

## TOP TEN TIPS

### Writing Poetry

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#### Tip 1: Know Your Goal

If you don't know where you're going, how can you get there?

You need to know what you are trying to accomplish before you begin any project. Writing a poem is no exception.

Before you begin, ask yourself what you want your poem to "do." Do you want your poem to describe an event in your life, protest a social injustice, or describe the beauty of nature? Once you know the goal of your poem, you can conform your writing to that goal. Take each main element in your poem and make it serve the main purpose of the poem.

#### Tip 2: Avoid Clichés

Stephen Minot defines a cliché as: "A metaphor or simile that has become so familiar from overuse that the vehicle ... no longer contributes any meaning whatever to the tenor. It provides neither the vividness of a fresh metaphor nor the strength of a single unmodified word....The word is also used to describe overused but nonmetaphorical expressions such as 'tried and true' and 'each and every'" (Three Genres: The Writing of Poetry, Fiction and Drama, 405).

Cliché also describes other overused literary elements. "Familiar plot patterns and stock characters are clichés on a big scale" (Minot 148). Clichés can be overused themes, character types, or plots. For example, the "Lone Ranger" cowboy is a cliché because it has been used so many times that people no longer find it original.

A work full of clichés is like a plate of old food: unappetizing.

Clichés work against original communication. People value creative talent. They want to see work that rises above the norm. When they see a work without clichés, they know the writer has worked his or her tail off, doing whatever it takes to be original. When they see a work full to the brim with clichés, they feel that the writer is not showing them anything above the ordinary. (In case you hadn't noticed, this paragraph is chock full of clichés... I'll bet you were bored to tears.)

Clichés dull meaning. Because clichéd writing sounds so familiar, people can complete finish whole lines without even reading them. If they don't bother to read your poem, they certainly won't stop to think about it. If they do not stop to think about your poem, they will never encounter the deeper meanings that mark the work of an accomplished poet.

### Examples of Clichés:

busy as a bee	beet red	eats like a horse
tired as a dog	on the horns of a dilemma	eats like a bird
working my fingers to bone	blind as a bat	

### How to Improve a Cliché:

- I will take the cliché "as busy as a bee" and show how you can express the same idea without cliché.
- Determine what the clichéd phrase is trying to say.
- In this case, I can see that "busy as a bee" is a way to describe the state of being busy.
- Think of an original way to describe what the cliché is trying to describe.
- For this cliché, I started by thinking about busyness. I asked myself the question, "What things are associated with being busy?" I came up with: college, my friend Jessica, corporation bosses, old ladies making quilts and canning goods, and a computer, violins fiddling. From this list, I selected a thing that is not as often used in association with busyness: violins.
- Create a phrase using the non-clichéd way of description.
- I took my object associated with busyness and turned it into a phrase: "I feel like a bow fiddling in the middle of an Irish reel." This phrase communicates the idea of "busyness" much better than the worn-out, familiar cliché. The reader's mind can picture the insane fury of the bow on the violin, and know that the poet is talking about a very frenzied sort of busyness. In fact, those readers who know what an Irish reel sounds like may even get a laugh out of this fresh way to describe "busyness."
- Try it! Take a cliché and use these steps to improve it. You may even end up with a line you feel is good enough to put in a poem!

### **Tip 3:     Avoid "Schmaltzy" Over-Sentimentality.              Practice Gritty Realism**

Sentimentality is "dominated by a blunt appeal to the emotions of pity and love .... Popular subjects are puppies, grandparents, and young lovers" (Minot 416). "When readers have the feeling that emotions like rage or indignation have been pushed artificially for their own sake, they will not take the poem seriously" (132).

Minot says that the problem with sentimentality is that it detracts from the literary quality of your work (416). If your poetry is mushy or teary-eyed, your readers may openly rebel against your effort to invoke emotional response in them. If that happens, they will stop thinking about the issues you want to raise, and will instead spend their energy trying to control their own gag reflex.

*you fit into me  
like a hook into an eye*

*a fish hook  
an open eye*

- Margaret Atwood

**Tip 4: Use Images, sounds (repetition, diction) and typography (line breaks, punctuation, layout) strategically.**

"BE A PAINTER IN WORDS," says UWEC English professor emerita, poet, and songwriter Peg Lauber. She says poetry should stimulate six senses:

sight  
hearing  
smell  
touch  
taste  
kinesiology (motion)

examples:

"Sunlight varnishes magnolia branches crimson" (sight)  
"Vacuum cleaner's whir and hum startles my ferret" (hearing)  
"Penguins lumber to their nests" (kinesiology)

Lauber advises her students to produce fresh, striking images ("imaginative"). Be a camera. Make the reader be there with the poet/speaker/narrator. (See also: "Show, Don't (Just) Tell").

Sound elements, such as consonance, assonance, cacophony, and euphony, help the reader "hear" the images that the poet sees. The poet controls the tone of the poem through the select of words that fit the theme/message of the poem. The slant the poet takes will be evident in the choice of sound elements. Will the reader feel like they just heard grating motor behind their eyes or the ethereal rhythms of a calming river? The choice is the poet's.

Assonance: the repetition of a vowel sound in two or more words in a line of poetry.

*Lightning blinks, striking things in its midst with blinding light.*

- Christian Bok

Consonance: the repetition of a consonant sound in two or more words in a line of poetry.

*His dark nose twitches, flares, scans the air for a scent.*

- Ree Young

Cacophony: harsh, discordant, and unpleasing sounding (not necessarily meaning) words.

*Jabberwocky*  
by: Lewis Carroll

*'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves  
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe;  
All mimsy were the borogoves,  
And the mome raths outgrabe.*

Euphony: pleasant, harmonious and melodious sounding (not necessarily meaning) words.

*To Autumn*  
by: John Keats

*Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness,  
Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun;  
Conspiring with him how to load and bless  
With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eves run;*

Repetition: repetition of words, images, ideas, and emotions add emphasis and importance.

Punctuation and Line Breaks: alter the reading, emphasis, and psychological impact of a poem.

Typography and layout: alters the visual impact of the poem. Where you place words and how you shape the structure of a poem will have an impact on the reader. A standard structured poem will engage the mind of a reader differently than an odd, atypically structured poem.

## **Tip 5: Use Metaphor and Simile**

Use metaphor and simile to bring imagery and concrete words into your writing.

A metaphor is a statement that pretends one thing is really something else:

example: "The lead singer is an elusive salamander."

This phrase does not mean that the lead singer is literally a salamander. Rather, it takes an abstract characteristic of a salamander (elusiveness) and projects it onto the person. By using metaphor to describe the lead singer, the poet creates a much more vivid picture of him/her than if the poet had simply said "The lead singer's voice is hard to pick out."

A simile is a statement where you say one object is similar to another object. Similes use the words "like" or "as."

example: "He was curious as a caterpillar" or "He was curious, like a caterpillar"

This phrase takes one quality of a caterpillar and projects it onto a person. It is an easy way to attach concrete images to feelings and character traits that might usually be described with abstract words.

Note: A simile is not automatically any more or less "poetic" than a metaphor. You don't suddenly produce better poems if you replace all your similes with metaphors, or vice versa. The point to remember is that comparison, inference, and suggestion are all important tools of poetry; similes and metaphors are tools that will help in those areas.

## **Tip 6: Use Concrete Words Instead of Abstract Words**

Concrete words describe things that people experience with their senses.

orange  
warm  
cat

A person can see orange, feel warm, or hear a cat.

Poets use concrete words help the reader get a "picture" of what the poem is talking about. When the reader has a "picture" of what the poem is talking about, he/she can better understand what the poet is talking about.

Abstract words refer to concepts or feelings.

liberty  
happy  
love

"Liberty" is a concept, "happy" is a feeling, and no one can agree on whether "love" is a feeling, a concept or an action.

A person can't see, touch, or taste any of these things. As a result, when used in poetry, these words might simply fly over the reader's head, without triggering any sensory response. Further, "liberty," "happy," and "love" can mean different things to different people. Therefore, if the poet uses such a word, the reader may take a different meaning from it than the poet intended.

Change Abstract Words Into Concrete Words. To avoid problems caused by using abstract words, use concrete words.

example: "She felt happy."

This line uses the abstract word "happy." To improve this line, change the abstract word to a concrete image. One way to achieve this is to think of an object or a scene that evokes feelings of happiness to represent the happy feeling.

improvement: "Her smile spread like red tint on ripening tomatoes."

This line uses two concrete images: a smile and a ripening tomato. Describing the smile shows the reader something about happiness, rather than simply coming right out and naming the emotion. Also, the symbolism of the tomato further reinforces the happy feelings. Red is frequently associated with love; ripening is a positive natural process; food is further associated with being satisfied.

Prof. Jerz belabors Kara's point:

Extension: Now, let's do something with this image.

She sulked in the garden, reticent...hard;  
unwilling to face his kisses -- or unable.  
One autumn morn she felt her sour face  
ripen to a helpless smile, tomato-red.  
Her parted lips whispered, "Hello, sunshine!"

OK, the image has gotten embarrassingly obvious now, but you can see how the introduction of the tomato permits us to make many additional connections. While Kara's original example simply reported a static emotional state -- "She felt happy," the image of the ripening tomato, which Kara introduced as a simple simile to describe a smile, has grown into something much more complex. Regardless of what the word "tomato" invoked in your mind, an abstraction like "happy" can never stretch itself out to become a whole poem, without relying on concrete images. -- DGJ

## **Tip 7: Communicate Theme**

Poetry always has a theme. Theme is not just a topic, but an idea with an opinion.

Theme = Idea + Opinion

Topic: "The Vietnam War"

This is not a theme. It is only a subject. It is just an event. There are no ideas, opinions, or statements about life or of wisdom contained in this sentence

Theme: "History shows that despite our claims to be peace-loving, unfortunately each person secretly dreams of gaining glory through conflict."

This is a theme. It is not just an event, but a statement about an event. It shows what the poet thinks about the event. The poet strives to show the reader his/her theme during the entire poem, making use of literary techniques.

## **Tip 8: Subvert the Ordinary**

Poets' strength is the ability to see what other people see everyday in a new way. You don't have to be special or a literary genius to write good poems--all you have to do is take an ordinary object, place, person, or idea, and come up with a new perception of it.

example: People ride the bus everyday.

Poets' Interpretation: A poet looks at the people on the bus and imagines scenes from their lives. A poet sees a sixty-year old woman and imagines a grandmother who runs marathons. A poet sees a two-year old boy and imagines him painting with ruby nail polish on the toilet seat, and his mother struggling to not respond in anger.

Take the ordinary and turn it on its head. (The word "subvert" literally means "turn upside down".)

### **Tip 9: Rhyme with Extreme Caution**

Rhyme and meter (the pattern of stressed and unstressed words) can be dangerous if used the wrong way. Remember sing-song nursery rhymes? If you choose a rhyme scheme that makes your poem sound sing-song, it will detract from the quality of your poem.

I recommend that beginning poets stick to free verse. It is hard enough to compose a poem without dealing with the intricacies of rhyme and meter. (Note: see Jerz's response to this point, in "Poetry Is For the Ear.")

If you feel ready to create a rhymed poem, refer to chapters 6-10 of Stephen Minot's book *Three Genres: The Writing of Poetry, Fiction, and Drama*. 6th ed., for more help.

### **Tip 10: Revise, Revise, Revise.**

The first completed draft of your poem is only the beginning. Poets often go through several drafts of a poem before considering the work "done."

To revise, put your poem away for a few days, and then come back to it. When you re-read it, does anything seem confusing? Hard to follow? Do you see anything that needs improvement that you overlooked the first time? Often, when you are in the act of writing, you may leave out important details because you are so familiar with the topic. Re-reading a poem helps you to see it from the "outsider's perspective" of a reader.

Show your poem to others and ask for criticism. Don't be content with a response like, "That's a nice poem." You won't learn anything from that kind of response. Instead, find people who will tell you specific things you need to improve in your poem.

