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Norman Galaxy Poetry Workshop

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Introduction

I. Basic Tools of Poetry--craft that will enable you to write poetry for publication.

Sound:

rhythm
meter
line
alliteration
assonance
consonance
rhyme

Comparison: simile and methaphor

Imagery

Subject Matter

Revision and Submission for Publication

II. We'll Read Some Poems Aloud

I'll read some poems as illustration,
Exercises, you'll write some verse and read it
aloud.

III. Questions and Answers: Throughout and at end

IV. **Sound: Involves both Rhythm and Meter**

Poetry sounds different from prose:
It is rhythmic.

To understand how we achieve rhythm in poetry, we must address the different ways we use syllables in words and the way we measure metrical feet in a line of verse.

A. Iamb: one word or two single syllable words with light stress followed by a hard stress Ex: to DAY, a DAY.

I THOUGHT you TOOK one PILL toDAY.

Four iambs. Four metrical feet.
(Iambic Tetrameter)

Five iambs:
We DROVE unTil we REACHED the SEC ond
SIGN
(Iambic Pentameter)
Five metrical feet

The iamb is a workhorse in poetry. If you write in iambs, you WILL be rhythmic.

B. Troche: one word or two single syllable words with a hard stress followed by light stress. Ex: TIMing, WEIGH him

MOTHer TOOK her TO the DOctor.

C. ANAPEST: One word or a combination of words with two light stresses followed by a hard stress. Ex: villaNELLE, in a MONTH.

Anapests quicken the pace of a poem.

D. **Dactyl:** One word or a combination of words with one hard stress followed by two light stresses. EX: CALendar, PRIor to

E. **Pyrrhic:** Two light syllables usually at the end of a line.

F. **Spondee:** Two hard syllables at the end of a line, usually following a light syllable.

G. TYPES OF LINE

Monometer: One foot per line.

Dimeter: Two feet per line.

Trimeter: Three feet per line.

Tetrameter: Four feet per line.

Pentameter: Five feet per line.

Hexameter: Six feet per line.

Heptameter: Seven feet per line.

Octameter: Eight feet per line.

Exercise: Exercise: Writing a three- or four-line stanza using any of the sounds discussed above. Use any line length desired. Suggest you emphasize **iamb**s and **troche**s, because you will **automatically be rhythmic if you use two-syllable sounds**.

Alliteration: Repetition of initial sounds (usually consonants) of stressed syllables in neighboring words or at short intervals within a line or passage. Usually at beginning of the word.

Example: “wild and woolly.”

Purpose: has a gratifying effect on sound and speeds the poem along.

I. **Assonance:** Close placement of the same or similar vowel sounds, essentially a **vowel rhyme**, as in “date” and “fade.”

With alliteration and assonance, often it’s a matter of **discovering** them in use rather than imposing them. In particular, look for opportunities to use them in **revision**.”

J. Consonance: A pleasing combination of sounds, often in the close repetition of the same end consonants, as in “float” and “bright,” or “drunk” and “milk.”

Consonance occurs most often within a line.

K. Rhyme: close similarity of sound, usually at the end of lines.

Many examples of rhyme schemes, but I’m going to give you examples of two: the sonnet and the nonce poem, which is an **individual** rhyme scheme devised by the poet for a particular poem.

Sonnet occurs usually in one of three forms:

Shakespearean: end rhyme scheme of **abab cdcd efef gg**.

Italian: end rhyme scheme of abbaabba in the first eight lines and cdedce in the last six lines.

Spenserian: scheme of abab bcbc cdcd ee

Contemporary poets often vary the rhyme scheme for their own purposes.

I’ve done so in my poem, “Kidney Stone,” which has the scheme:

abba cdde effe gg. This poem exemplifies something I’ll discuss later, which is writing from personal experience, especially involving emotion, passion or (in this case) pain.

Kidney Stone

That silent partner in my kidney nesting?
 A wingless wasp sopping undue pleasures?
 We bond with all hues of forbidden treasures
 black velvet chocolate, brown salty almonds testing

resolve, green spinach, red berries and currants
 brewing devilish alchemies in twin quarries below.
 While I nestle in naïve sleep he notches arrow to bow
 draws back and lets fly the shaft of penance.

The first sting invades the plot of a dream
 like a gross actor slipping in backstage
 then crashing the scene, the cast enraged
 the curtain falling too late, midnight's faint stream

of cold light chilling the sweat of regret
 and promises made that time forgets.

That's a rhyme scheme I used because it just felt right
 at the time, but it still follows the basic form of three
 quatrains and a closing couplet.

Nonce Poem: follows a rhyme scheme devised by the
 poet for a one-time, particular poem, often because it
 just feels right for the moment.

Any poet can use an end rhyme scheme devised by
 another poet. Using an individual rhyme scheme form
 is NOT plagiarism; you just can't use the same words,
 obviously. Make your own poem and use the form.

Here's a nonce poem I wrote about a subject I love.
 The nonce rhyme scheme is: abcb dabc bdbe fghb gfhg.

Chocolate

Seek the cacao tree;
 smell the baking batter of cake
 laced with nuts and cream;
 melt a stick of butter and make

squares of hardened bark,
 darker forms to free
 the craving soul to take
 refuge in that rising steam

from fresh-baked brownies flaked
 with almonds; find the stash of bars
 put back for hellish days;

mainline a Snickers fix

Ganache fillings yet to try,
 icings begging to be licked,
 syruped scoops, dark and white,
 butterfat melting over glaze.

Cheap therapy's bag of tricks:
 find the cacao tree, fly
 the magic Almond Joystick
 to sated needs and wrongs made
 right.

**Exercise: Write at least four lines
 of verse using rhyme on the end
 words in any form you desire:
 might rhyme end words on lines 1
 & 3 and 2 & 4, or just 2 & 4 only,
 or you might write the first four
 lines of a sonnet. It's up to you.**

That concludes our discussion of sound, let's move on to:

V. Forms of **Comparison**, specifically **Simile** and **Metaphor**.

These are two of the most powerful tools in poetry.

- A. **Simile**: figure of speech comparing two essentially unlike things, using **like** or **as**. Ex: Shelley's phrase "still as a brooding dove."
- B. **Metaphor**: figure of speech in which a word or phrase literally transfers one object or idea to another, thereby suggesting a likeness or analogy between them. Much more powerful than a simile.

An entire poem can be an **Extended Metaphor**.

I'd like to read an example I wrote which won an award in Byline. I admire the late Polish Nobel Laureate, Czeslaw Milosz. However, often I have trouble understanding his poetry. This entire poem is a metaphor for that:

Reading Czeslaw Milosz

Strapping on beginner's skates
 I look across the opaque lake
 a surface scored by others
 with more athletic vision.
 I fall in the second stanza
 like a flattened stamen
 in a flower of tracings
 sketched to white horizons.
 I rise and try again
 at last my skates bite ice
 see forms coalesce in Warsaw
 smoked ruins of St. John's
 Cathedral

unburied bones of kin
 alabaster face of a doll
 reflections in the sheen of jackboots.

*A carousel drones in the little square
 Somebody is shooting at somebody out there .
 A light squall blows in from the river.*

I rise to hands and knees
 watch evolution of hope to despair
 a march of Star of David armbands
 herded by bellhops from hell.

Instinct suggests
Get up! Push on!
 There's more to his work
 than Warsaw and World War II
 yet Paris and Berkeley
 will have to wait.
 This ice
 is starting
 to melt.

Questions at this point?

VI. Imagery

Poets turn ideas to imagery.

When we search for subjects, we're seeking images, because that's the grist for our mill. That's how we enable our audience to envision the poem.

The most important tool we have in that task is the senses:

sight
touch
hearing
smell
taste

So as we free associate in our diaries and journals, we're seeking to transfer **emotions** into something concrete--an image-- using simile and metaphor to do so.

Once we get that image, we can start working on a grabby first line.

Once we get the first line, we're on our way.

Poets are like sponges. We're constantly seeking sudden images that suddenly engender feelings in us. That's the process in reverse: instead of emotion, then image.

Often--**IF WE ARE OBSERVANT**--we will see the smallest thing, **then** feel the emotion, then know we've got the ingredients of a poem.

Remember the ice storm a couple of years ago? Since I'm a poet, I grabbed my camera and went to the front porch. I turned myself into a sponge and just observed, taking everything in.

Only four feet to my right, locked in the embrace of the yaupon tree, hung a leaf that had blown there. Icicles reached down from it. From that first **image** came a **feeling**, which immediately changed in my mind to a **simile**. The icicles looked like fingers.

I knew I had a poem. Immediately, I wrote it down in my notebook, which I always have close by, even in the car.

Here's the poem.

Frozen Leaf

Calling card welded
in ice to its limb
skin translucent
passing veined
orange light
bottom edges
cragged with six
clawed clear
stalactites.

To further illustrate everything we've discussed so far, I want to read a great poem by James Wright. This poem has it all.

A Blessing

Just off the highway to Rochester, Minnesota,
Twilight bounds softly forth on the grass.
And the eyes of those two Indian ponies
Darken with kindness.
They have come gladly out of the willows
To welcome my friend and me.

We step over the barbed wire into the pasture
 Where they have been grazing all day, alone.
 They ripple tensely, they can hardly contain their happiness
 That we have come.
 They bow shyly as wet swans. They love each other.
 There is no loneliness like theirs.
 At home once more,
 They begin munching the young tufts of spring in the darkness.
 I would like to hold the slenderer one in my arms,
 For she has walked over to me
 And nuzzled my left hand.
 She is black and white,
 Her mane falls wild on her forehead,
 And the light breeze moves me to caress her long ear
 That is delicate as the skin over a girl's wrist.
 Suddenly I realize
 That if I stepped out of my body I would break into blossom.

Now it's time for another exercise: Write at least a four-line stanza which has **simile**, **metaphor** or both AND which uses as many of the **senses** as you can work in. It can rhyme or not, depending on your preference. The more emotion you feel, the easier this happens.

VII. Subject Matter

Syd Field. "The hardest thing about writing is knowing **what** to write."

When you start poetry as an adult, you have a lifetime of memories to choose from. After 18 months, you run out of the best ones.

One morning I was staring at a blinking cursor on the screen, and I didn't have a clue what I would write.

That's when I discovered the power of **free association**. I start every writing session, usually at 6:00 a.m., by writing in a computer diary. If I don't have any ideas in my **poetry notebook**, which all of you should keep, then I fall back on the Ward Kelley approach of REVERSE PRAYERS.

Suggestion: Google Ward Kelley REVERSE PRAYERS.

To paraphrase, Kelley thinks poetic material is imbedded in our souls and psyche, based on personal experience.

He believes we're surrounded by a sea of language and ideas. Just relax and figuratively remove the top of our head and be receptive, the ideas and images will just enter us like reverse prayers.

To jump start that process, I'll write in my journal: **“What’s on my mind? What images? What feelings?”**

The actual process of typing those words, that kinetic energy, somehow jolts my muse awake. **I'll get an idea or an image. Then I write on a grabby first line, and I'm into the poem.**

Passion: One final hint--the more **feelings or passion** you have for the subject, the more effective the poem.

NEVER CENSOR YOURSELF OR YOUR SUBJECT MATTER. DON'T WORRY ABOUT FAMILY OR FRIENDS “SEEING THEMSELVES” IN YOUR WORK, WHETHER IN POETRY OR NOVELS. A HUMAN BEING IS FAR TOO COMPLEX TO TRANSFER TO A NOVEL, POEM OR ANY CREATIVE WORK. IT'S OKAY TO USE A TRAIT OR A CHARACTERISTIC. IF YOU WORRY ABOUT SOMEONE TAKING PERSONALLY WHAT YOU WRITE, YOU'LL NEVER ACHIEVE FULL POTENTIAL.

IT'S ALL ABOUT THE WORK, NOT THE WRITER.

VIII. Revision

One mistake amateur writers make is thinking and feeling first drafts are finished products.

They feel so good and right. They are just the start.

Revision separates beginners from selling writers.

Revising a poem: cutting words, even syllables.

Even as I write a draft, I'll always look for ways to cut words from the line by using a simile or a metaphor. A simile or metaphor cuts weak words and adds power at the same time. The work of great poets is loaded with simile and metaphor, almost in every line.

Often, they did NOT achieve that in the first draft. They added them in revision. For great poets, a poem is NEVER finished. It's a living thing. They'll change a poem three or four times for each new book they publish. Why not? It's THEIR poem. The improve it with every revision.

Should read like a ball bearing rolling ove silk.

After first revision, read entire poem aloud. If you voice trips over a word or phrase, delete it or shorten the line.

The best revision happens when work is cold. Time and distance are your friend in revision.

IX. Readings and Submitting for Publication

A. Readings

Be prepared. Don't stand there and shuffle your papers. Respect your audience.

Be heard. If it's a large room, try to arrange for a mic.

If there's no mic, then be prepared to raise your voice.

Engage your audience. Raise your chin and make eye contact. Some poet make a huge mistake. They lock their eyes on the page and mumble the poem.

They THINK their “letting the poem do the work and not getting in the way.” They're wrong. They're disrespecting the poem AND the audience. Half the people can't hear.

The rule: EVERY WORD SHOULD BE HEARD BY EVERY PERSON THERE.

Ladies, I hear your plea. Some of you say you don't have a strong voice. Ask the host about the room. If it's large, try to insist on a mic. If it's small and no mic, use good posture, head up, make eye contact with people on the back row and do the best you can.

At any reading, make frequent eye contact and give the audience the sense that you're reading to EACH of them, not just mumbling into the page in the guise that the poem is doing the work.

Engage and respect your audience.

B. Submitting for Publication

Good news: There are many publications, both online and in paper that accept poetry. Most pay with copies, a few, like OKLAHOMA TODAY, pay money. I think OKLAHOMA TODAY pays \$40 or \$50, but they're the exception.

You don't go into poetry for money. You write poetry to feed your soul, the soul of your readers and, as Frost said, "provide the world a momentary stay against confusion."

Steffie Corcoran, Senior Editor of Oklahoma Today is always seeking Oklahoma-related poems. Recently she e-mailed me and ASKED if I had anything. That's rare, and it's golden. I e-mailed three to her and she accepted one.

Her e-mail: steffie@oklahomatoday.com No deadline.

I've also had very good luck with **Crosstimbers**, literary journal of USAO in Chickasha. The poetry editor is:

Sarah Webb. (Spell it.) E-Mail: bluebirdsw@earthlink.net
(Be sure to put that "w" in after bluebirds.)

Another Good Publication is **Blood and Thunder**, literary journal of the OU College of Medicine.

Poems must be clinical or related to medicine in some way.

E-mail: oubloodandthunder@gmail.com

Submission period usually runs about March through May.

As with any submission, get copies of the publication from the library and **READ THE GUIDELINES AND THE WORK TO GET A FEEL FOR THE KIND OF POEMS THEY'RE PUBLISHING. AS A PROFESSIONAL, THAT'S YOUR FIRST RESPONSIBILITY.**

X. HELPFUL BOOKS ON CRAFT OF POETRY

I like to recommend three books on the craft of poetry. They're are many, but these three helped me the most:

THE ART AND CRAFT OF POETRY, by Michael Bugeja.

WRITING POEMS, Fourth Edition, by Robert Wallace (Available as a **used book on Amazon.com**, where I got it. Don't get the latest version, a text book that runs around \$70.)

WESTERN WIND: AN INTRODUCTION TO POETRY (Fourth Edition), by John F. Nims and David Mason. (Available as a used book at **Amazon.com**)

XI. DISCUSSION OF TALENT

Before I go to Questions and Answers, I'd like to discuss something that's NEVER discussed at writers conferences and workshops. Speakers seem to avoid this word like the plague: it's TALENT.

I have my personal definition of talent. A combination of two things:

- 1) Knowledge and respect for the English language, especially the elements of style. Words & sentences are your building blocks for fiction and poetry.

You can begin with Strunk and White's THE ELEMENTS OF STYLE, and go from there. Style, grammar and effective writing can be learned. Exposure to great poetry is just a click away on your computer. Every morning I have great poems sent to me online from Poem a Day from Poets.org and Garrison Keillor's The Writers Almanac. Subscribe to these and learn from great poets. You'll get better by osmosis.

- 2) The second component of talent CANNOT be learned. You inherit it; you either have it or you don't.

That component is IMAGINATION. Every single creative pursuit, whether it's poetry, fiction, music, painting, sculpture or whatever, requires the creative vision of imagination.

The good news: all of you in this room have imagination, or you wouldn't have taken the time to be here.

So I submit that you already have imagination, and you can brush up on your English if you need to.

Then you have the talent to write and to be published.

We're all **voyeurs** at heart; we want you to share your soul with us, and poetry is a wonderful way to accomplish that.

XII. Questions and Answers

(Before we begin Questions and Answers, let you know that this entire presentatktion is a computer file. If you want a copy e-mailed to you, write your name and e-mail address on a sheet of paper and give it to me afterward. I'll send it as an attachment or imbedded in an e-mail, whichever you prefer.)

XIII. Contrails to close workshop

Close with recitation of the first poem I ever published, written after the loss of seven astronauts in the Columbia space shuttle disaster: CONTRAILS.