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Writing Poetry

Shelley Tucker



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Culver City, California

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Preface

I believe that everyone can compose good poetry and benefit from writing it. Poetry writing is not dependent upon age or academic accomplishment, so adults with little education and children with low test scores are as successful writing poems as people with stronger academic skills. Poetry writing instead relies on a writer's feelings, history, and perceptions, so every person has the background needed to write poems. Because poetry draws on the senses and the senses give deep access to memories and feelings, poetry writing is relevant and interesting. Poetry has fewer rules than prose, so people feel confident when they write.

During the last eighteen years, I have seen thousands of adults and children markedly benefit from writing and sharing poetry. The models in this book have been used extensively with *students* in grades 3–12, in special, regular, and gifted programs, as well as with *adults* writing independently, in poetry workshops, and in university classes. Most of the poems in this book were written by my former students. Their ages are listed under their writing.

Poetry writing is a friend to all writers. During one three-year project, I worked with sixty students; some of them were considered at risk while others were successful in school. Poetry writing was a major part of their curricula. Grades and communication dramatically improved. Suspensions were eliminated. No students dropped out of school.

Part of this power of poetry is that it invites honest reflection and expression. I once had a student who saw a serious accident. Instead of isolating or acting out, he wrote poems about his experience. His poetry helped him remember the details, review his thoughts, express his feelings and understand them. When he shared his writing with us, we heard the truth in his poetry and listened carefully to him. People frequently respond to poetry as we did. There is just as much truth in descriptions of events as in poems about animals and nature. Poetry commands attention and each time writers are heard, they receive clear validation that they are important and that their words matter.

Poetry writing is so engrossing and honest that I have even seen it provide a viable alternative to gang involvement. The appeal of street activities is frequently motivated by the desire to belong, to be heard, and to be important. Students who are given time to write and share their poems form communities right in their classrooms in which everyone is included. By writing openly and honestly, they share their pasts, their beliefs, and their feelings, providing bridges for understanding and empathy.

People write poetry for many reasons. Some write to record their pasts, to validate and to share their memories with family, friends, and classmates. Others write poetry to express feelings and support their own healing. For some, writing poems provides a deepening of their spirituality and their connection with others. Poetry writing expands a writer's creativity, and the principles of poetry enhance prose writing and speech.

Through all of my years teaching poetry writing, I have never worked with anyone who could not write poems. What happens in a classroom in which everyone is interested in the same subject? What changes occur when special education and at-risk students are as likely as other children to win writing awards and get published? What are the benefits for adults who express their thoughts and feelings through poetry? The obvious gains are enhanced creativity and generalization of poetry skills to speech, reading comprehension, and other forms of writing. Equally important, though, are the significant increases in academic motivation, personal expression, self-esteem, and peer respect.

Poetry writing comes naturally. Consider the poems in this book. Some were composed by people with very little education. Many of the authors had never before written a poem. Nonetheless, the poems are articulate and compelling. Each one of us is equipped with the resources to write good poetry—the histories of our lives and the ability to see, think, feel, and hear. When we combine these with the willingness to write, we discover that writing poetry is as natural as walking and talking.

Many people share in the credit for all the work that went into this book. My deepest love and thanks to my husband, Bruce Sherman, and my brother, Richard White. My special gratitude to my mother, Chickie Kitchman, who always values my projects. Thank you to Lauren Wilson, Kay Grant Powers, Diane Adkison, Mary Ellen Cardella, Richard Greenberg, Vicky Edmonds Verver, and Carlos Reyes for sharing their

ideas. My gratitude to Natalie Goldberg for her books and wisdom about writing. My appreciation to Seattle Pacific University, the Morningside School, the Private Industries Council, Goodwill Industries, and the public school systems for supporting the connection between poetry and prose, creativity, analytical thinking, and speech.

For many people, writing poetry feels like a great risk. A very special thank you to all of the authors featured in this book who took the risk to write poetry and value what they had written.

Shelley Tucker, 1992

Introduction

Many of us were taught that poetry must contain rhyme at the ends of lines of a poem. When writing poetry, we had to juggle both sound and meaning, and poems became more like puzzles than art forms for creative expression. As a result, poetry writing often seemed complicated or irrelevant.

Those of us who were taught that lines of poems must end in rhyme were not given complete information about available poetic styles. In many languages, poetry has always been composed in **free verse**, poetry without end rhyme, set structures, or meter (regular patterns of stressed and unstressed syllables). In English, end rhyme was the predominant poetic form from the twelfth century through the middle of this century. In 1855, Walt Whitman published his first version of *Leaves of Grass*, and his collection of non-rhyming poetry became a masterpiece about the American experience. Whitman's work popularized the option of writing poetry without end rhyme, and, during the last fifty years, free verse has become the preferred poetic form in English. This is because free verse allows us to choose which poetic elements we use in our poetry.

If the main definition of a poem is not *a series of lines that rhyme*, what, then, is a poem? A **poem** is a compact piece of writing that contains one or more poetic elements. Rhyme is just one of the many poetic forms. We can easily learn and use a variety of poetic elements to give shape and structure to our poems.

Initially, though, writing poetry may seem like riding a bicycle for the first time. It is sometimes difficult to begin, and, at first, some of the parts of the bike may seem a little confusing and hard to coordinate. Soon, though, with instruction and practice, we come to understand the process and find the balance easily within ourselves. Like bike riding, poetry writing can become second nature and provide us with clear views of new and familiar places.

We also have great freedom in choosing the appearance our poetry takes. A poem may contain one or two words per line, or many. Poets may use no punctuation at all or adhere to the conventions of standard punctuation. Writers can influence the content of their poems by starting each line with a capital letter or by capitalizing the beginning letter of each new thought. Other poets use no capitals at all.

Because the scope of poetry is so broad, some structure, of course, is needed. I developed the models in this book to facilitate the instruction of poetry by teaching a variety of poetic elements. As you work through this book, always feel free to modify the exercises or depart from them completely. The goal of these exercises is to support creativity by giving you some definitions and direction. Once you are on the road, the choice of where to go is yours.

The models and concepts in this book have been used extensively at every grade, pre-school through university and graduate school levels. In the early grades, most of the composition is done orally. At Orca Elementary School, in Seattle, Washington, Vicky Edmonds Verver led groups of six- and seven-year-old students who orally composed the poems on the following page.

UNICORN

Big, pointy horns
coming out of its head,
the unicorn is magical and nice,
white or pink
and different colors
with wings and a big bushy tail.

They're in Never-Never Land
like Peter Pan,
and they talk like parrots,
or like humans.

They sleep on a stick
like a carousel,
eat purple grass, and flashlights.

Then, with light coming out of their bodies,
unicorns fly to the moon,
and drill holes in it with their horns,
and eat the snowy, green cheese inside.

DRAGON FLY

A dragon fly
has graceful wings,
big eyes,
and is cautious,
conscious.

He is red,
blue, or black
and flies all around
like a butterfly,
like a helicopter,
or a roller coaster
off its track.

People frequently ask me why very young children are able to compose such wonderful poetry. I believe that children are poets because poetry, like singing, dancing, walking, and talking, arises easily and naturally as an expression of perceptions, beliefs, and experiences. Poetry is a simultaneous connection between the senses and thoughts. It is completely natural for a child to say, "Sadness is white." As children get older, they are steered away from the natural construction of metaphors (comparisons between two unlike things) and toward facts. A definition such as "Sadness is a feeling" comes to replace the metaphor "Sadness is white." It is only then that poetry writing begins to seem difficult.

As writers, our job is to retain and accumulate facts, and simultaneously to regain our wonderment of the universe, our ability to sense sounds in inanimate objects, our desire to draw pictures with words, and our knowledge that allows us to show the connections between unlikely things. Third-graders through adult writers successfully learn and practice the poetic elements in this book by writing their responses; and what wonderful poems they write!

BLACK

The color black
is shaped like a rock
and sounds like the wind.

Black is rough
and makes me feel happy.

Black is like the color of night,
the song of the wind,
the month of February,
and a box of shadows.

PAUL FULLER, age 9

Sometimes between the
orange
and the indigo
is the emerald sunset.

Improbable green holding
day and night
apart.

VICKI HAYNES, Adult

Our times clearly issue a call for the poet in each of us to come forward. As we write metaphors, we see how things that once appeared unrelated actually are connected. This may help us understand and form relationships that are critical in our interdependent world. Poetry allows us to draw new pictures and explanations, record our personal histories, and express our thoughts and feelings in concise and articulate form.

Have fun using this book. Enjoy and share your writing. Read your poems or lines from your poetry to family and friends. Remember the words of Virgil, the Roman poet who lived 2,000 years ago: "Do not commit your poems to pages alone. Sing them, I pray you."