

Poetry handouts

Donn Taylor

5 Coralberry Court

The Woodlands, TX 77381-2865 *Permission is granted to print one copy for personal use.*

donn_taylor@sbcglobal.net

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GETTING STARTED WRITING POETRY

PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS IN GETTING STARTED: Methods for starting to write poetry are much the same as for starting other writing projects.

1. Make an appointment with yourself for a specific time of day and devote at least one hour to writing or studying poetry. Keep these appointments.
2. Keep a journal. Begin each session with freewriting. Don't grade your journal.
3. Carry a notebook to note down ideas for poems, to record striking words and phrases as soon as they occur.
4. Write at least a few lines of poetry at each writing session.
5. Don't edit first drafts as you go. Complete the draft and put it aside for later editing. When you do edit, don't throw away the first draft: it may wear better than the edited product.
6. Read a lot of the kind of poetry you'd like to write. (All poets begin by imitating their preferred models.)
7. Remember James Dickey's statement about writing poetry: You never complete a poem; you only abandon it.
8. Join a group of practicing poets. Meet regularly and criticize each other's work.
9. Never be intimidated because another writer is more advanced than you. (Even John Milton began as a beginner.)

This example does not use image, metaphor, or other structures usually recommended to make poetry vivid. In most respects, it is narrative prose. But it does use division of poetic lines to put the important words in the emphatic places. I put this in chiefly to show that, in spite everything we say from here on, there is a poetry of plain statement.

WORD CHOICE: Some techniques for achieving "higher voltage" are the same in both poetry and prose. In general, verbs are stronger than nouns, nouns stronger than adjectives, adjectives stronger than adverbs. When you need strength, put the main idea in the verb. Note the increasing strength of these sentences (modeled after a lesson from Famous Writers School):

My ambition is to be a poet. (Main idea in a noun; the verb *is* is weak.)

I aspire to be a poet. (Main idea in an action verb.)

I yearn to be a poet. (Main idea in a strong action verb.)

These sentences also show that some verbs are stronger than others. State-of-being verbs (forms of *to be*) are always weak and should be avoided when strength is needed. *Be*-verbs and other weak parts of speech such as conjunctions, prepositions, and articles should be kept to a minimum: All are necessary, but using many of them makes for weak writing. Action verbs vary greatly in their vividness or dramatic quality, as do nouns, adjectives, and adverbs. In general monosyllables are stronger than polysyllables, and words derived from Old English (*yearn*) are stronger than Latin-derived words (*aspire*). The poet's task is to use these degrees of strength appropriately, as Shakespeare does in Hamlet's dying request to his friend Horatio:

If ever thou didst hold me in thy heart,
Absent thee from felicity a while
And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain
To tell my story.

The soft, Latinate words of the second line give way to the hard-hitting monosyllables of the third (most of which are derived from Old or Middle English). It took Shakespeare decades of practice to achieve that level of art, and few if any of us will ever write lines of that perfection. Yet, through consistent practice of the principles stated here, many of us can turn out some fairly respectable poems.

Certain positions in the poetic line are stronger or more emphatic than others. This is true in both free verse and metric verse. The final word of a line holds the strongest position, the first word of a line holds the next strongest. In the previous quotation, the strongest word (pain) occurs at the end of a line. Thus the rule is, in general, to **place the strongest word at the end of the line or let the line end on a weak word followed by a strong word at the beginning of the following line**. As in this example:

Waking before the sunrise, she and I
Walk the woodland trails beginning when darkness
Flows, flood-tide, and sends its liquid currents
Billowing over the scarred and sullied earth....

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Darkness and *currents* occupy emphatic positions at the end of lines, but their soft endings pass the reader quickly through to emphasize the first words of the following lines, *Flows* and *Billowing*. *Flows* receives further emphasis by being set off by the comma that follows it.

Words (or phrases) can also be emphasized by putting them in a separate line:

...like an experienced bureaucrat shouting "Eureka!"
as after awkward arduous hours he invents
an octagonal wheel.

(© 1978)

Strong words can be made stronger by preceding them with weak words, as in this line from Tennyson's "Ulysses":

To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

To summarize: 1. When possible, put the main idea in a strong verb.

2. Find strong words and put them in emphatic positions in the poetic line.

3. Use as few weak words as possible. Use the necessary weak words to make strong words look stronger by contrast.

STRUCTURES TO ACHIEVE HIGHER VOLTAGE:

IMAGES: An image is defined as any word or combination that appeals to one of the five senses. Why are they important? Because everything we know about the world we live in begins with the five senses. When we appeal to the five senses in writing, we imitate the learning method our readers have used all their lives.

Here we also have to deal with expressing abstract ideas in concrete terms to make them more easily understandable. The poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe said, "I no sooner have an idea, than it turns into an image." Here are two examples: An abstract statement might be: "Ideas have greater power than military force." Edward Bulwer-Lytton made it concrete with two sharp images: "The pen is mightier than the sword." An abstract statement might be: "A paid militia costs more than it is worth." John Dryden made the thought concrete by calling the militia "mouths without hands."

Though we have to be concerned with communicating ideas, we also have to gain reader interest. Images are even more important in this. As sight is the most powerful of the senses, so visual images are usually the most powerful images. But the most vivid writing appeals to more than one sense and the skillful writer will find ways to appeal to taste and smell as well as sight, sound, and touch. Consider this stanza from A.E. Housman (1859-1936):

On moonlit heath and lonesome bank
The sheep beside me graze;
And yon the gallows used to clank
Fast by the four cross ways.

Of the stanza's 26 syllables, only nine are filled by weak, connective words, and seven of those are followed immediately by strong words in accented positions. The imagery appeals to both sight (moonlit heath, bank, grazing sheep, gallows, cross ways) and sound (clank). In my view, the strong word *lonesome* is not an image, but falls into a category I call emotionally loaded words (sorrow, pain, happy, etc.), which also can add interest to poetry.

Here is a vivid stanza from "Sea Fever," by John Masefield (1878-1967). The images appeal to three senses, and the weaker syllables almost disappear among the strong, well-placed images.

I must go down to the seas again, to the lonely sea and the sky,
And all I ask is a tall ship and a star to steer her by,
And the wheel's kick and the wind's song and the white sail's shaking,
And a gray mist on the sea's face and a gray dawn breaking.

Images can also appeal to taste and smell. Here are two examples from "The Eve of St. Agnes," by John Keats (1795-1821):

...he from forth the closet brought a heap
Of candied apple, quince, and plum, and gourd;
With jellies soother than the creamy curd
And lucent syrups, tinct with cinnamon....

Then Keats uses another provocative image to describe the lovers' union:

Into her dream he melted, as the rose

Blendeth its odor with the violet,
 Solution sweet....

As in the Housman stanza, the lines from Masfield and Keats illustrate minimizing weak words and maximizing strong words, including images, in emphatic positions. Though most of us cannot compete with these three poets, we can improve our own poetry by following their principles.

FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE: Another basic poetic structure is figurative language. The most common figures are personification, simile, metaphor, and symbol. (Also common, but beyond today's discussion, are overstatement, understatement, and irony.) Figurative language lets us say things we can't find ways to say literally, or it lets us say things in a more interesting manner.

Figures of speech capitalize on the natural tendency of our minds to compare one thing with another. We use them so often we aren't even aware that we're speaking figuratively.

In the beginning of the movie *Driving Miss Daisy*, Miss Daisy wrecks her car. To explain it, she says, "The car did not behave properly." The figure she is using is **personification**: giving human characteristics to non-human things.

Figures compare one thing to another, but not all comparisons are figurative:

Literal:	Joe is as strong as an ox.
Simile:	Joe is like an ox.
Metaphor:	Joe is an ox.

One of my favorites comes not from poetry, but from a mystery novel by Raymond Chandler:

She smelled like the Taj Mahal looks by moonlight.

The sentence has sharp images, but it also gains interest by crossing over from one sense into another, as Emily Dickinson did when she wrote, "To the bugle, every color is red." Here are a few illustrations of how real masters have used figurative language in poetry:

Sweet is the breath of morn.... (Milton)

[of Helen of Troy] Was this the face that launched a thousand ships
 And burnt the topless towers of Ilium? (Marlowe)

There is no frigate like a book/To take us lands away....(Dickinson)

But at my back I always hear/Time's winged chariot hurrying near;
 And yonder all before us lie/Deserts of vast eternity. (Marvell)
 [prayer for salvation] Take me to you, imprison me, for I
 Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,

Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me. (Donne)

'Twere profanation of our joys
To tell the laity our love. (Donne)

PRACTICAL WORK: Please turn to the exercises on the final page.

ORGANIZING THE POEM: The ways of organizing a poem are almost infinite, so these are a mere sampling. I like to compare a short poem to a paragraph: it has a main idea that may be stated or unstated, and everything in the poem points to or develops that one idea. (There are, of course, impressionistic poems that don't follow that principle.)

FIGURE OF SPEECH: A single striking figure of speech can become the organizing principle of an entire poem, as in this example from Emily Dickinson (1830-86):

My Life had stood—a Loaded Gun—
In Corners—till a Day
The Owner passed—identified—
And carried Me away—
..... (three stanzas omitted)
To foe of His—I'm deadly foe—
None stir the second time—
On whom I lay a Yellow Eye—
Or an emphatic Thumb—

Though I than He—may longer live
He longer must—than I—
For I have but the power to kill,
Without—the power to die—

Remarkably, this turns out to be a poem about faithful love. The speaker's life is unused until the lover takes possession of her. Then she becomes fiercely allied with the lover and protective of him. At first reading, we're tempted to understand the Owner as God or Christ, but the last stanza's idea of her living longer than he eliminates that possibility. There's also a wonderful image and figure in the next-to-last stanza—the Yellow Eye image for the firing of an aimed gun. And the figure in the last two lines is paradox.

In a way, it's cheating to bring Emily Dickinson's poetic riddles into a session on getting started. In all honesty, I don't follow all of her figurative language even after study and reading critical treatments. But this poem does illustrate the use of a startling metaphor to dramatize an abstract concept: a lifetime love that defines one's entire existence.

ANALOGY: A poem can also be organized around an analogy, usually moving from concrete to abstract, as in this poem by Walt Whitman (1819-1892):

A noiseless patient spider,
 I marked where on a little promontory it stood isolated,
 Marked how to explore the vacant vast surrounding,
 It launched forth filament, filament, filament, out of itself,
 Ever unreeling them, ever tirelessly speeding them.

And you, O my soul where you stand,
 Surrounded, detached, in measureless oceans of space,
 Ceaselessly musing, venturing, throwing, seeking the spheres to connect them,
 Till the bridge you will need to be formed, till the ductile anchor hold,
 Till the gossamer thread you fling catch somewhere, O my soul.

The physical quest of the first stanza becomes an analog of the intellectual or spiritual quest of the second. As you study the poem, notice the placement of emphatic words in emphatic places, and the use of rhythm and sound repetition to dramatize the stated actions.

AN EXCEPTION: Despite what we said about greater density and higher voltage, it's possible to write a poetry of plain statement, as Stephen Crane (1871-1900) did in this example:

A man said to the universe:
 "Sir, I exist!"
 "However," replied the universe,
 "The fact has not created in me
 A sense of obligation."

COMMONPLACE MATERIALS IN NEW COMBINATION: Even the most commonplace materials can become the organizing principle of a poem. We've all read the Superman comic books, but who would think of making a poem out of them? Jack Butler did (© 2006, printed in *FIRST THINGS*, www.firstthings.com, March, 2006. Reprinted by permission.):

I WAS, ONCE MORE, SUPERMAN

in my dreams
 last night, torching a section of steel pipe loose
 With X-ray vision, swigging like orange juice
 a gallon of explosive oil. Such themes,
 a half-century past childhood!—So fast I blurred
 invisible, so nimble I pirouetted
 with atoms, so powerful my passage shredded
 the air like thunder when I stopped or stirred.

And yes, I flew. Lifted my arms and flew.
 swooped and zoomed and shrank the world to a map.
 flying's the greatest happiness of sleep.

I woke to find myself still me, and you

still you, of course, still angry from our fight,
and all this Earth a vale of kryptonite.

PRESENT OLD IDEAS IN NEW COMBINATIONS: The ancient Greek Archimedes said he could move the world if you gave him a lever and a place to stand. Amit Majmudar brought that idea into a new combination with Christianity to form a wonderful short poem (© 2008, in *FIRST THINGS*, www.firstthings.com, February, 2008. Reprinted by permission.):

ARCHIMEDES QUATRAIN

Jerusalem, fulcrum of our uplift,
Is not this rough plan the Cross, laid across Golgotha,
The lever with which the philosophers boasted
They could move the world?

CAPSULIZE A BIBLICAL OR HISTORICAL PERSON OR EVENT:

BARAK (*Judges 4*)

After fine words of prophecy
Gray doubt crept in to quarrel.
I won the victory in the field:
A woman wears my laurel.
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PUT A NEW TWIST ON A WELL-KNOWN LINE, THOUGHT, OR CLICHÉ: –

Remembering, of course that not all poems are serious:

THOUGHTS ON THE HOUSTON ROCKETS' RECENT SEASON

Their light show comes on with a rush
And a trumpeted promise to crush;
But with old talents molding
And fourth-quarter folding,
The Rockets' red glare is a blush.
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Here are two poems rich in figurative language. . . . Explore the figures of each to find the limits of their meanings. The Keats sonnet uses geographical exploration as a metaphor for intellectual exploration. (He couldn't read Greek and had to read Homer in George Chapman's translation. Note that the historical error on Balboa's discovery of the Pacific Ocean does not disqualify the poem's meaning.)

ON FIRST LOOKING INTO CHAPMAN'S HOMER (John Keats, 1816)

Much have I travelled in the realms of gold,
 And many goodly states and kingdoms seen;
 Round many western islands have I been
 Which bards in fealty to Apollo hold.
 Oft of one wide expanse had I been told
 That deep-browed Homer ruled as his demesne;
 Yet did I never breathe its pure serene
 Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold:

Then felt I like some watcher of the skies
 When a new planet swims into his kin;
 Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes
 He stared at the Pacific—and all his men
 Looked at each other with a wild surmise—
 Silent, upon a peak in Darien.

In this poem, John Donne uses light and shadow as symbols of fidelity and falsehood.

A LECTURE UPON THE SHADOW (John Donne, 1572-1631)

Stand still, and I will read to thee
 A lecture, love, in love's philosophy.
 These three hours that we have spent
 Walking here, two shadows went
 Along with us, which we ourselves produced;
 But now the sun is just above our head,
 We do those shadows tread
 And to brave clearness all things are reduced.
 So, whilst our infant loves did grow,
 Disguises did and shadows flow
 From us and our care; but now, 'tis not so.

That love hath not attained the high'st degree
 Which is still diligent lest others see.

Except our loves at this noon stay,
 We shall new shadows make the other way.
 As the first were made to blind
 Others, these which come behind
 Will work upon ourselves, and blind our eyes.
 If our loves faint and westwardly decline
 To me thou falsely thine
 And I to thee mine actions shall disguise.

The morning shadows wear away,
 But these grow longer all the day,
 But, oh, love's day is short if love decay.

Love is a growing or full constant light,
 And his first minute after noon is night.

(Note: The laws of real-world physics do not apply in Donne's poetic universe.)

* * * * *

SUGGESTED SUBJECTS FOR POEMS: Write a poem of one page or less on each of the following subjects. (Short poems are easier to publish.)

1. A person you know well. Include a paradox if you can.
2. A critical event in your life, focusing on interpretation rather than narrative.
3. Write a soliloquy for a Biblical or historical character at a critical time in his or her life.
4. Study a painting carefully, then represent it in poetry. Perhaps question its meaning.
5. Select a striking event you witnessed or experienced and present it as an example of some general principle.
6. Imagine two fictional characters who have witnessed some Biblical or other historical event. Have them discuss their perceptions and interpretations of it.
7. Choose a well-known short poem and write either an answer to it or a parody of it.

EXERCISES FOR GETTING STARTED:

The following are abstract statements or common observances, ideas, or concepts. Find concrete images and settings that make them new and interesting. It's okay to use figurative language, and you're not necessarily limited to one poetic line.

1. The sun is rising.
2. He has no ideas of his own.
3. Promises are easy to make, hard to keep.
4. Time heals all things.
5. Clouds remind me of sheep.
6. I have many things to worry about.
7. I keep changing my mind.
8. She felt very much alone.
9. Time passes quickly when you're having fun.
10. The only time we're sure of is right now.

RECOMMENDED BOOKS: There are many good books on writing poetry, and many good collections. These are some of my favorites. Others may be equally as good.

Addonizio, Kim *Ordinary Genius*

Baer, William. *Writing Metrical Poetry*. Cincinnati: Writer's Digest Books, 2006.

Bugeja, Michael J., *The Art and Craft of Poetry*

Kooser, Ted, *The Poetry Home Repair Manual*

Lyne, Sandford, *Writing Poetry From the Inside Out*

Nims, John Frederick. *Western Wind: An Introduction to Poetry*. Another good introductory text.

Nyemaster, Wendy, *Unleash the Poem Within*

*No man who values originality will ever be original. But try
to tell the truth as you see it, try to do any bit of work as
well as it can be done for the work's sake, and what men
call originality will come unsought.*

—C.S. Lewis