

Writing Poetry  
(Five 45min – 1h workshop lessons)

**Learning Outcomes for workshop students:**

- Be able to understand some basic elements of poetic expression
- Understand the benefits of free writing exercises to stimulate a poetic approach
- Be able to use a visual or verbal prompt to begin a poem, expand a poem
- Be able to use several revision techniques and revise a poem
- Understand there are no ‘wrong’ answers in poetic writing and evaluating poetry

**Online Resources (journals and venues for and by high school students)**

ELAN – An International Student Magazine <https://elanlitmag.org/>

The Apprentice Writer <http://www.apprenticewriter.com/>

Polyphony H.S. <http://polyphonyhs.com/>

Tunnel Zine <https://tunnelzine.com/category/words/flash-fiction/>

Teen Ink <https://www.teenink.com/>

Young Writers Project <http://youngwritersproject.org/>

“Good poems are the best teachers” – Mary Oliver, A Poetry Handbook

[www.poetryfoundation.org](http://www.poetryfoundation.org)

For revising and approaching poetry, a great essay here with four terms that are great to use with students – “The Overstuffed Couch, The Skeleton, The Pancake, The Lively Mess”:

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/70305/the-warmth-of-the-messy-page>

A Glossary of Poetic Terms

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/learn/glossary-terms>

**Overview**

Lesson ONE: What is poetry?

Lesson TWO: Getting started, finding inspiration

Lesson THREE: Poetry Practice – creating fragments, growing fragments

Lesson FOUR: Revising, Rewriting

## Simple Poetry Glossary

### **Allusion**

A brief, intentional reference to a historical, mythic, or literary person, place, event, or movement.

### **Couplet**

A pair of successive rhyming lines, usually of the same length. A couplet is “closed” when the lines form a bounded grammatical unit like a sentence

### **Ekphrasis**

“Description” in Greek. An ekphrastic poem is a vivid description of a scene or, more commonly, a work of art.

### **Enjambment**

The running-over of a sentence or phrase from one poetic line to the next, without terminal punctuation.

### **Free verse**

Nonmetrical, nonrhyming lines that closely follow the natural rhythms of speech. A regular pattern of sound or rhythm may emerge in free-verse lines, but the poet does not adhere to a metrical plan in their composition.

### **Haiku**

A Japanese verse form most often composed, in English versions, of three unrhymed lines of five, seven, and five syllables. A haiku often features an image, or a pair of images, meant to depict the essence of a specific moment in time.

### **Motif**

A central or recurring image or action in a literary work that is shared by other works. Unlike themes, which are messages, statements, or ideas, motifs are details whose repetition adds to the work’s larger meaning; multiple and varying motifs can take place within one work and across longer collections.

### **Objective correlative**

T.S. Eliot used this phrase to describe “a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion” that the poet feels and hopes to evoke in the reader

### **Prose poem**

A prose composition that, while not broken into verse lines, demonstrates other traits such as symbols, metaphors, and other figures of speech common to poetry.

### **Quatrain**

A four-line stanza, with one of the following rhyme schemes

-ABAC or ABCB (known as unbounded or ballad quatrain), -AABB (a double couplet), -ABAB (known as interlaced, alternate, or heroic), -ABBA (known as envelope or enclosed), -AABA.

### **Stress**

A syllable uttered in a higher pitch—or with greater emphasis—than others.

### **Tone**

The poet's attitude toward the poem's speaker, reader, and subject matter, as interpreted by the reader. Often described as a "mood" that pervades the experience of reading the poem, it is created by the poem's vocabulary, metrical regularity or irregularity, syntax, use of figurative language, and rhyme.

### **Villanelle**

A French verse form consisting of five three-line stanzas and a final quatrain, with the first and third lines of the first stanza repeating alternately in the following stanzas. These two refrain lines form the final couplet in the quatrain.

## **Lesson ONE: What is poetry?**

A tongue-in-cheek answer might be: anything and everything is poetry.

Ask students what they think the difference between poetry and prose might be? Discuss their answers and see if it's possible to find some common perceptions.

Poetry can be defined in many ways. People who enjoy poetry enjoy paying attention to language, to the rhythms of language, to word play, to words with dual meanings, to the ways in which certain words can be juxtaposed to create spaces that are filled with images, new meanings, etc.

### Activity 1:

Read "Happenstance" by Rita Dove

Questions / Discussion

Who is the voice of the poem? What is the tone of the poem? Mark out the visual images – how many are there? How about the sounds? How many people are in this poem? How are they identified? Mark the places that are hardest to understand immediately. What does the poem make you feel?

Read "Those Sunday Mornings" by Robert Hayden

Questions / Discussion

Who is the voice of this poem? Who else is in the poem? What is the poem about? Mark the places that are hardest to understand immediately.

### Activity 2: Warm-up and first poem

Both sample poems can be read as memories – they both recount a single instance that occurred in the past tense of the poet's life.

Ask the students to go back to a childhood memory, any memory at all. Have them free write for 5 minutes on the details of the memory: what season, what time of day, who else was there, what were the sounds or visual of the memory (tell them to list out four objects from the memory), smells, what happened in the memory? What was the emotion of the memory?

Ask them to attempt a poem using the details they've generated. Go for a poem of 10 lines. Grammar doesn't matter. Ask if anyone wants to share.

## Lesson TWO: Getting started, finding inspiration

### Activity 1: Reading and Experimenting

- Read William Carlos Williams's "This is just to say"
- Read Mary Oliver's "Landscape"

Both poems are speaking directly to either "a reader" or all readers. How do they do this? What does it feel like? What is the tone of each poem? What is the emotion conveyed? What are the settings of each poem? How does each poem create its setting?

The title of the William Carlos Williams – *This is just to say* - is a great prompt for starting a poem. Ask the students to write this down as a title, and then imagine their own very short scene of apology. The Carlos Williams poem can be read with humor, what different emotions might work in a similar structure of three groups of four lines? Give them 10 minutes or so to work on a draft of their own version.

This next activity can be done in a group or individually:

Mary Oliver's poem begins with a series of questions. Ask the students to pick a landscape of their own – the ocean, a lake, a forest, a desert, a swamp – and free write for 5 minutes on that setting. Make lists of visuals and colors, of sounds. Remind them to think of interesting combinations – a desert on the only day it rains, a forest in the snow vs a forest in the summer, a lake that is drying up.

Once they have a good-sized list, ask them to come up with questions that begin like Oliver's – Isn't it plain... Isn't it clear... Isn't it true... Isn't it obvious... - about their chosen landscape, using the details they've found. And once they have two or three questions, then invite them to step into the poem using an "I" sentence. Give them fifteen minutes to work on the rest of the poem however they like.

### Activity 2: Where else does poetic inspiration come from?

The constraints in composing different poetic forms (haiku, limerick, sonnet, villanelle, quatrain, ode...) can be really inspiring. Ask the students to look up definitions of the forms and find examples, and they can then try their own version.

Poetry prompts using visuals, memories, lines, themes.

## **Lesson THREE: Poetry Practice – flexing those poetry muscles**

### Activity 1: Word-play warmups

Pick a word like “ocean” or “family” and ask the students to free associate on the word for a few minutes. Then ask them to find rhyming words to some of the words written down (ocean/notion), and synonyms to other words (water, liquid).

Have each student pick a famous person they like or admire, and then ask them to create a simile to describe that person: She is as elegant as... Then ask the students to partner up, and find a new simile to match the first one. (Student one: She is as elegant as a swan / Student two: She is as elegant as a rose.) Then ask the students to find an opposite simile for their first simile’s (She is as elegant as a swan / She is as clumsy as a penguin.)

### Activity 2: Read poems / Discuss

Read “Cherries” by Shira Abramovich, Read “The Snowfall is so Silent”

Ask the students to write down the words or phrases that are meaningful to them or words that ring out. Where are the places in the poem that feel significant? That elicit a reaction?

Discussion questions:

What are these poems about? Do these poems tell a story? Who are the characters in these poems? What emotions do these poems portray? What images are used?

### Activity 3: Writing

Take 20 – 30 minutes and ask the students to write their own poems, using a prompt from an earlier lesson or by latching on to some of the words from the word play warm-up. The idea is to experiment.

Ask the students if any one is comfortable reading a poem. Share and discuss.

What is difficult about writing poetry? What is fun?

## **Lesson FOUR: Revision techniques**

**All revision should begin with reading your poem out loud and slowing it down a bit, getting a sense for the way the words work together and the rhythms.**

### **One**

Add another sense

If the poem includes a lot of sight visuals, ask the students to add something from one of the other five senses. How does adding a new sense open the poem up to a different experience?

### **Two**

Line breaks

Every word in a poem is important, but there is an emphasis at the start and finish of each line.

Take a look at where your lines break and see where the meanings become more important.

Does breaking a line in a different place put more emphasis on a different word?

Talk about “enjambement” and how it works to shift and introduce dual meanings

### **Three**

What can be cut?

Reread the poem again. Is anything unnecessary? What can be cut away? Can sentences be chopped up to focus more tightly on an action or a sense?

How does cutting down the poem make it powerful?

### **Four**

Look at the form

Have you written something that gets close to one of the standard poetic forms? Can you create couplets from the lines? Count your syllables. Find the patterns. If a pattern is emerging, can you reinforce that pattern and follow it through?

### Activity

Hand out the last bunch of poems (“A Stop Before Starting”, “Snow”, “Words are birds”) for the students to read and consider. Ask them to find something in one of the poems that might lead them to begin their own poem – can be the perspective (a travel poem), can be an observation of a natural event, can be the form. Ask them to write for 10 – 15 minutes and sketch out a rough draft. And then using their new poem (or an older one if necessary), have them go through the revision steps.