see how many more ways of speaking and writing there are. Expand your repertoire. Ask your professor and other poets you hear read to make recommendations. Who should you be reading? What's their newest favorite book of poems? Who are they excited about?

When you begin reading more poets, you will discover many ways of writing that you will want to experiment with. Don't worry about sounding like other poets or imitating someone else's style. This is another popular concern of beginning writers and it is, like worrying

about finding your voice, completely unnecessary. Several writers and artists have said something akin to “Good writers borrow, great writers steal.” This isn’t implying you should plagiarize. Just that we build upon the shoulders of others and then we stand up tall ourselves. It’s unavoidable for others to influence us and inspire us—in fact, this is what we want as artists. Take in as much as you can and let it roam around and settle in your brain like compost. You will change it unconsciously into what suits you, what you need, and you will grow from it. And then, when you sit down to write your own poems, to thine own voice you will be—eth true.

### **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. A risk of being rejected, criticized, not believed. Expressing our true feelings makes us vulnerable and feel exposed just for that reason: because whether it’s love, anger, confusion, or joy, expressing how we feel *exposes* us and opens us to other people’s reactions. Being a feeling, thinking human is full of risk. In poetry, our aim is to bottle that risk in a condensed way and deliver it through a speaker to a reader.

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 oversentimentality.

Beginning writers, attempting to instill intensity in a poem, often lapse into *oversentimentality*,

exaggerated or overly simplistic 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.” Oversentimentality results in sappy, clichéd writing, and an inauthentic voice. *Sentiment*, a speaker’s emotional state, is not the same thing as oversentimentality. 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 poem falls victim to oversentimentality:

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 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.

### **Use Contrasts**

To balance oversentimentality 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 his life when he was vulnerable. If a character is generous and giving, try to find or invent a time when she wasn'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, but 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.

### Activity

Create a character that can be described as being one of the words in List A. Choose a word and create a list of ten images or actions that make the character such:

List A:

- Reliable
- Intelligent
- Athletic
- Generous

Then, create an event where the character does something that can be characterized as being one of the words in List B.

List B:

- Gullible
- Jealous
- Controlling
- Overly Indulgent

Alternatively, reverse the lists and create a character who is appalling but does something kind.

### 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 an odd 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.

*“Eating Together”, from WHAT IS THIS THING CALLED LOVE: POEMS by Kim*

*Addonizio. Copyright © 2004 by Kim Addonizio. Used by permission of W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.*

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:

### **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.

*Li-Young Lee, “Eating Together” from Rose. Copyright © 1986 by Li-Young Lee. Reprinted with the permission of The Permissions Company, Inc., on behalf of BOA Editions, Ltd., [www.boaeditions.org](http://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 “lonely for no one.” 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?

### Your Voice

As readers and students, you may have heard someone refer to a writer and his or her “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 pass 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.” Many young writers get caught up in the mission to find or discover his or her 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. At your little sister's recital, did she look cute in her costume? Adorable? Pretty? Sweet? 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?

#### Activity

Write a list of synonyms for the following words:

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

Then choose one of these lists and use your crayons to draw a series of images that fit each. What differences do we *see* in these “similar” words. What are the similarities? Next, translate your drawings into writing using concrete, detailed descriptions.

**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. For

example, what do you say when you break off a relationship or tell someone you can't make it to their wedding? We think about what we say, what words we choose, and how we deliver them to our intended audience. 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?

#### Activity

Go through your poems and note any patterns of images. What do you notice? Make a list of similar images and sculpt them into a poem.

**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 his or her 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 his or her 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.

*Copyright ©William Heyen "Job" is licensed CC-BY-NC-SA.*

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 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 pearly 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.

*"Our Bodies Break Light", from OUR LADY OF THE RUINS: POEMS by Traci Brimhall. Copyright © 2012 by Traci Brimhall. Used by permission of W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.*

### **Activity**

Choose a character from history and write a dramatic monologue in his or her voice. Either conduct some research to position yourself in a particular event, or place the

person somewhere you know very well—your college dorm room or dining hall, your childhood bedroom, a favorite hangout, at your neighborhood deli, on your town’s Main Street or on one of your city’s main avenues. Give the speaker a concern—what does the speaker want, fear, need right now? Describe what he or she sees. Do not worry about being factually or historically correct. Rather, just pretend to be the person: human, complicated, flawed. Consider writing a diary entry for the speaker.

Alternatively, pretend to be someone you know well—a sibling, a friend—and place him or her in a specific situation that you yourself have never been in. Write a poem in his or her voice.

Alternatively, choose a speaker who you have nothing or little in common with: a terminally ill cancer patient, a middle-aged mother of three who works at a department store, a baseball card collector. Then, conduct some research and find a way to enter the speaker’s experiences.

### 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 his or her 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.

**Omniscient** Toby fastened his seatbelt and looked out the passenger side window. His mother, worrying about being late for the match, blasted the gas. Toby squeezed his hands into fists. He didn’t want to go. He thought himself better off at the playground. On the swings where he left her, Susan rebraided her hair. By the next day she’d forget what Toby had told her.

The omniscient speaker is powerful and godlike. As you see in the example above, the omniscient speaker isn't limited by space or time. We can enter the thoughts of all characters—Toby, his mother, and Susan. We can be in the car, on the playground, and we can fast-forward to tomorrow. The omniscient speaker is flexible and can go anywhere, anytime.

**Limited Omniscient** Toby fastened his seatbelt and looked out the passenger side window. His mother, worrying about being late for the match, blasted the gas. Toby squeezed his hands into fists. His mother figured that he didn't want to go. But she didn't feel comfortable with him and Susan being unsupervised at the playground—especially with how much “in love” he might be thinking he was.

In this example, we are limited to Toby's mother's thoughts. We can observe Toby but we cannot enter his thoughts. As readers we ride alongside with Toby's mother, struggling as she does, experiencing what she does, discovering things only when she does. We are limited to her interpretations of the world—even if they are incorrect.

**Objective** Toby fastened his seatbelt and looked out the passenger side window. His mother blasted the gas. “Now we're going to be late,” she said. Toby squeezed his hands into fists and rolled his eyes. Through the rear window, on the swings where he left her, he could see Susan rebraiding her hair.

Here, the most distant of the perspectives, we can observe only what a witness could sense with his nose, ears, mouth, eyes, and skin. Any judgments we make must arise from the text and where the speaker directs our attention.

When you revise, try switching the point of view to see what difference it makes in the poem. If a poem is first person, try it in third. If it is objective, make it omniscient. The changes might alert you to new possibilities or make something stand out to you that didn't before. If you don't like it, you can always change it back.

#### Activity

Revise one of your poems in three ways using first, second, and third person points of view. What differences do the different perspectives make in your poem? What are the advantages/disadvantages in each?

#### Psychic Distance

In addition to point of view, another element that influences voice in our writing is *psychic*

*distance*, or how intimate a *narrator*, what we call a “speaker” in fiction, is to the subject. For us as poets, it’s advantageous to consider the role of psychic distance in our poems, as well, since it affects tone.

In his book *The Art of Fiction*, [John Gardner](#) succinctly demonstrates differences in psychic distance, moving from farthest to closest:

1. It was winter of the year 1853. A large man stepped out of a doorway.
2. Henry J. Warburton had never much cared for snowstorms.
3. Henry hated snowstorms.
4. God how he hated these damn snowstorms.
5. Snow. Under your collar, down inside your shoes, freezing and plugging up your miserable soul...

In these examples, we see diction and point of view change tone and determine the distance from which we read the character of Henry. In the first example, Henry is just “a man,” an unnamed figure in winter in 1853. With each subsequent example we take steps closer moving into Henry’s thoughts and feelings and finally into Henry’s body.

Just as it can be useful to experiment with different points of view in our poems, it can be insightful to try on different levels of psychic distance.

### Activity

Write a poem three different ways altering the speaker and his or her psychic distance. For example, write about a high school football game from the following perspectives: football quarterback; coach; newspaper reporter. Or about a car accident: driver; witness; police officer. Or at a restaurant: customer’s five-year-old child; parent; server.

## Making Friends with Fictioneers

Although poetry and fiction are different in many ways, they do have points of intersection where mastering the skills of one can improve the other. Because it is so integral to narration, point of view is an aspect of writing that is more complex in fiction than it is for poetry. The same may be said of character; in fiction, the way a character changes is central to the form. But as different as they are, there are similarities and intersections where each genre’s elements can benefit the other. For fictioneers, the attention paid in poetry to condensing language and making it musical can contribute to stronger prose. Likewise, some of the approaches our

fictioneer friends use, particularly for point of view, character development, and setting are especially helpful for poets when thinking about persona/character, voice, and tone.

### Tips for Characterization, Burroway Style

In her classic text *Writing Fiction*, Janet Burroway lists tips for characterization that may be helpful for poets, too, when pinning down and developing a poem's tone and voice. One of the tips she provides:

1. If the character is based on a real model, including yourself, make a dramatic external alteration.

She suggests changing the color of your character's hair, or altering the gender. If we shift this advice to a poem's speaker instead of a story's narrator, we may alter more than just external appearances; we may alter memories, experiences, or stances, too. Just enough to give ourselves some distance where we can privilege the language instead of the facts.

Many beginning poets fall into the trap of writing directly from the facts of their own lives from which they refuse to deviate. Because the writer has chosen what to write about, or whom, the poem fails to grow organically, take risks, or create leaps and surprises. As Richard Hugo says, this type of poet is choosing to believe that "all music must conform to truth" rather than "all truth must conform to music." "One mark of a beginner," he writes, "is his impulse to push language around to make it accommodate what he has already conceived to be the truth, or, in some cases, what he has already conceived to be the form." If you're writing about your Uncle Matt who is a recovering alcoholic, whose daughter is your cousin you sit with on the bus every day on your way to school, it is going to be difficult to give precedence to the language in the writing process, and instead, thoughts and adherence to facts will make the writing seem forced and contrived. Worst of all, you will shut down opportunities to give yourself over to imagination and create art.

To counter this impulse, Hugo suggests inventing a town populated with residents from which to write. The town is fictional, but it is derived from your experiences and your imagination. In your town, your Uncle Matt can become Louie the neighbor or Mrs. Stover the English teacher, thereby creating enough of a distance so you can feel free to imagine as you write and go where the music of language takes you.

Another tip that Burroway provides:

2. Know what your character wants, both generally out of life, and specifically in the context of the story. Keeping that desire in mind, "think backward" with the character to decide what he or she would do in any situation presented.

In the context of poetry, this advice works well for persona poems. If you're undertaking a

persona and wearing a “mask” as a speaker, clearly you, speaking as that persona, should be a fully developed, complex human. If the persona is someone you know well, place that speaker in a situation you do not know well. If the persona is someone you’ve researched or invented, place that speaker in a circumstance you do know well. Always, some element of the strange and new for the poet will make for fresher writing. As Robert Frost has said, “No surprise for the writer, no surprise for the reader.”

A third tip that Burroway provides is based on Aristotle’s concept of “consistent inconsistencies,” or conflicts within a character:

3. Identify, heighten, and dramatize consistent inconsistencies. What does your character want that is at odds with whatever else she wants? What patterns of thought and behavior work against his primary goal?

Complexity, complexity, complexity. When writing a persona poem, the voice should be based not on what the speaker *should say or think*, but on what the speaker potentially *would say or think*. Keep your writing surprising, and as Hugo says about language, don’t be a bully!

### **Who speaks? To Whom? In what form? From how far?**

In fiction, these questions help a writer determine who the narrator is in a very precise way. The questions can also be useful in poetry to help us carve out a precise speaker and help develop a form. The following is based on the chart provided by Burroway in *Writing Fiction* with some alterations to make it more apt for poetry:

#### **Who Speaks?**

The Poet	The Poet	A Character
In: Third Person	In: Second Person	In: First Person
Omniscient	“You” as Character	In: Second Person
Limited Omniscient	“You” as Reader	In: Third Person
Objective		

#### **To Whom?**

The reader, a character, the self

#### **In What Form?**

Dramatic monologue, narrative voice, lyric voice, meditative voice, prose poem, journal entry, letter, etc.

#### **At What Psychic Distance?**

## Complete Identification versus Complete Opposition

If anything be taken from this chart, it is that a poet is offered a range of voices from which to speak. There are also different points of view to take, and even opportunities to speak as someone else, either real-ish or imagined, behind the mask of a persona. Experimenting with any of these can be fun and enlightening, and is highly encouraged.

### Actors are Ficioneers Too

In her book *Respect for Acting*, [Uta Hagen](#) distinguishes between representational actors and presentational actors. *Representational actors*, constantly aware of their physicality, try to act *like* the character. They make faces, speak, and move like they imagine the character would. *Presentational actors*, on the other hand, believe the way to best capture their character's essence is to find something about the character in themselves. The presentational actor embodies the character and takes risks in portraying him or her. Janet Burroway offers similar advice:

4. If the character is imaginary or alien to you, imagine a mental or emotional point of contact.

As poets, we strive to be presentational actors by finding ways to internally identify with the persona so we may portray him or her as convincingly human as possible.

To better embody your character, or in our case, our persona, Hagen provides a list of questions for the presentational actor to ask of his or her role:

Who am I? (Character)

What time is it? (Context, year, day)

Where am I? (Country, neighborhood, room, etc.)

What surrounds me? (Animate and inanimate)

What are the given circumstances? (Past, present, future and events)

What is my relationship? (To objects, characters, and events)

What do I want? (Character's immediate and superobjectives)

What's in my way? (Obstacles to objectives)

What do I do to get what I want? (Actions, words)

Notice how specific and concrete (country, neighborhood, room, etc.) the answers aim to be. It is much like writing when we position ourselves in our speaker's space and state. We need

to feel situated in a very specific way before we can create concrete images for the reader. Hagen's questions are effective for not only acting, but for writing poetry, as well.

## 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 reader 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 **enjambéd** 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. Enjambéd 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, most 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.

#### Discussion

Do you tend to write in free verse or in classical forms? Why? How do you determine a line’s length and what belongs on it? Can one play tennis without a net?

## End-Stopped Lines and Enjambment

In the following poem, [James Wright](#) keeps his lines syntactically intact and uses almost entirely end-stopped lines. Read the poem via [the Poetry Foundation](#).

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:

In the Shreve High football stadium, I think

Of Polacks nursing long beers in Titonsville.

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 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 connect-edness 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.

*“Lewis and Clark Disagree” from Miracle Fruit, published by Tupelo Press, copyright © 2003  
Aimee Nezhukumatahil. Used with permission.*

The form is almost the exact opposite of Wrights’: ten enjambed lines followed by two end-stopped, 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:

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

Like Wright’s poem, this poem changes its pattern, moving from enjambed lines to end-stopped 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]

cutting

There is a long pause between “pulling” and “cutting” produced from the break of momentum in the list of actions. Nezhukumatahil 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?

### Stanzas: Rooms

Once the lines of our poem begin to find their length of breath, the next structural concern is how to break the lines into stanzas. In classic forms stanza lengths are predetermined. A **ballad** is written in quatrains, or stanzas containing four lines; a **roundel** has three stanzas; and a **vilanelle** 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 (let’s relax!),” or “This is the dining room (no clutter allowed!).” Rooms help us create space and define the tone of that space. When I was young, my sister and I shared a doorway with no door. Our bedrooms flowed into and out of each other, but the walls still defined our own individual space. We were connected as siblings, could see into each other’s rooms, but still had control over what we wanted in our private space. Like my childhood bedroom, 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 like mine and my sister’s bedrooms, 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

### *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.

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")

In Lee's poem, the first stanza is delivered in the present tense and the second brings us to the future with "lives far ahead."

### *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  
somnia 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.

Copyright © Chad Sweeney. "The Mile" is licensed CC-BY-NA-SA.

Here, Sweeney's stanzas bring us on a journey. We move with the grandmother over the hill, then through the grain fields, then beside a river. The lack of punctuation between the stanzas unifies the locations and makes the transitions feel like one journey. Had punctuation such as periods been used at the end of each stanza, there would be a stronger sense of isolation:

My grandmother crowns the hill,  
her headlights lathing the dark.

A farm route  
through rye then cotton  
then the red and gold of wheat.

Then, the scrub oak crowding  
a little nameless river  
where fog holds to low places.

### 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.

*From Gaze by Christopher Howell (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, ). Copyright © 2012 by Christopher Howell. Reprinted with permission from Milkweed Editions. milkweed.org*

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:***

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")

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..."

### 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.

*"Passover: The Injections", from The Candle: Poems of Our Twentieth Century Holocausts by William Heyen. Copyright © 2016 by William Heyen. Used by permission of Etruscan Press.*

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.

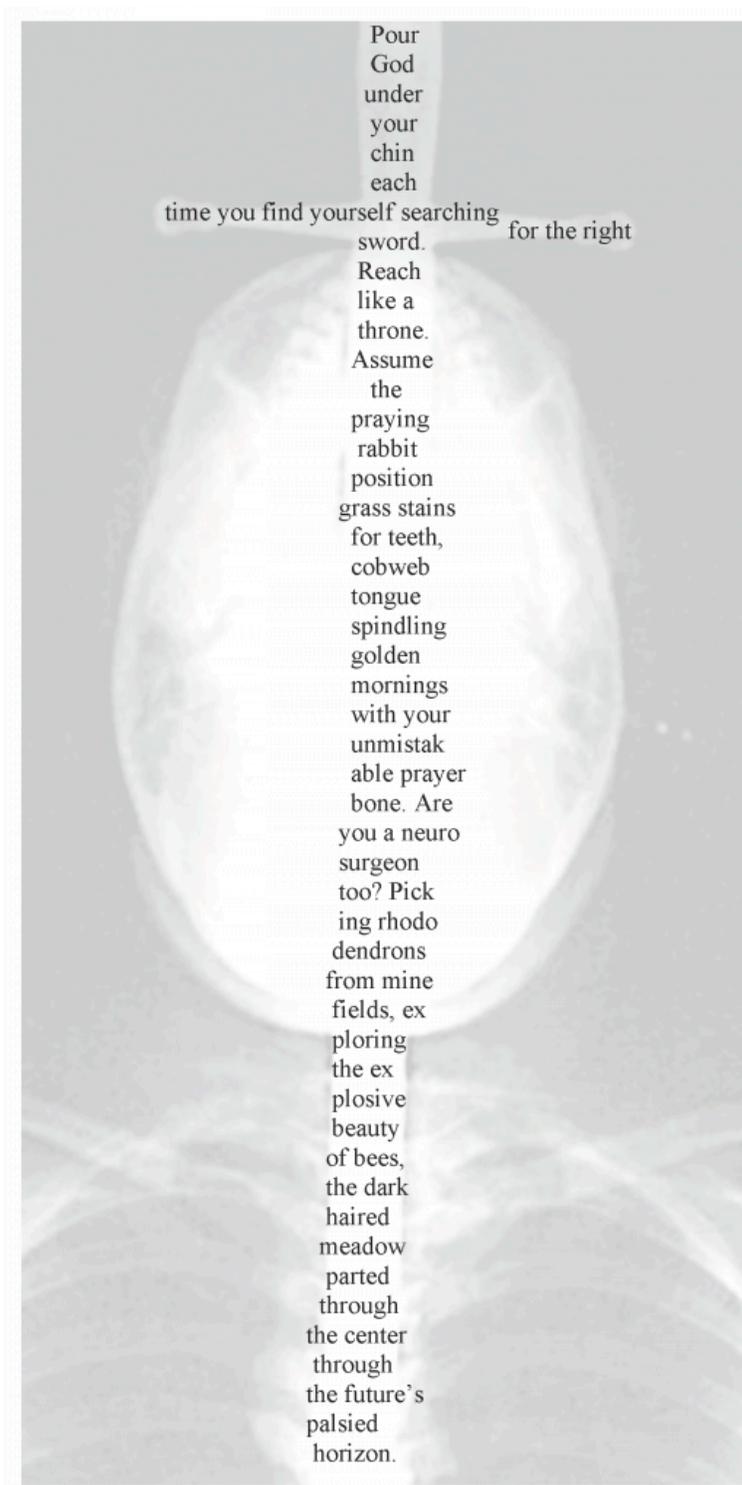
**On Enjambment**

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**



S.Marie LaFata-Clay, "Prayer Bone".

**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 graden-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!

*Georg Trakl, trans. Stephen Tapscott, "Age" from Georg Trakl: Poems, Oberlin College. All rights reserved.*

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")

As we go deeper 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.



## Chapter Six: Acoustics

Even before you were born, in your watery womb home, 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, in free verse, our ears attune finely to tone, cadence, pitch, rhythm, and silence. 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 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: ~ ' :the curve marks an unstressed foot, the slash a stress. In the following words, the first syllable is stressed and the second is not: **Tennis. Fiction. Music.** In the following words, the first syllable is unstressed and the second is: **Unlock. Tonight. Against.** 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  $\sim$  ' a light stress followed by a heavy stress

- and leapt

Trochee '  $\sim$  a heavy stress followed by a light stress

- dolphin

Dactyl '  $\sim \sim$  a heavy stress followed by two light stresses

- happily

Anapest  $\sim \sim$  ' 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 | 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. The 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, of course, 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”:

I wandered lonely as a cloud  
That floats on high o’er vales and hills,  
When all at once I saw a crowd,  
A host, of golden daffodils;  
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,  
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.

Here we can see the first and third lines rhyme; the second, fourth and sixth; the fifth and sixth. There is 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.

In the poem “They Feed They Lion,” rather than end-rhyme, [Philip Levine](#) utilizes internal rhyme. Read the first stanza via [this link](#).

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:

Not my hands but green across you now.  
 Green tons hold you down, and ten bass curve  
 teasing your hair. Summer slime  
 will pile deep on your breast. Four months of ice  
 will keep you firm.

([Richard Hugo](#), from “The Lady in Kicking Horse Reservoir”)

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

Turn 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:

While this **A**merica settles in the **m**ould of its vulgarity,

Heavily thickening to **e**mpire,

And **p**rotest, only a bubble in the **m**olten **m**ass, **p**ops

And sighs out, and the **m**ass hardens,

I sadly **r**emember that the **f**lower fades to **m**ake

Fruit, the fruit rots to **m**ake earth.

Out of the **m**other; and through the spring exultances,

Ripeness and decadence; and home to the **m**other.

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: fow-fay-frew.

### Activity

The poet [Mary Ruefle](#) writes what she calls “erasure” poems where she will use white out 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 web site](#).

## 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 affect 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](#)'.

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:

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 affects long and short lines have on the breath. The first lengthy line 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](#)."

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](#)," reflects the tone that Ginsberg's lines create.

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 *x's*  
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.

*“Lines”, from The Star-Spangled Banner by Denise Duhamel. Copyright © 1999 by Denise Duhamel. Reprinted by permission of Southern Illinois University Press.*

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. Ironically, poems are made of lines too! 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

Follow the link to Gwendolyn Brooks’ 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.

## Chapter Seven: Experimenting with Forms

In this chapter I wish to introduce you not only to common forms, but also to lesser-known forms, all with the intention that you will experiment with forms while writing your own poetry. I was first introduced to many of these forms in [Robin Skelton](#)'s wonderful book *The Shapes of Our Singing*, which I highly recommend.

### Abecedarian

In this form, the poem works its way through the alphabet, each line beginning with the letter following the first letter of the previous line. 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, realphabetize 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.

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## Aubade

Partner to the serenade, which focuses on evening, the aubade is a poem about the morning or 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.

*"Aubade With a Broken Neck", from Rookery by Traci Brimhall; Copyright © 2010 Traci Brimhall, reproduced by permission of Southern Illinois University Press.*

## 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](#):

### Read *Ballad of Orange and Grape* on [PoetryFoundation.org](#)

[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 *Paradise Lost*.

## Ch’i-Yen-Shih

In this Chinese pattern, each line contains seven monosyllabic words with a caesura after each fourth 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 example below 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.

### **Dodoitsu**

This Japanese form is composed of four lines with the syllable count 7 7 7 5. There is no rhyme or set meter.

#### **Service**

An altar boy holds the stained-  
glass door open as women  
in satin-lined skirts enter  
the church like saints.

### **Elegy**

An elegy is a lament for the dead and contains the character of sadness and loss. Mark Strand and 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 that when done best, according Strand and Boland, sets the customs of death in a particular culture against 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.

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## 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 person writes 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.” Each person writes without knowing what the other person is writing. The first person writes a 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 statement beginning “Then...” Here are some examples that make it hard to believe that these were random—but they were! You’ll be surprised how the collective unconscious sometimes 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 be knockin’ at your door.

## Ghazal

Typically dealing with subjects of love and separation, the ghazal is a form with Arabic roots consisting of rhyming couplets of the same syllabic length and a refrain. [As explained on the Academy 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 the poem must be of the same length, though meter is not imposed in English. The first couplet introduces a scheme, made up of a rhyme followed by a refrain. Subsequent couplets pick up the same scheme in the second line only, repeating the refrain and rhyming the second line with both lines of the first stanza. The final couplet usually includes the poet’s signature, 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, unmetred lines with a 5 7 5 syllable count. Traditionally, the haiku’s subject matter relates to nature or seasons.

### 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.

### Mountain Road

We drove the silver van full speed  
 The branches snapped in windows  
 We dipped and bumped in rocky holes  
 From earth we felt like we'd been freed

#### 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 the next 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 unlimited number of quatrains in which the second and fourth lines of each are repeated in the first and third 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 may be 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.  
 Scramble at the riggings, keen to anchor.  
 Palm trees look heavenly from the galleon.  
 Once ashore, we drink till we slur,

scrambling 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.

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## 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 second poet, 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 spontaneous with the answers and with the form. The Surrealists were great at inventing [these types of games](#). Pair up and in the style of the [Surrealists](#), have one person write a question and the other write an imagistic answer without knowing what the question is.

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 the elements of poetry: figures of speech, musical language, internal rhyme, repetition, condensed syntax, and imagery. There is some debate over the form, as there are some poets who do not consider the form a poem, per se, but something more akin to flash fiction, or at least a genre of prose rather than verse. Either way, it is a cross-genre form—half prose, half verse—and fun to experiment with.

An influential revivalist of the form was Robert Bly, who said in an 1997 interview that the form 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 “all words are signs” to metered poetry to free verse to prose. Additionally in the interview, Bly spoke about his feeling of freedom and “safety” in writing prose poems: “The most wonderful thing 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 a father of the form, Edson provided one of the form's common characteristics: strangeness. His subjects 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't 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.

*Russell Edson, "Ape and Coffee" from The Tunnel: Selected Poems of Russell Edson. Copyright © 1973 by Russell Edson. Reprinted with the permission of Oberlin College Press.*

### 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.

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## 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–B A 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 a **tornada**. The six words that end each of the lines in the first stanza repeat throughout the poem 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 A or A C E

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

Here is an example by [Chad Sweeney](#):

### Michigan Sestina

I've tried to understand this winter  
 that grows out from no root and no  
 seed, yet sways like a meadow toward the mind,  
 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 where 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,  
 a heap of frozen images in the mind,  
 Polish teachers in the 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*—mounded 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 the same line, though no  
 station is there to greet them and no  
 one is getting on or off. Is  
 it irony draws 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, though one crow is  
 changed in sleep to the Japanese character for *mind*.

Copyright © Chad Sweeney. "Michigan Sestina" is licensed CC-BY-NC-SA.

### Activity

Make a list of six words you absolutely love. Then write five sentences that include all of the words. Then, write five more. Then write ten more. Then use these six words to write 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 rhyme or meter, or with none at all.

**Shakespearean:** Comprised of an octet and a sestet, this sonnet is composed in iambic pentameter and rhymes A B A B–C D C D–E F E F–G G. The volta appears either between 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 B B A, and a remaining sestet with varying rhyme schemes. The volta occurs between the stanzas.

**Spenserian:** This sonnet modifies the Petrarchan to contain a rhyme scheme of A B A B–B C B C–C D C D–E E.

Garrison Keillor featured [Billy Collins](#)’ parody of the form on *The Writer’s Almanac*.

[Listen to Billy Collins read it.](#)

## Split Couplet

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

### Morning Run

A rabbit hops across my trail  
A bouncy tail

A fawn leans into chamomile  
Its sunny meal

The miles vanish beneath my feet  
It brings me peace

## Tanka, or Waka

This Japanese form, which focuses primarily on nature or strong emotions, consists of five unrhymed, 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 the last line.

### July

Grasshoppers alight  
Onto the sunflower's face.  
Honeybees buzzing  
From lavender to basil.  
The whole garden is alive.

## Than-Bauk, or Climbing Rhyme

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

Relish your sleep  
Wake, repeat, wake  
Count sheep and dream

Never lose hope  
There is no time  
To mope around.

### Activity

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 third

lines 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 of the poem.

The following villanelle was written by Victor James Daley. Its 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](#).



## 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, we can understand it all as being 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 so 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 a new 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?
- Are there any nouns that would 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?
- Is there any content that can 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 Nye has 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 my own poem "19-19" and its stages of revision.

When I lived in Washington State, I often traveled to neighboring states. 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, wishing  
 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.

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:

The game went into overtime that night.

The moon didn't stay to witness. On top

Of Mount Thoradour she couldn't wait to lose

Her virginity. This was before the war.

Before he would leave her

And a round belly, alone, until he returned,

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

He was lucky, he'd tell her, the scent of her hair

Against his bruised cheek. The scent of her

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

Her ankle while dancing with George Thyman,

Her knee scraped red dripping from the split skin

But this was before photographic color. It kept her

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

Long caterpillar body flying up toward the basket,

Her daughter remembers her mother pointing

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.

The first line immediately sets the time and place, as well as the occasion for the poem.

I pull the camera's eye outward, from the game to the moon and then inward to the mountain.

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.

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.

Stanza two and no figure of speech yet? Time for a simile.

This stanza zooms into the intimate moment between the couple. It also expands the senses to include smell.

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.

Sounds like "hymen." That blatant. The next line's image continues along this theme.

The poem took this turn beyond my control. I guess I was thinking about newspapers.

I breach time and start to imagine the impact one night can have on a life.

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.

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

To lose her virginity. This was before the war.

Before he would leave her

Pregnant with Sierra, alone, until he returned,

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 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

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 last witch trial had taken place. In dense forests

Skirts still fanned cautiously around dark fires.

And this was before the reunion, before Sierra's

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

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

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.

Using names helps the reader stay grounded in a poem with many characters and references to them.

I wanted to zoom in on something and add an element of surprise and strangeness while echoing the theme of oppression in regard to women.

The dialogue allowed me to smooth over the clunky language in the last draft, and make the moment of conception magical.

Camera zooms in and voila: images.

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.

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

That made everything possible, everything feel

Secure. The way it fell through the chute, guided

By holes in the net. This was before the casket hit the ground.

This was before the war.

These lines are a rewrite of language that didn't sound right to me: "everything / Mean, everything possible, everything relate."

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."

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 my own poetics at the time that I 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.



## *Chapter Nine: Publication*

Once you have written and revised a small body of poetry, you are ready to take the next step in the writing process: publishing. A poem is “published” once it appears anywhere on the Web (even on your Facebook page or blog) or in print in a journal, magazine, or book. The word “publish” has the power, for some reason, to intimidate beginning writers. But don’t let feelings of intimidation dissuade you from sending your poems out to literary journals and magazines. Today there are more than ever, and so there are more opportunities to find a home for your work than ever before. You’ve read and written, workshopped and revised, and it’s time—in the natural life of a poem—for it to go off into the world. After all, why spend time and energy crafting poems for only yourself? Let others enjoy them, too! I guarantee you will feel quite satisfied seeing your poems in print.

### **Rights—Pure and Simple**

As a beginning writer, it is only natural to be concerned about what will happen to your work after you submit it for publication. Beginning writers tend to fear that in submitting poems to editors, there is a chance that someone will steal their poems and claim to be the writer. But you really have more to fear from publishing mediocre or unfinished work than from having your writing claimed by another. Ask around in the poetry world and you will find that stolen work is so rare that you may never find a first-, second-, or even sixth-hand account of this type of thievery ever happening. I cannot name one.

Much of this fear stems from not knowing how copyrights work. So, let’s fix that.

If you’d like to understand the laws in depth, Wikipedia is a good source to start with. Looking up [copyright](#) as well as [authors’ rights](#) will give you a detailed account of the history and current status of laws. But for poetry, these laws—especially when you are just starting out—are much simpler to understand.

As soon as you put pen to paper, you have copyrighted your writing. According to the [copyright law](#) itself, any “original work of authorship”—a poem, a book, a letter, a song—is protected by copyright the exact second it is “fixed in any tangible medium of expression.” In

other words, as soon as you write a sentence, a line, a stanza, a poem, you own the rights to it. Of course, the concern I often hear is, “If my work is stolen, how can I prove my copyright?” And the answer is that there are several ways. For example:

1. A program like Microsoft Word keeps a dated record of your work.
2. A written journal or notebook can also be dated by hand when you write.

If you are really worried about copyright, you can mail yourself a copy of your poems and leave the envelope sealed. The stamped post office date is legal proof of when the poem was written, or near it, anyway. I can tell you, though: I have never done this and know no one who has. In the world of poetry, there usually isn’t much at stake, especially monetarily. And poets tend to be respectful of each other’s art.

When a poem is accepted, it is usual for journals to request one-time publication rights and first North American rights. Basically, these permit the journal to publish the work once, and to be credited with having published the work before anybody else whenever the work is re-published. It is becoming more and more common today for journals to also ask for digital rights and future re-publication rights, as some online journals will collect their best work into a print volume. With all of these rights, the author remains the owner of the poem.

## The Publication Process

The best way to ease feelings of intimidation and anxiety when it comes to sending out poems is to do three things:

1. Create a personal routine and system of organization.
2. Educate yourself about the market.
3. Learn to love or at least live with rejection.

And a word about that third part...if you are going to send out your poems to publishers, you will receive rejections. No doubt. Everyone does. It’s part of the process. These are in no way a reflection of your worth as a person—or poet for that matter. Publication is often a matter of an editor’s personal taste, and also a matter of luck—getting the right poem in the right hands at the right time. Learning about those hands—the market, editors, and the aesthetic of journals, magazines, and presses—can serve you well and save you some rejection (but not all).

All writers have stories about pieces that were rejected X amount of times before winning Y or being published in Z. Robert M. Pirsig’s *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* was rejected 121 times. The poet Gertrude Stein was rejected for twenty-two years. Billy Collins’ first book wasn’t published until he was thirty-five. Not being rejected would be like running

a marathon without sweating: absolutely impossible—unless you'd prefer to trade your body in and become a robot. So, learn to embrace it.

Read famous authors' rejection letters [here](#).

### **Personal Routine and Organization**

Like writing, sending out your work will go smoothly if you have a system that you can fall back on. Many writers like to keep writing and publishing independent of each other—psychologically and time wise. Try to designate time to submit work just like you set time aside to write. When you write, write; when you submit, submit. They use different parts of the brain. Of course, you may find yourself revising when you actually are supposed to be submitting, but like everything else, that's okay. It's all part of the process. If you do find yourself revising poems you intended to send out, either switch to revising mode or save that poem to work on later. When submitting work for publication, if you choose poems that you feel are truly finished, you will save yourself time and be able to concentrate on submitting—so you can get back to writing.

### **Organizing Your Submission Record**

To set up a system of organization, create a Word file in which you will keep poems that are ready for publication. Save each poem separately and insert a header at the top of the page that contains your name and contact information. If a journal's guidelines requests anonymous submissions, simply erase the header when you send. In my system, I call this file "Poems for Publication" and in addition to all of the individual poems, I keep an internal file in which I save a copy of all of the poems I send to each journal. Because journals usually request that poems all be submitted in one document, you wind up creating a document each time you send. Although it's not necessary to do, I save that document as the name of the journal. For instance, if you opened up "Paris Review," it would contain the five poems I sent to the Paris Review.

Once you begin to submit, I recommend using Excel to create a spreadsheet to keep a record of your submissions. In the top column, list the names of the journals. In the left column, list the names of your poems. In the cell where each meet, type in the date you sent the work. After you hear from the journal, you can click on the cell and make a note as to whether the poem was accepted or rejected. Sometimes editors will write notes on your poems or cover letter and let you know that they liked the poem. Whenever an editor writes *anything* in handwriting, this is a good sign, even if it's just a "Thanks!" Most journals receive thousands of submissions and the editor is not obligated to respond personally. A note of thanks or a request that you submit again in the future should feel like success—because it is. Once you begin receiving responses like this, you can make notes in Excel and begin to see what poems of

yours appeal to certain journals, better allowing you to make decisions about which types of poems to send in the future.

Keeping a record of your poetry submissions is necessary for a couple more reasons. First, it is a quick and easy way for you to track submissions. You can see where they are, see how long they've been somewhere, and, as mentioned above, see what poems you have sent to places in the past. It is not atypical for a journal to take six months or longer to respond to a submission. But if you see on your spreadsheet that your poems have been somewhere for longer than eight months, it is okay to send a small inquiry to check in. Sometimes poems are lost or misplaced and checking in allows you to avoid any of these mishaps.

Secondly, when your poem is accepted for publication, you will be able to see where it is a **simultaneous submission**, and withdraw it. A simultaneous submission (SS) refers to a poem that is being considered at more than one place. Some journals accept simultaneous submissions; some do not. You should never submit a poem simultaneously to a place that prefers **exclusive submissions**, which simply means that the journal wants to be the only place considering the poem at that time. Venues that only accept exclusive submissions do not want to take the risk of the poem being accepted elsewhere while they are considering it because in their eyes it wastes their time. Please be considerate of a journal's guidelines. If you are not willing to wait the months it may take for an exclusive submission to be considered then only submit to places that accept simultaneous submissions.

One way to handle the decision about whether to submit exclusively is to only send only new or your best work to a place you really want the poem to appear. You can do a few rounds and once you exhaust your first preferences, you can simultaneously submit the poem. When submitting to a journal, you should always read the submission guidelines located in the front of a publication, or on the publication's web site. Almost all journals and magazines have a clearly designated link on their homepage to information about their submission process.

In the past, all journals accepted submission by mail. Today, almost all prefer submission via email or an online submission system. Many use an online tool called [Submittable](#), which is very easy to use. You simply set up an account and login from the website of the journal where you want to submit. Submittable will keep track of all poems submitted through their system. But because some journals prefer e-mail or snail mail, it is still good advice to maintain your own system of organization to track all of your submissions.

Thirdly, your system allows you to see which poems of yours have been published. Aside from knowing if a journal accepts simultaneous submissions, you will also need to see if a place accepts previously published (PP) poems. The high majority of places do not.

If Excel isn't for you and you would like a system that is more hands on and physical, another way to keep track of your poems is to use good old-fashioned index cards. For each journal,

create an index card that includes the name, address, e-mail, and phone number of the journal in the left hand corner. Then in the top right corner, indicate whether or not the journal accepts SS or PP. You can also jot down the average time it takes for them to respond. All of this information should be available on the journal's website, or in a source like *The Poet's Market*, which is a handy resource for finding places to submit (similar resources are listed later in this chapter). In the middle of the index card you can write how many poems the venue accepts at once, and you can also include a list of poets they've published so you can catch a quick glimpse of their aesthetic. When you submit poems to the journal, write down the names of the poems and the date on a Post-it note, stick the note to the face of the index card, and move the index card to the front of your card box or pile. This approach may seem old-fashioned, but for those of us who like to feel paper and need to interact with it in order to organize ourselves, the system works well.

### Compose a Cover Letter

Unlike a job application, the cover letter for poetry submissions can be nearly the same each use. Its purpose is to organize the information you send and to enable editors to match the submitted poems with the poet if anything is shuffled or mixed up. The cover letter also provides editors with a reliable way to contact the poet. A good cover letter will contain the following:

- The poet's name, address, phone, and e-mail address
- The titles of the poems sent
- Whether or not the poems are simultaneous submissions
- A short author bio (often optional)

Short bios are written in third person and may include where you were educated, your degree/s, the names of your books, awards, names of journals where you've been published, and where you teach or work. However, do not worry if you do not have any of these. Most journals love publishing work by new writers and the bio is really just a formality. In fact, many journals today opt for a much more casual and personal biography from their writers. Sometimes bios can even be humorous. So if you are not a PhD with ten books, saying where you live and that you like cats is usually perfectly acceptable. If you are uncomfortable including a bio, you may send in your work without one; if your work is accepted for publication the editors will request one then.

The following template may be used to compose your cover letter, including the bio:

Date  
 Poet's Name  
 Address

Phone

E-mail Address

*Journal Name*

Address

Dear Editor's Name or Editor,

I am submitting the following poems to be considered for publication:

- Poem one
- Poem two
- Poem three
- Poem four
- Poem five

All are simultaneous submissions, but you will be notified immediately if any are accepted for publication elsewhere. A brief bio should you need it:

(Name of poet) is a student at (name of college), where he/she is studying (subject). Originally from (name of town/state), he/she enjoys (something neat about you or another simple fact).

I appreciate your time and consideration, and look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Name of poet

Once you begin to accumulate publications you may add them to your bio.

### **Study the "Market"**

You do not need a degree in publishing to send out poems. Nor do you need to be a doctor of literature. What you do need is access to a journal, either by print copy or the Internet, so you can see what the venue publishes. The best way to select where to send your work may be the tried-and-true method of choosing places that publish work you like.

There are a couple of ways to familiarize yourself with the poetry market:

- The library
- A publishing resource
- Books of poems

Your college library and English department—especially if your college houses a literary journal or press—are great places to find journals and magazines, as well as publishing resources. In the library, recent poetry journals will be stacked with periodicals. Your library might even have older ones on the shelves. Asking your librarian for assistance and suggestions (that is why they are there!) will save you time and probably provide you with information for which you couldn't have even thought to ask. Librarians often hold master's degrees in library science—yes, science!—and know much more than you do about how to locate sources efficiently. Once you gather a stack of journals, most libraries have comfortable, private nooks and crannies in which you can tuck yourself away for a bit while you browse.

If your department houses a national literary journal or publication, you may have access to a small library of journals you can browse. It is a common practice for literary journals to do exchanges with other literary journals. That way the college acquires a library of current writing for students interested in publishing or editing. Many colleges also publish a publication that features work by students. If your college has one of these, you may consider not only submitting work, but becoming involved on the editorial side of the equation. These valuable resources can provide you with experience and skills that will not only help you when it comes to writing and publishing poetry, but may also help you as a future job seeker.

### **Publishing Resources**

In addition to print journals, in recent years there's been a boom of online literary journals as the Internet has made it easy for anyone to publish and maintain one. In fact, there are now so many that it is easy to become overwhelmed in pursuing the goal of finding respectable places for your work. Rather than browsing the Web randomly, it is helpful to use a publishing resource to locate potential places for your poems. The following is a list of resources that summarize a journal's history and aesthetics, and provide a list of essential information for submitters:

- [The Council of Literary Magazines and Presses \(CLMP\) Literary Magazine Directory](#) (free)
- [International Directory of Little Magazines and Small Presses](#) (order or check your library)
- [Poets and Writers Literary Magazines Database](#) (free)
- [The Poet's Market](#) (order or check your library)
- [Duotrope](#) (subscription based)
- [NewPages Guide to Literary Magazines](#) (free)
- [Susquehanna University: Guide to Undergraduate Literary Magazines](#) (free)

## Research Questions

Whether you are reading a print or online journal, the following questions will help you locate an appropriate place to submit your poems:

- Do I like the work in this journal?

The answer here should be yes. Why would you want to publish work somewhere where you don't like the writing?

- Do I know and/or enjoy the poets in this journal?

If the answer is yes, then this is good sign.

- Does anything in the poems this journal publishes remind me of my own poetry?

If the answer is yes, then the journal might be a potential place to send your work.

- Does the body of the journal (print or online appearance) look professional?

You want the answer here to be yes. Professionalism shows the editors care about the journal and your work.

- Are there any typos or errors visible?

Errors are usually a sign that you should not submit your work here.

- Aside from a small submission fee through the journal's online submission system, do I need to pay money to submit work?

You should never have to pay a place to publish work. There are many scams out there, and this is one of the easiest tip-offs. You want to publish in places where your work is selected because of merit, not because of cash.

- Am I required to purchase a copy of the journal if I appear in it?

Again, not only should there be no obligation to purchase the text, but it is usual for you to receive at least one free copy and often a discount on additional copies of the journal in which your work appears. Most of the time that is the only payment you will receive, but this isn't about making a fortune; it's about ushering your poems into their next life stage.

## Using Books to Find Places to Publish Poems

In most poetry books there is an acknowledgements page which lists journals where a poem first appears. It is usually located in the very front or very back of a collection. If you like a certain poet, or feel that a certain poet has influenced your writing, look at the poet's acknowl-

edgements page and see where his or her poems have appeared. There is a good chance that if you like a poem and the editors of a journal likes the poem, then the editor might like your poems, too.

### Activity

Browse one of the free resources listed above and locate ten literary journals or magazines that you believe might be a good fit for your work. Include two to three sentences that explain the reasoning behind why you believe this is true.

### Making Fun of Rejection

I'm not sure why the rejection slip has the reputation it does. Like any sport or art, poetry comes with ways of thinking that can assist you in becoming better. If you are a runner you know what I mean: those mind tricks you use to keep yourself going. For writers, rather than seeing a rejection slip as a sign of failure, view it as something more akin to a ribbon or medal. It is an indicator of persistence, confidence, and the seriousness with which you view your work as a writer. A constant stream of rejections bursts with potential. If your poems aren't out, they're not getting published! The poet William Stafford is said to have sent out rejected poems the same day they came back so that his poems were always under consideration.

It is a fact that any writer who publishes has received rejection emails and slips, and many of those writers keep a nice collection of those slips. A friend and I used to see who could collect the most slips the fastest. It was a way to make rejection a game, and a way for us to, like Stafford, continually keep our poems under consideration.

If you need a lift after some rejections, there are many websites and online articles that can help you shift perspective. Here are a few articles to start with:

- [20 Brilliant Writers Whose Work Was Initially Rejected](#)
- [50 Iconic Writers Who Were Repeatedly Rejected](#)
- [10 Rejection Letters Sent to Famous People](#)

Learning to accept rejection is part of the process of many endeavors. Send your poems out enough and you will see; what twenty editors reject, one will reward with high recognition. Don't ever give up on your poems.



## *Chapter Ten: Reading Your Poems to an Audience*

In addition to publishing poems online or in print, another way to share your poems with the public is by reading them at an open mike event or at a more formal reading. Since poetry is an oral art, presenting your work this way is more natural to poetry's auditory nuances; as anyone who has listened to poetry read aloud knows, the impact can be more powerful than when poems are read silently in one's head. Some poets are very good at delivering their poems out loud to an audience. Other poets are not. I have attended readings where I was brought to tears by the power of beautiful language. And I have attended readings where I was nearly brought to tears for another reason. One reading by very well-published and respected poets was so intensely slow and monotonous that I thought I might never attend a reading ever again.

If you are writing poetry seriously, there is a good chance that you will be called upon or given the chance to read to an audience. At the very least you will be reading your poems in class to your workshop peers, a captive audience who, too, deserve to hear the poem delivered in an effective way. This chapter will provide you with tips and approaches to make sure your poems inspire listeners and to make the process enjoyable and rewarding for you, too.

### **Want to Read**

How many of you have attended a poetry reading or listened to poets read online? If you have attended readings before, think to what made the reading enjoyable or made you wish you were somewhere else—anywhere else.

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

Kwame Dawes, [“Tornado Child”](#)

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

In contrast, readers who bore the audience show the following traits:

1. A clear state of not wanting to be there
2. Speaking too quietly
3. Rushing!
4. Monotone delivery
5. Not looking up from the page

The poets on the [“Poetry Everywhere”](#) site all read differently. Some, like Kwame Dawes and Shara McCullum, are very animated and willing to perform—they sing, they create voices for dialogue. Others, like Bob Hicok, rarely lift their eyes from the page. Whereas Naomi Shihab Nye in a crowded room is intimate with the audience and even interrupts the poem to better explain herself, Sharon Olds alone in a room reads from the book intensely but with distance. All of these poets portray ways to read that can help you deliver your own poems effectively. You do not need to sing. A poetry audience is generally very forgiving, supportive, and pos-

sibly one of the most attentive audiences anyone could stand in front of. We simply need to *want* to read.

Even if you are uncomfortable in front of an audience, the good news is that strong reading skills can be learned, practiced, and perfected. And the number one thing you need to do to be a successful reader is to *want* to be there. If you feel good about your poems, if you want to read your poems to an audience, you will take the time to read them in a way so the audience will understand. Listeners will most likely not have the poems in front of them, so it will be up to you to hand them the words at a pace that permits them to follow along.

### Discussion

What types of opportunities are there for poets to read in your area? At your college? In your community?

### Tips for Reading

Generally speaking, poets tend to be shy and often introverted. Writers work in solitude, and being in a room of poets is nothing like being in a room of actors or theater people who spend most of their time around people. Yet, when poets read, they often channel some of the skills used by performers, even if it's just speaking up and slowing down. It helps to lend the reading a little bit of drama, breathing life into the poem's speaker, so that the poem read aloud has a beating heart, breathing lungs, and a glowing soul.

### Activity

Read through these [TED Talk Tips](#) about public speaking, which include eating protein beforehand, exercising to burn off cortisol, and not asking anxiety-producing “what if” questions. What other tips might be useful before reading your poems in public?

One of the most common challenges of reading to an audience is managing nervousness or anxiety. Arriving early and settling into your space can help alleviate some of this. If you are reading at a bookstore or café, show up fifteen minutes before the event starts and browse the aisles or order a bite to eat. Just be careful not to drink too much if alcohol is involved in the event. Find your seat and get comfortable. You may introduce yourself to others in attendance or to the host if you've been invited to read. Many times an open mike will have a host or director. Introducing yourself and mingling just a little bit can really take the edge off unfamiliarity of the setting. Plus you may make a friend or discover something new.

Breathing deeply can also help to cool your nerves before a reading. Just a few deep breaths slows down your heart rate and helps you focus. Likewise, closing your eyes for a few seconds can help center you, too. All of these techniques can help make your experience a good one, and the more you do them, the easier reading your poems becomes.

Of course, we all know the advice to imagine your audience in their underwear. And if this works, by all means, feel free. The basic point is to realize that your vulnerability is an illusion. All of us are on equal footing. Most of us have been in each other's position. I realize remembering this may be easier said than done.

Another approach to calming nerves is to have a ritual. Maybe wear a certain something each time you read. Or sip a cup of orange tea beforehand. The routine of doing something creates a pattern in our minds and bodies that makes it easier to relax and prepare for the task at hand.

One way to warm up in a reading is to read someone else's poem first. This is a way to give tribute to someone you like, and a way to seep into your reading groove. Many poets will choose a poem that reflects their mood for that day or the day's events. If it is near a holiday, choose a similarly themed poem. If the weather has been snowy, read a poem that refers to winter. Similarly, some poets will tell a short funny story about something relevant to the moment, mood, or day. Beginning with something personal can help situate both you and the audience and introduce you to each other.

### **General Rules for Readings**

Being asked to read poetry somewhere is an honor, and an opportunity to which you should always agree. The more you practice, the better and more relaxed you will become in front of an audience; besides, the skill of public speaking is one that is beneficial to you not only as a poet, but also as a future professional in your field of study. I encourage you to participate in open mike nights on campus or in your communities, and to take pleasure in being part of the poetry community.

The following rules of etiquette will help you when reading:

1. Once you know you are going to read, know what it is you are going to read (or at least have it narrowed down) and **practice reading it out loud** before delivering it to the audience. You may even practice reading it in front of someone and asking for feedback. While you practice, it might even be helpful to make notes in the margins for cues as to when to slow down, pause, look up, etc.
2. When asked to read or signing up to read, be sure to **stick to your time limit** or read a little under. What's that rule? Always keep them wanting more? A reading that drags on becomes boring and the audience loses interest in the work.
3. **Be gracious.** Thank your audience for their attention and attendance. Thank the

hosts for the opportunity to read.

4. **Smile.** Smiling will relax your body, focus your mind, and gather the audience's attention.

5. **Stay.** If reading at an open mike or with several other poets, don't walk out after your reading. Stay and support the other readers.

### Activity

Small, intimate [gatherings of poets](#) have been the norm throughout history. [The Beats](#), the [Fireside Poets](#), and the [Surrealists](#) all nurtured their art by nurturing each other's, mostly in friendship. Investigate your community and campus to find an opportunity to read your work and become part of the poetry community. Check bookstores, coffeehouses, cafés, and art galleries. Gather a few friends and go for it!

Alternatively, if you can't find an open mike, create one! Either approach a manager or owner of a local business, or host a small reading at your place. Ask friends to bring a dish or beverage and make it a potluck.



## Key Terms

abecedarian: A poem in which the first letter of each line follows the alphabet down the page. There are no restrictions on meter or rhyme.

abstract words: Idea words such as “dream,” “love,” or “curiosity” that one cannot touch physically and experience directly through the five senses.

alliteration: In a line of poetry, a series of sounds consonants make at the beginning of or in the middle of words.

allusion: An indirect reference made to something else.

anapest:  $\sim \sim \text{'}'$  Two light stresses followed by a heavy stress.

aubade: A poem about the morning or dawn.

ballad: A poem 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.

blank verse: A form that lends itself well to a meditative voice, blank verse is written in iambic pentameter lines that do not rhyme.

catalectic: An incomplete line of metrical poetry in which the last syllable or foot is dropped.

Ch'i-Yen-Shih: In this Chinese pattern, each line contains seven monosyllabic words with a caesura after each fourth word. The rhyme scheme is comprised of the pattern A B C B.

cliché: A phrase that is so overused that its use results in unoriginal and unimaginative expression

cinquain: [Adelaide Crapsey](#) established this unrhymed iambic form, which consists of a five-line stanza with the syllable count 2 4 6 8 2.

concrete words: Words that refer to something with physical properties that can be experienced with the five senses such as “chair,” “water,” or “cat.”

consonance: [Edward Hirsch](#) defines this as “the audible repetition of consonant sounds in words encountered near each other whose vowel sounds are different”—flower-fades-fruit: fow-fay-frew.

couplet: A stanza comprised of two lines.

dactyl: ' ~ ~ A heavy stress followed by two light stresses.

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.

diction: Word choice.

dimeter: A two-foot line

Dodoitsu: This Japanese form is composed of four lines with the syllable count 7 7 7 5. There is no rhyme or set meter.

elegy: An elegy is a lament for the dead and contains the character of sadness and loss. It is considered a public poem that when done best, according to Mark Strand and Evan Boland, sets the customs of death in a particular culture against the decorum and private feelings of the speaker.

end-rhyme: When two or more words that end lines rhyme.

end-stopped lines: A line of poetry that ends in punctuation.

enjambéd lines: The running over of a sentence across multiple lines of poetry.

envoi: Also known as “tornada”: this is the final tercet of a sestina.

exclusive submissions: A term used to refer to poems in the submission process that are under consideration by only one publisher exclusively.

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 person writes two more lines and folds the paper so that only the second line is visible; and so on.

feminine end: A line of poetry that ends with an unstressed beat.

figurative language: Words or phrases in which the meaning is not literal.

first person: A writing perspective that uses “I.”

foot: In metrical verse, lines can be divided into length and rhythm which we refer to as feet. Each foot is comprised of stressed and unstressed syllables.

ghazal: Typically dealing with subjects of love and separation, the ghazal is a form with Arabic roots consisting of rhyming couplets of the same syllabic length and a refrain.

genre: Categories used to describe types of writing such as fiction, non-fiction, poetry, and drama.

haiku: This well-known Japanese form is three lines long and comprised of unrhymed, unmetred lines with a 5 7 5 syllable count. Traditionally, the haiku’s subject matter relates to nature or seasons.

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

hyperbole: An exaggerated statement.

iamb: ~ ‘ A light stress followed by a heavy stress.

image: A mental image, what we see with the mind’s eye.

impure line: A line in a poem that breaks from an established pattern altogether.

internal rhyme: Lines of poetry in which words in the middle of a line rhyme with words at the end of other lines.

Italian quatrain: A poem consisting of four lines written in iambic pentameter and rhyme A B B A.

katauta: A three-line poem with the syllable count 5 7 7, the first line posing a question that the next two lines attempt to answer in an intuitive, immediate way.

masculine end: A line of poetry that ends with a stressed beat.

metaphor: A direct comparison between two things, as in *Hope is the thing with feathers* (Emily Dickinson, “Hope”).

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)

monometer: A one-foot line.

octameter: An eight-foot line.

octave: A stanza containing eight lines.

pantoum: Originating in Malaysia, the pantoum was adapted by French poets. It consists of an unlimited number of quatrains in which the second and fourth lines of each are repeated in the first and third 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 may be the last.

penultimate: Second to last.

pentameter: A five-foot line.

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").

Petrarchan sonnet: This sonnet contains two stanzas: one octet that rhymes as A B B A–A B B A, and a remaining sextet with varying rhyme schemes. The volta occurs between the stanzas.

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 second poet, matching the form, answers. The topics usually related to love, philosophy, or morality.

prose poem: The prose poem, which can be any length, isn't broken into verse, but contains many of the elements of poetry: figures of speech, musical language, internal rhyme, repetition, condensed syntax, and imagery.

prosody: The musical patterns of language.

pure line: A line of poetry that adheres to a pattern the poem has undertaken.

quatrain: A stanza comprised of four lines.

rhyme scheme: Clear end-rhyming patterns in a poem.

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–B A B–A B A R.

scansion: The process of scanning lines of poetry to mark stressed and unstressed beats and determine the poem's pattern of meter and length.

sense: One of a human being's five ways of interacting physically with the world around her: sight, hearing, taste, touch, and smell.

septameter: A seven-foot line.

septet: A stanza containing seven lines.

sestina: The sestina consists of five sestets culminating in a final tercet called an **envoi**, also called a **tornada**. The six words that end each of the lines in the first stanza repeat throughout the poem 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 A or A C E

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

sextet: A stanza containing six lines.

Shakespearian sonnet: Comprised of an octet and a sextet, this sonnet is composed in iambic pentameter and rhymes A B A B–C D C D–E F E F–G G. The volta appears either between lines eight and nine or between lines twelve and thirteen.

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").

simultaneous submissions: A term used to refer to poems in the submission process that are under consideration by multiple publishers at one time.

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 rhyme or meter, or with none at all.

spondee: – – Two equal stresses.

Spenserian sonnet: This sonnet modifies the Petrarchan to contain a rhyme scheme of A B A B–B C B C–C D C D–E E.

split couplet: Composed of two lines, the split couplet contains a first line in iambic tetrame-

ter and a second in iambic dimeter; the two lines should rhyme. Another variation is to write the first line in iambic pentameter.

stanza: A unit of poetry consisting of lines and bordered by blank space; similar to a paragraph in prose.

stress: The syllables in a line of poetry that are emphasized.

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).

synonym: A word with a similar meaning.

tanka: This Japanese form, which focuses primarily on nature or strong emotions, consists of five unrhymed, non-metrical lines with the syllable count 5 7 5 7 7.

tercet: A stanza containing three lines.

tetrameter: A four-foot line.

Than-Bauk: Also known as “Climbing Rhyme,” this Burmese form consists of three four-syllable lines, with rhyme falling on the fourth syllable of the first line, the third syllable of the second line, and the second syllable of the third line.

third person: A writing perspective that uses “he/she/it.”

tone: An attitude the speaker of a poem has toward the subject. It is represented in its musical qualities: pitch, duration, and volume.

tornada: Also known as “envoi,” this is the final tercet of a sestina.

trimeter: A three-foot line

trochee: ' ~ A heavy stress followed by a light stress.

verse: Lines of poetry.

villanelle: This French form consists of five tercets and a final quatrain. The first stanza's first and third lines 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 of the poem.

volta: A turn in thought in the sonnet form indicated sometimes by a “but” or “yet.”

volta: The turn that takes place in a sonnet in which there is a marked change in the speaker's thought, emotion or rhetoric.

waka: This Japanese form, which focuses primarily on nature or strong emotions, consists of five unrhymed, non-metrical lines with the syllable count 5 7 5 7 7. Lines one and two, as well as three and four, form complete sentences, as does the last line.



# Concrete Word List

acorn

alarm clock

anchor

ant hill

apple core

asteroid

atom bomb

avalanche

balloon

battery

beehive

beer bottle

blizzard

bulldozer

bullet

cage

cigarette

closet

cocoon

cricket

dagger

desert

doghouse

earthworm

firecracker

fire engine

fishtank

flame

forest

garden

glacier

harbor

hatchet

hurricane

ice cube

icicle

island

jet engine

jungle	sewer
lawn mower	shark
leaf	skeleton
leash	skyscraper
light bulb	snowflake
lightning bolt	spiderweb
map	sponge
microscope	subway
mirror	swimming pool
missile	tavern
mosquito bite	taxicab
mountain	telescope
needle	temple
ocean	tombstone
pebble	tornado
piano	tricycle
raindrop	tsunami
river	tunnel
rope	turnpike
rope bridge	umbrella
sand castle	volcano
satellite	waterfall
seashell	yo-yo
see-saw	zoo

# Abstract Word List

agony

animosity

anticipation

anxiety

apathy

arrogance

awe

boredom

confidence

confusion

courage

cowardice

creativity

cruelty

desire

despair

disgust

doubt

envy

evil

faith

fate

fear

frustration

genius

glory

grief

guilt

heartlessness

honesty

hope

ignorance

immaturity

impatience

indecision

injustice

jealousy

joy

loneliness

love

lust

maturity

misery

modesty

motivation

nostalgia

optimism

paranoia

patience

perseverance

pity

pride

rage

recklessness

regret

remorse

responsibility

restlessness

sadness

serenity

shame

sobriety

sorrow

stubbornness

surprise

sympathy

tolerance

trust

vice

weariness

wonder

# Recommended Accompanying Resources

## Chapter One: Getting Started: Nine Muses

Stafford, William. "A Way of Writing" <http://ualr.edu/rmburns/rb/staffort.html>

Hugo, Richard.

"Writing Off the Subject" <http://ualr.edu/rmburns/rb/hsubj.html>

The Triggering Town <http://ualr.edu/rmburns/rb/htrigt.html>

Whitman, Walt. Song of Myself [http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/s\\_z/whitman/song.htm](http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/s_z/whitman/song.htm)

Walt Whitman: An American Experience. PBS Documentary. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/whitman/>

Museum of Modern Art. Most viewed exhibits. [http://www.moma.org/explore/most\\_viewed](http://www.moma.org/explore/most_viewed)

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

## Chapter Two: Images

A Thesaurus

## Chapter Three: Voice

Burroway, Janet. *Writing Fiction*.

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

## Chapter Four: Architecture

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

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

### **Chapter Five: Acoustics**

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

### **Chapter Six: Experimenting with Forms**

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.uwnorton.com/books/The-Making-of-a-Poem/>

### **Chapter Seven: Revision**

The Poet's Billow. [www.thepoetsbillow.org](http://www.thepoetsbillow.org)

### **Chapter Eight: Publishing**

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

*Poets and Writers* [www.pw.org](http://www.pw.org)

NewPages.com [www.newpages.com](http://www.newpages.com)

### **Chapter Nine: Reading Your Poems to an Audience**

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

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