

# Tips for Writing Poetry

There are two main things to consider when writing poetry: **what** you want to say, and **how** you want to say it. What you want to say might be obvious, or you might need to search for an idea first. How you're going to say it involves literary techniques and takes practice to perfect. Below are some tips that cover both areas.

## Getting Started

### 1. Form

There are many poetic forms. Some, like sonnets, limericks and haikus are very strict. Some forms, like acrostic poems, only have a few rules to follow. Others are very freeform. Depending on the type of poem you are writing will depend on what rules you need to follow. For strict forms, keep in mind the guidelines you need to follow; whether that's rhyme scheme, metre (stressed and unstressed syllables), or stanza length. Stephen Fry's *The Ode Less Travelled* is an excellent guidebook to writing many poetic forms.

Even if you're writing freeform poetry, you should still consider the poem's final form. Where your lines end, your stanzas break, and whether you'll stick to a set rhythm, should still be considered decisions.

### 2. Imagery

Imagery is a key device to poetry. It's a description that appeals to at least one of the five senses, and allows the reader to visualise the moment, or feeling, that you are trying to recreate within your poem. Being specific with your descriptions is important. Instead of saying

*'It was a beautiful, sunny day.'*

you could say

*'The midday sun shone down on the straw-yellow fields.'*

It tells us what time of day it is, where we are, and even the time of the year, as golden fields imply late summer and harvest time. This allows the reader to imagine the exact experience or feeling you're trying to evoke.

### 3. Appeal to Multiple Senses

Appealing to more than one sense will heighten imagery. Don't rely solely on how something looks. Think about how it might sound, smell, taste or feel.

If you were describing the same summer's day, what else might you have noticed? The sound of the birds in the treetops? The smell of the flowers in the hedgerows? How about the feel of the crisp, dry grass around at the edge of the field?

### 4. Use Abstract Ideas, but be Cautious with Your Words

**Abstract words**, like love, fear, or family, refer to feelings and concepts. You might want to evoke these ideas in your poem but think of ways you can do so using concrete words.

**Concrete words** are those that describe things you can experience with your senses, for example: blue, screeching, fluffy. You can *see* blue, *hear* screeching, *feel* fluffiness. These words are less open to interpretation than abstract words.

### 5. Avoid Cliches...

...like the plague. Some phrases are really overdone - like avoiding something like the plague!

The sun's golden rays. Stars that twinkle like diamonds. Sweet as sugar. If you've heard it before, over and over again, think of a new way to say what you mean.

Even though you might be using concrete words, some phrases are so overused they don't sound specific to your exact experience or description. Be original as you can.

## Ideas and Where to Find Them

### 6. Freewriting to Music or Pictures

If you're struggling to come up with an idea for a poem, there are many ways to get your creative juices flowing.

Freewriting for a few minutes is a good way to get your pen going. With your pen and paper ready, listen to your favourite song and write down anything it makes you think of. Don't worry too much about what you're writing. The goal is just to keep the pen moving. At the end of the song, look back at what you've written. Are there any key words that jump out? Or did it make you think of a specific moment in your life? That could be your idea.

This also works with pictures. Pick any picture from a magazine, or online, and write down

anything that comes to mind when you look at it. What do you notice about the colours? Is there a person in the picture that you imagine doing something else? Your poem doesn't have to be about the song or picture specifically, but what they make you feel or think about. By writing freely for a short while, you might end up thinking of something completely different – but it only happens because you put pen to paper!

You could also try writing about your favourite colour. What are all the things it makes you think of? What about your favourite food? What does it taste like? How does it make you feel when you eat it?

Ideas are everywhere, but it's up to you to find them!

## 7. Words First

If you're writing poetry that uses rhyme you might want to think of some interesting words first.

Very few forms of poetry use **perfect rhyme** alone. Perfect rhyme is where both words have the same assonance (vowel rhyme) and number of syllables, like *plunder* and *thunder*.

**Imperfect rhymes**, sound similar, but not exact. They might share the same assonance, such as *slow* and *road*, or the same assonance and end rhymes but have a different number of syllables, like *dark* and *ballpark*. They may also share the same ending consonants, but have different vowel sounds, such as *young* and *song*.

You might want to focus on **alliteration**, where the words share the same first letter, such as *big*, *bold*, *brave*, and *beautiful*.

Half rhymes can create the illusion of a rhyme scheme without sticking to strict, perfect rhymes. Try thinking of rhymes that share the same assonance, or words with different numbers of syllables but the same end rhymes. Both are popular techniques in rapping and song lyrics.

## 8. Ekphrastic Poetry

Ekphrasis means “description” in Greek. An ekphrastic poem is a vivid description of an existing work of art. You could write about a painting, a sculpture, or another visual art.

There are many famous examples, such as John Keats' 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', Williams Carlos Williams' 'Landscape with the Fall of Icarus', or Anne Sexton's 'Starry Night'.

All you need to write ekphrastic poetry is an image of an artwork and careful attention to detail. Remember to engage with the image. Describe the artwork in a personal way. How does it make you feel, and what specific things about it make you feel that way?

## And Finally

### 9. Read it Out Loud

Reading your poem out loud helps with you to notice any mistakes you may have made with the rhyme scheme or meter. Reading aloud can make stressed and unstressed syllables more obvious or make it clear where extra words/syllables are needed. It also makes devices like alliteration and repetition more obvious. Each time you make significant changes to your poem, read it out loud again.

### 10. Use Strong Closing Words

Does your poem have a strong ending? The type of poem you've written, especially if you're sticking to a strict form, will impact the ending you choose. It could be that the final lines sum up the whole mood of the poem, or that the last stanza shows a change in thought from the rest of the poem. You might want to end with a rhyming couplet, even if the rest of the poem doesn't rhyme. You might choose a heavy dose of alliteration, or repetition, to hammer the point home. Just think about what marks the end of the poem as the end, and whether or not you've expressed that to the reader.

### 11. Read Lots of Poetry

Reading poetry is one of the best ways to learn how good poetry is written. You almost certainly won't like every single poem you read, but reading widely will show you many different techniques, and make you aware of what you do, and don't, like in poetry. If there's a particular poem you do enjoy, you could try imitating the form. Or, re-write the poem in a new way, whether that means changing the form or modernising the content.

### 12. Polish your Poem

Go back and read your poem once more. Is the metre correct? Could you make more interesting word choices? Have you made the point you wanted to say? Does it sound good out loud? How does it look on the page, and is the punctuation correct for this type of poem?

If you've got doubts about any of these questions, don't be afraid to make changes to your poem.