

How to Write Poetry

Writing Your First Few Poems



Poetry Soc

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Writing Your First Few Poems

Poetry is a wonderful and rewarding hobby to get into.

At first glance, it may seem hard to write your own poems.

The good news is that it's not as intimidating as people make it out to be.

Modern poetry is all about capturing a feeling or a moment in a way that feels right to you.

The days when you had to abide by a strict adherence to meter to be taken seriously are behind us.

Now it is worth noting that while these steps are presented in a certain order, poetry isn't really a step-by-step process. It is an art, after all.

You may end up doing several of these completely out of order during your journey, and that's fine. These are really just some tips to get you started.

Part 1. Getting Motivated

#1 Read as Much Poetry as You Can

It may sound obvious, but this really is where the journey starts.

Almost every writer in every genre can name their favorite writers off the top of their head. It's how you learn what you do and do not like.

It's where you see techniques that make you go, "Wow, I want to use that!" It's also how you'll gradually figure out the things that most annoy you, deepening your resolve to avoid them.

Do you love the Gothic stylings of Edgar Allan Poe?

Perhaps you prefer the minimalist flair of Rupi Kaur?

The writers you do and do not love will have a major influence on how you want to write and what you want to write about.

- "The Road Not Taken" by Robert Frost.
- "The Red Wheelbarrow" by William Carlos Williams.
- "Because I could not stop for Death" by Emily Dickinson.
- "One Art" by Elizabeth Bishop.
- "Middle Passage" by Robert Hayden.
- "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night" by Dylan Thomas.
- "Jabberwocky" by Lewis Carroll.

#2 Seek Out New Experiences

Getting stimulated in new and interesting ways is part of being a writer.

Go to that lobster fest that sounded kind of interesting.

Visit the weird-looking store downtown with the cheesy mascot.

Talk to someone who has stories to tell.

Even just going for a walk around the neighborhood might give you a new idea.

Most importantly, don't be afraid of new experiences.

Getting your heart broken is part of being a writer.

Holding a small animal for the first time is part of being a writer.

Looking a bad day in the eyes is part of being a writer.

Everything that makes you feel something is valuable. It's ammunition that you're going to need later, so load up on every new inspiration that life offers you.

Some reliable ways to find new experiences include:

- **Travel:** Visiting a city you've never been to (or even another country, if you have the time and the money) is sure to be full of new experiences.
- **Convention centers:** You can usually find a schedule of events online. Try investigating a hobby you'd never considered before.
- **Public libraries:** Similar to convention centers, many libraries regularly host educational events.
- **Chat rooms, forums, and social apps:** If you're not the outdoorsy type, then consider joining a new online community. (Just make sure it's a secure site first!) The further it is from your comfort zone, the more you're likely to get out of it.

#3 Give Yourself Permission To Write Poorly First

Anything that's worth doing is worth doing poorly, and that includes writing.

The first poem you ever pen probably won't revolutionize the literary world. It just needs to get you started.

It's allowed for it to be bad. Maybe your first fifty poems will be bad. It doesn't matter because you're just knocking the dust off your wheels. There's nothing wrong with that.

So before you even boot up your computer or put your pen to paper, make a point to tell yourself, "This is just the first draft. It's allowed to be bad."

#4 Brainstorm

Just think. Don't limit it. Don't decide what is or isn't worth writing about yet.

Just jot down everything that pops into your head. All of it. An ode to your toaster oven.

A poem about how much you hate politics.

A sonnet about the connection between banana pudding and your childhood.

Everything is fair game right now because you're just thinking.

As you rotate through ideas, keep a special eye out for any that immediately start to paint pictures or scenes in your head.

Imagery is a big part of what makes poetry so appealing, so embrace the ideas that make you see something in your mind's eye.

Maybe there's an emotional moment from your past that you've always wanted to capture. Whatever sticks out to you is fair game.

- Remember that anything in your immediate vicinity could be helpful when you're totally stumped.
- Look around for objects that catch your eye.
- Turn on the TV and start flipping channels until something makes you think.
- Listen to your favorite music and imagine a scene set to it.

#5 Pick Any Random Idea and Roll With It

When you get tired of brainstorming, choose the idea that feels the most promising to you.

It doesn't really matter which one you choose, since you can write about all of them if you want to.

You can write about each one multiple times. Do you want to write fifty different poems about pinecones? Then do that.

The important thing is that you just start writing something, anything at all.

- Did you try brainstorming and just couldn't think of anything?
- Start a poem about how much you hate writer's block.
- You might lead yourself into a tangent that turns into a really good idea.
- Just. Start. Writing.

Part 2. Writing the Poem

#6 Start Small

Don't convince yourself that you're going to compete with Homer's epics when you're just starting out. That's comedically unrealistic and would be tragic since that's effort that could've been saved for later in your career.

Set your sights on more achievable goals. A few quick eight-line poems with some end rhymes are more than enough to get your feet wet.

- Writing a shorter poem also has the benefit of getting you straight to the editing and feedback stages. This gives you more opportunities to practice the later parts of the creative process right away.
- Additionally, you'll get used to actually finishing a poem. One of the biggest roadblocks to learning any new skill is forcing yourself to cross that finish line.
- Make your first poems short and make a habit of completion so that you're less likely to give up later.

#7 Keep Resources on Hand

Have a thesaurus and a rhyming dictionary nearby, bare minimum. That way, you'll be able to completely circumvent most of those nasty tip-of-the-tongue moments so you can get back to writing.

- It's important to avoid repetition and cliché in your writing.
- Anytime that you feel you could've written a section more creatively, break out the thesaurus and look for alternatives to the words, you used.
- Having said that, don't avoid repetition to the point of insanity.
- Readers will gloss over common words like "said" and "the." Replacing super common words like these will only make your writing convoluted and annoying. This is especially true of "said."
- Do not replace every instance of "said" with a different word if you want to be taken seriously.

#8 Focus On Images

As you write, try to think in terms of clearly visible images and exciting verbs as much as possible. This gives your readers something to attach themselves to in the world you're creating.

The objects and actions in your poem act as a foundation for the rest of the poem.

- In particular, try to appeal to the senses. Trying to tell the reader how a moment feels emotionally is often boring and hard to relate to if you just say things like “She was sad.”
- Tell them how that moment smells, looks, or sounds. For example: “Her tears were cold to the touch.”
- Consider using creative comparisons. In poetry we often call these metaphors or similes, but the principle is the same.
- Just compare two unlikely things to create a new, interesting image. For example: “Her tears were as frigid as a corpse’s cold, lifeless heart.”
- Try humanizing abstract concepts. Complex concepts like life and death are hard to wrap our little human brains around.
- Giving them humanlike qualities can make it much easier for your reader. For example: “Justice looked away from us in shame that day.”

#9 Try Playing With Sounds

Poems started out as an oral tradition.

People gathered around and spoke poems to each other around fires and in taverns.

Poems have never truly left those roots behind, and there are a lot of tricks you can use to make a poem more fun to listen to, both when spoken out loud and when recited in your head.

- Rhyme is the most obvious example of this.
- Try rhyming at the end of two adjacent lines or at the end of every other line.
- Experiment with different rhyme schemes until you find something you like and challenge yourself to stick with it.
- You can even mix it up by putting the rhymes in the beginning or middle of lines instead.

- Alliteration is a fun way to draw attention to a line or part of a line. It's when you repeat a consonant sound. It sounds surprisingly similar to this silly sentence.
- Assonance can be a more subtle way to direct the reader's attention. It's just like alliteration, but you repeat a vowel sound instead. This is usually only used in short burst phrases like "sky high" or "bedhead," but it can be a fun trick to toss in when possible.

#10 Consider Poetic Forms

While free verse is easily the most popular way to write in today's culture, it isn't the only way.

If you fell in love with haikus, limericks, or palindrome poems somewhere along the way, then don't be afraid to try them out.

Maybe avoid metered poems for your first few attempts, though, since those tend to be especially difficult.

- As mentioned previously, having resources at the ready is a must.
- If you're dead-set on writing a Shakespearean sonnet, then you may want to have a few examples of the rhyme scheme in front of you.

#11 Prioritize Clarity

One of the most common mistakes among aspiring poets is to forget clarity. It doesn't matter how pretty or thought-provoking your cute turn of phrase is if the reader got lost and stopped reading.

You absolutely should not ever compromise clarity for the sake of a pretty phrasing. Use simple, modern syntax unless you're absolutely certain of your ability to convey information.

- One of the most glaring examples of this is when young poets switch around a few words for no good reason after reading too much-outdated poetry.
- "She pines not for me despite mine best efforts" might sound poetic and deep to a novice, but an experienced poet will almost NEVER choose to write like that in the 21st century because that isn't how modern people talk.

#12 Write With Purpose

Your poem should always be trying to express something. It can be a lesson you want to impart to the reader or a feeling of longing that you wish you could put into words.

Go through your poem and make sure every piece of it is working toward the goal you set aside for the poem.

It's okay if you don't know what that goal is until the poem is almost finished.

As soon as you figure out exactly what you're trying to say, go back and make sure you're saying it.

A poem that's ultimately about the evils of capitalism probably doesn't need a random aside about how good ice cream tastes in July.

Part 3. The Editing Process

#13 Read the Poem Out Loud

Almost every poet or creative writing teacher is going to give you this advice, and for good reason.

You absolutely WILL catch mistakes you didn't realize you made when you slow down to read the poem out loud.

Whether you read it to yourself or to a friend is up to you, but make sure you've read your poem out loud at least once.

- Reading individual lines or parts of a poem out loud to yourself while you write and edit is a good practice to get into.
- It's much easier to tell if a line sounds awkward or unnatural when you hear it than when you see it.

#14 Go Line-by-Line

Go line-by-line and examine every word closely.

One of the biggest advantages to working with poetry is its brevity. It doesn't take long to reread.

Make sure every word choice feels natural to you.

Underline parts that don't seem right, even if you can't immediately place the issue, so that you know to go back to them later.

Removing parts of a poem can be hard. If you love a particular line but have to admit to yourself that it doesn't work in this poem, set it aside.

Cut and paste it to a different file so that you can write a different poem with it later.

Nothing has to go to waste.

#15 Share the Poem

You will improve ten times faster by working with others than you will by trying to do everything yourself.

Ask friends and family what they think of your work. Tell them to be brutally honest with you. Point out specific lines that you're not sure about.

Visit online forums where you can workshop your poem with other poets. Join local classes or clubs that are all about poetry.

- Remember not to take any feedback you receive personally. Writers need to be able to listen calmly and rationally to the opinions of others.
- Maybe something that seems obvious to you isn't as clear to your readers.
- Most importantly: If you have to explain what you meant outside of the poem, you probably didn't write it clearly enough.
- Think seriously about how you can address the concerns of your readers without compromising what you want from the poem.
- Maybe you were trying to write a poem about gender equality, but your readers saw it as an attack on the opposite gender.
- Think about what parts of the poem may have lead them to that conclusion in the first place.
- How can you make your intentions more clear within the poem?

#16 Celebrate Your Efforts

Every time you finish a poem you're proud of, celebrate yourself in some small way. Use that fancy soap you were saving. Take yourself out to dinner.

Reward yourself properly, and don't you dare feel guilty about it. Because that newfound feeling of satisfaction after putting in the effort is the most important part of being a writer.