

Poetry guidelines

Poetry

1. Theme and idea. Some poems have too little theme and lack a unifying idea, but a more common flaw is too much theme. Writers who try too hard to present a message ("war is bad"; "people of all races are equal"; "let's save the earth before it's too late") often produce heavy-handed propaganda instead of poetry, no matter how noble the message is.

Good poetry often explores rather than concludes, suggests rather than preaches. It is not fuzzy or scatterbrained, but neither is it a mathematical proof. One understated image of a bag lady can work better than a page of ranting about "poverty and injustice in our society today."

2. Diction. Writers who try too hard to produce an effect resort to artificial language:

ARCHAIC: Whither hath fled thy doleful damsel?

GUSHY: Gentle, soothing breezes waft shimmering, gilded clouds over serene sapphire streams and lush, verdant meadows.

Writers who do not try hard enough produce flat language with nothing poetic about it:

DRAB: I guess she just doesn't like me very much.

DRAB: There was nothing good on t.v. so I went out with my friends.

A poet's medium is words, just as a sculptor's is marble. Every line should do something interesting with language. Lines like these--"Thanks, Mom, for spending quality time with me. / You helped me to be all that I can be"--may express a pleasant sentiment, but as artistic use of language, they have no value.

3. Line endings. Avoid ending lines on weak words:

ARTICLES: a, an, the CONJUNCTIONS: and, but, or, when PREPOSITIONS: of, in, to, with

The line is one of the basic units with which a poet works. Even if you are not using meter or rhyme, there should be reasons for line length and line breaks. End lines where the reader's breath would normally pause, or to call attention to a single word. Try ending some lines on verbs:

ELIZABETH BISHOP: The art of losing isn't hard to master.

ALEXANDER POPE: At every word a reputation dies.

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE: And where the offense is, let the great axe fall.

4. Sentence structure. Avoid two common flaws: a vague series of unconnected phrases, or a monotonous string of one-line sentences. Sentence structure is an important resource for a poet, like metaphor, imagery or irony. Vary your sentence structure. Use run-on lines as well as end-stopped lines. A well unified sentence that covers several lines, carefully building up to its conclusion, can be highly effective.

5. Punctuation. Help your reader with precise punctuation. All the rules of punctuation that apply to prose apply to poetry as well. Commas, periods and other punctuation marks go where sentence structure and clarity of meaning dictate

6. Rhyme.

a. Avoid words that are only there for the rhyme. It is obvious when a writer ends a line with a phrase ("you see," "as they say") that contributes nothing except rhyme. The best rhyme words contribute to meaning. Avoid predictable and overused rhymes: *day-say, love-above, see-me-be, you-do-true*.

b. Avoid letting rhyme and meter force you into awkward phrasing. *Fold* and *cold* might make a good rhyme, but when you read "which not being cold," it is obvious that the writer has sacrificed natural, clear phrasing for the sake of rhyme.

c. The last stressed syllable determines rhyme. If the final syllable is stressed, the rhyme is called masculine. If one or more syllables follow the final stress, the rhyme is called feminine.

MASCULINE RHYME: *float, re-mote, petti-coat*

FEMININE RHYME: *vital, title, re-cital; re-ality, hospi-tality, superfici-ality*

WEAK RHYME: *grieving-ring* BETTER: *grieving-even* TRUE: *grieving-leaving*

WEAK RHYME: *hated-dead* BETTER: *hated-raided* TRUE: *hated-dated*

Of course, these weak rhymes can also be corrected by finding rhymes for *ring* and *dead*.

d. The second-to-last syllable must be unstressed for rhyme to be heard clearly. If you need a rhyme for *mouse*, *lighthouse* or *red blouse* will not work, for *light* and *red* are stressed.

e. For true rhyme, the vowel and any final consonants must be identical. *Tame* does not rhyme with *pain*. A verb like *throws* or a noun like *toes* is not true rhyme with *go*. It is usually not too hard to rephrase a sentence to have *throw* or *toe* rhyme with *go*, or to change *go* to *goes*.

f. Avoid rhymes on weak words. Prepositions, conjunctions and articles seldom rhyme well because they do not normally receive stress (see also PLE above on line endings).

*Adapted from Keable's Guide <http://www.iolani.honolulu.hi.us/Keables/KeablesGuide/PartFive/CreativeWriting.htm>

g. Adjacent rhyme sounds should be different. *Mind* and *remind* do not rhyme; they are identical in sound. If you are writing a quatrain rhymed *abab*, or even couplets, you should avoid rhyming *cried-decide* and *freed-need* next to each other (or *cried-decide* and *nine-design*) because they are too similar to sound like separate rhymes.

h. If you start with a rhyme scheme, stick with it.

7. Meter

a. Avoid letting meter and rhyme force you into awkward phrasing. When you read "to come to home," it is obvious that the writer distorted natural phrasing ("to come home") for the sake of meter. Concentrate on ideas first, phrasing second, rhyme third (if you are using rhyme), and meter last.

AWKWARD: All night the thunder *made us feeling* fear

b. Do not pad a line with words to make it scan. Every syllable should have meaning.

PADDED: But morning brought a day *that is so* clear.

c. Do not rely too much on one-syllable words. They quickly become monotonous. Try for a balance of polysyllabic and monosyllabic words.

d. Avoid writing a series of one-line sentences and clauses. Try sentences that run on from one line to the next. Begin with subordinating conjunctions (like *although* and *when*) or prepositions (*in, on, with*); save the main clause until a second or third line.

8. Formatting poetry. Make your poem look good on the page. Of the five versions below of an anonymous nineteenth-century poem, version 5 looks best and version 1 second-best.

Version 1. The title is not centered, and the narrow left margin leaves a wide space at the right:

In Peterborough Churchyard

Reader, pass on, nor idly waste your time

In bad biography or bitter rhyme;

For what I am, this cumbrous clay ensures,

And what I was is no affair of yours.

Version 2. The title is centered, but the title hangs over the right edge of the poem:

In Peterborough Churchyard

Reader, pass on, nor idly waste your time
In bad biography or bitter rhyme;
For what I am, this cumbrous clay ensures,
And what I was is no affair of yours.

Version 3. The poem has ragged margins like a Christmas tree. Only the title should be centered:

In Peterborough Churchyard

Reader, pass on, nor idly waste your time
In bad biography or bitter rhyme;
For what I am, this cumbrous clay ensures,
And what I was is no affair of yours.

Version 4. The left margin was set at three inches for the entire poem including the title; as a result, the centering of the title is skewed to the right:

In Peterborough Churchyard
Reader, pass on, nor idly waste your time
In bad biography or bitter rhyme;
For what I am, this cumbrous clay ensures,
And what I was is no affair of yours.

Version 5. Everything is correct: margins, alignment, centering. The poem looks good:

In Peterborough Churchyard

Reader, pass on, nor idly waste your time

In bad biography or bitter rhyme;

For what I am, this cumbrous clay ensures,

And what I was is no affair of yours.

To make your poem look like version 5, take two steps:

1. Center the title, not the entire poem.

2. Set a wide left margin for the rest of the poem (not for the title). Choose a line of average length (not the shortest or the longest line), center it, see where its left margin is, and set a tab stop or margin there. If the poem is in iambic pentameter and you are using 12-point type, a three-inch margin (two inches in from the one-inch margin) is usually right.

The Keable's Guide recommends leaving two or three blank lines after the title and double-spacing the rest of the poem.