Don't Make These Ten Mistakes in Your Poetry

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Note: If a quoted stanza or poem is not attributed, it was written by yours truly. That's merely because I'm most familiar with my own poetry and because I don't want to use others' poetry as bad examples.

Intro to Poetry, Curator Style

All art has form and content. Words and language make up the formal element of a work of literature.

- Form is the building materials
    - Sounds (rhyme, meter, alliteration)
    - How the phrasing flows off your tongue
    - Writing style
    - Intensity of language (heightened from regular speech)
- Content is the concepts conveyed
    - Images portrayed
    - Themes and worldview
    - Direction (the poem takes you somewhere)
    - Direct statements and questions
- In poetry, form and content can overlap.
    - Is metaphor form or content?
    - How about the meanings and connotations of individual words?
    - I would say they're in an intermediate category.

I said that the formal element of literature is composed of words and language. However, prose literature is mostly focused on content. Poetry elevates form until it is as valuable as the content for expressing what the poem intends to express.

Note: Poetry in different cultures and different genres has needed more or less form. In narrative poetry, often the form is not as elevated as it typically is, for example, in love poetry.

Good form typically makes for good content. They can't be separated too far, and when we apply the *Curator*'s rating system, we rarely rank form and content more than one point apart.

The key to writing successful poetry is to **make every aspect of your poem add to the overall effect**, drawing from the different aspects mentioned above. The best poems leverage every tool at the author's disposal, in order to make a beautiful and meaningful whole.

Examples of Form and Content in Poetry

All Form, No Content:

> Get bellow guest forget said high,
> Two spoon could fruitcake the below
> Fit sixty this in tie.

All Content, No Form:

> God takes care of all my needs. This includes my physical needs and my spiritual needs. The way he gives me peace and helps me be righteous is just like him!

Both Form and Content:

> The Lord is my shepherd;
> I shall not want.
>
> He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:
> he leadeth me beside the still waters.
> He restoreth my soul:
> he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness
> for his name's sake.

Note the simple language and phrasing, the metaphors, the parallelism in this quotation from Psalm 23. This poem may have had more formal elements in the original Hebrew, but even in the English translation, it has excellent form, even

though it doesn't have rhyme or meter. However, rhyme and meter are formal elements that can add a considerable amount of meaning to a poem.

Daily

by Sherri Steiner

I brought my day to the doorposts
And pierced its ear at the dawn.
Earth sang and shouted for gladness,
And gold spilled down from the sun.

When the world came near the doorposts
And saw the crimson spread,
They laughed, and pointed their fingers
And wrote me down as dead.

thecurator.org/2022/01/27/sherri-steiner-daily

Formal Mistakes

#1. Using rhyme like a magic wand.

Much Western poetry uses rhyme. Perfect rhyme, in English poetry, has these rules. A rhyming syllable begins with a consonant or lack of consonant that is *not* the same, and moves to an accented vowel that *is* the same. After this, you can have any number of consonants and unaccented syllables, all of which must be the same.

Not a perfect rhyme:

- Mercy–free
- Red–read
- Say–wake

Perfect rhyme:

- Today–way
- Ready–Eddy
- Hurriedly–worriedly

Rhyme is not merely a fun sound, nor is it merely a rule to be obeyed. Rhyme is a binding mechanism. Not all poems are rhymed, but if you do use rhyme, it shouldn't be as a merely incidental aspect of a poem.

- For some reason, a poem without meter doesn't make the most use of its **rhyme**. You might like it, but to the discerning reader, it will feel contrived, which is a **crime**.
    - If you like rap, which I don't, note that it still has a meter that's imposed by the vocal style instead of by the words the author chose.
- Because rhyme is a binding mechanism, you can start unrhymed and end rhymed, but you don't want to start rhymed and end unrhymed.

Once I was dawn, for I was young,
and reveled in the **air**;
I filtered through the sailing clouds
and left my footprints **there**.
When darkness gathered on the **lake**
and spread along the shore,
A moon-path rippled in my **wake**
and Evening sang to me.

- If a poem over-uses rhyme, it's hard to take the poem seriously. That's why humorous poetry often makes such heavy use of rhyme. If someone sent you these poems, would you assume that they were meant in good faith or tongue-in-cheek?

Then all my kids got really mad
because their mom had made them sad,
so then I sent them to their dad
who gave them cake to make them glad.
(This rhyme scheme sure is pretty rad.)

I am the very model of a modern Major-General;
I've information vegetable, animal, and mineral.
I know the kings of England, and I quote the fights historical
From Marathon to Waterloo, in order categorical.
I'm very well acquainted, too, with matters mathematical;
I understand equations, both the simple and quadratical.
About binomial theorem I am teeming with a lot o' news,
With many cheerful facts about the square of the hypotenuse.
—W.S. Gilbert

- Don't force rhymes. I.e., don't let it be obvious that you chose a word just for its rhyme. Work it in so that it fits, or find another rhyme. Typically, you want your rhyming words to seem like the obvious choice to end the line, rather than an unlikely word to use. **If the rhyming syllable is a**

natural part of the line, it will tie it beautifully to the other line/s that rhyme with it. Note: it can help to use the harder or less common rhyming word first; then the typical word will make it seem like it fits in well. Compare these stanzas from two drafts of a poem:

But the righteous son complains; he is not **content**: "You should make a feast for me, I'm **obedient**."	Son and father both rejoice; servants **celebrate**. But the father's other son stays outside the **gate**.

Some further tips:

- Good rhyme takes work, but it's worth it. Use a rhyming dictionary. There are some good ones online, like rhymebrain.com.
- When you're just starting, lean on common rhyming syllables, so that you have plenty of options. If possible, keep words like "God" and "love" within the line rather than as the ending syllable.
- If you want a challenge, try an Italian sonnet. The first eight lines (octave) are rhymed ABBAABBA, and the last six (sestet) can use either two or three rhymes, in different combinations.

#2. Using imperfect rhymes too freely

Poets often use imperfect rhymes (also called slant rhymes) in their poetry. This can work, or it can flop.

The whole point of rhyme is that the ear associates the two (or more) rhyming syllables, and, by extension, the lines that they end. Thus, rhyming syllables need to sound similar enough that the ear automatically hears the words as connected.

This means that the proof of the poem is in the hearing, and I can't tell you what's legal and what's not. However, to my ear, the following tend to work quite well. Note that in different dialects of English the example rhymes might not all work.

- Same consonant, similar vowel: love–move, known–gone
- Same vowel, similar consonant: known–dome, face–raise
- Same, except there's an extra ending consonant: height–bites, awe–fall

It's possible to stretch these farther in some cases. However, the farther you stretch them, the less able they'll be to carry the work of rhyme.

Remember that rhyme is a binding mechanism. Thus, you may want to ensure that your most significant rhymes are perfect rhymes.

#3. Using rhythm unnaturally

A metrical poem is, theoretically, made up of lines which have a certain number of metrical feet. Put simply, a foot is a pattern containing one stressed syllable and one or more unstressed syllables. Here are the typical types of feet:

- Iamb = unstressed–stressed = reTURN
- Trochee = stressed–unstressed = THINKing
- Anapest = unstressed–unstressed–stressed = engiNEER
- Dactyl = stressed–unstressed–unstressed = QUEStioning

In English speech, we often use iambic naturally. Still, trochaic catches our attention. But iambic is often a lighthearted meter to use. As is dactylic sometimes.

Metrical poems are made up of lines made up of consistent patterns of metrical feet, though typically, the final foot doesn't need to be a complete one.

Hymns and other songs are typically metrical, and Western poetry has typically been metrical up to the nineteenth century, with some notable exceptions.

Here's the first problem. It's not metrical verse if you don't use a meter.

> But who on earth enjoys a verse
> that marches onward like a hearse
> until the pounding in your ears
> will bring its hearers all to tears?

The first potential problem is being too regular or irregular with rhythm. Yet you don't want to bury your meter so deeply that it doesn't sound like you have one. **Even more so, you don't want your reader to consistently stumble over your lines.**

Recommendation: Stick to a meter pretty consistently, but give your poem the freedom to have some stressed syllables that are weaker than others (as English typically does) and to have some inverted feet (but not enough to obscure a line).

> I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree,
> And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made;
> Nine bean-rows will I have there, a hive for the honey-bee,

> And live alone in the bee-loud glade.
> —William Butler Yeats

> Then let my birthright be the night, I pray—
> when all your gifts are given, and I stand
> alone without my modicum of day,
> without a holy blessing from your hand.
> Then let it be tonight, and where I stand
> under this heaven, where this night I pray.

Look over these stanzas and notice that, though both are iambic, both sometimes flip around a metrical foot either to add aural interest or to bring forward certain aspects of the poems. Even when they stay within the bounds of iambicity, they use the natural accents of the English language to create a lyrical sound. In this area, you can't go wrong by emulating Yeats's poetry.

Exception: If your poem is intended to be sung as a strophic hymn (multiple stanzas to the same music), you will want to make sure it stays fairly regular, so that some of the verses aren't awkward to sing.

Another mistake is using a meter that doesn't match the mood of the poem. Typically, you shouldn't don't use three-syllable feet for solemn poetry. It will sound like you're trying to be funny.

> So sadly, I looked down the drain, where my lover had slipped;
> I knew, if the gears there were spinning, in two he'd be snipped.

You may laugh, but what if I'd been serious, and had simply chosen the wrong meter for my poem? Note: One exception is that dactylic meters can be very weighty—if you are careful to choose the right words for your desired mood:

> Cold on his cradle the dewdrops are shining;
> low lies his head with the beasts of the stall.
> Angels adore him in slumber reclining,
> maker and monarch and Savior of all.
> —Reginald Heber

> Far down that tide will thy ship, then, be grounding,
> Leaving thee off in grey lands like a grave,

Or to the ocean, on some deep sounding,
Pitch thee forever on wave and on wave.

#4. Don't use too tight meters.

Poets typically begin by emulating the best poetry they know. For Anabaptists, this is often hymns. However, as mentioned above, hymns are constrained to stick closely to their meter, and such metrical regularity can sound wooden when you carry it into poetry that was intended to be spoken.

A less-observed phenomenon is this: It's hard to write a compelling melody for any text with more than four feet per line. It can be done, but because it's hard, the most common hymn meters max out at four feet, typically eight syllables, per line. (Gospel songs, since their lightness allows for lighter melodies, frequently use longer meters.)

However, when you're writing spoken poetry, sometimes you need more space to say what you're trying to say. Too tightly-bound verse might keep you from saying as much. This is because of two things:

- Shorter lines mean that phrases and clauses will typically be shorter, so that most of them can fit into one line.
- Shorter lines mean that you'll need to come up with rhymes oftener, which limits your freedom in writing what you want.

Though short meters can be very beautiful, these constraints make so that short meters are harder to write well. To demonstrate this, I'll show you two stanzas I've written and that I'm satisfied with. Consider this stanza:

When I beheld him dying,
the word of ages crying
that all that was begun—
that all the world was ended,
the sun's last course was wended,
that all earth's life was flying:
I knew him for God's son.

The reason this stanza, though so tightly rhymed and bound, says anything at all is because it doesn't try to say much. It uses the sounds of the form to give more

depth and earnestness to the simple idea: When I heard Jesus say “It is finished,” I knew he was God’s son. Consider this much freer stanza:

> Near us his heart, beating like gentle rain,
> moves all the world and makes our spirits rest.
> His breath falls lightly here, but, east and west,
> it quickens all ills, makes all joys remain.

This stanza is able to express just as much content as, or more than, the previous one could express, and it does it with five fewer words. Besides that, it’s written in formal constraints that are significantly easier to write in.

I tried writing an entire poem to complete the tightly-bound stanza, but I’ve never been completely satisfied with any of the rest of the stanzas I wrote. Yet I’ve written any number of quatrains in the style of my more loosely-bound stanza. However, consider that my tightly-bound stanza can easily be set to hymn-style music, but the one with longer lines will be much more difficult to write melodies for.

You get tradeoffs either way. However, it is typically easier to express yourself in a longer meter. This tip doesn’t work for everyone, but I have often seen very good results when a poet has started writing poems in larger forms. Add a foot or more and you may express your thought better. But note that if you add too many feet, the line will naturally tend to drag on and on, or it will naturally sound like it’s really two lines, rather than one.

Iambic pentameter (five feet per line) is probably the sweet spot between the two extremes. Historically, poets seem to agree with me—consider that, for centuries, sonnets, plays, and epics in the English language were typically written in iambic pentameter.

#5. Using line breaks ineffectively in free verse.

So far, I haven’t talked about free verse (unmetered poetry). That’s not because there aren’t mistakes you can make there, too! Just because free verse is free from rhyme and meter doesn’t mean that it’s free from using any formal elements.

One formal element that makes a big difference in free verse is line breaks. There isn’t really a rule that when reading a poem, you need to pause at line breaks.

However, well-placed line breaks will create a strategic pause in the sound and thought of a poem.

However, prose with line breaks is not free verse.

One way to tell whether a free verse poem has good form or not is to change or remove the line breaks and see if it still sounds the same. Consider this example from before:

> God takes care of all
> my needs.
> This includes my physical
> needs and my
> spiritual needs.
>
> God takes
> care of all my
> needs. This includes my phys-
> ical needs and my spir-
> itual needs.
>
> God takes care of all my needs. This includes my physical needs and my spiritual needs.

The line breaks can be moved to different spots without changing the poem, so obviously they aren't helping to make it a poem. It sounds just like prose when the line breaks are moved, so obviously there aren't other poetic devices helping to make it a poem, either. This little trick can help you tell whether something is a poem or not.

If you're worried that your poems are just prose with line breaks, try these:

- Bring in metaphors, pictures, and different poetic devices having to do with the sounds of words, to make the poem more poetic.
- To create more effective line breaks, try to think in terms of thoughts rather than clauses. Try not to only divide lines at punctuation.

It can take practice to get a sense for what makes a poem read like a poem, but as you intensify the language you employ, you'll learn. However, some poets are just naturally better at free verse. I happen to be naturally better at writing formal verse. If you have a hard time with free verse, maybe you should mainly focus on rhymed and bound poetry.

Short lines can be overdone. Consider this beautiful poem:

> Each morning breaks the same,
> Rising with a hunger that carves
> Like the slanting fingers of sunlight cutting
> Through the fog that shrouds the neighbor's burnt field.
> —Lori Hershberger

Some poets try to intensify their poetry by using short lines, as I did to the stanza below:

> Each morning
> breaks the same,
> Rising with
> a hunger that carves
> Like the slanting
> fingers
> of sunlight cutting
> Through the fog that shrouds
> the neighbor's
> burnt field.

But shortening these lines doesn't help the poem. Short lines are an attempted shortcut to intensity; they make each word count. But think of each line as your stride. Some steps will be shorter than others, especially when you're turning, but if you try to ramp up the intensity of your walk by using short steps, you'll get dizzy pretty quickly.

I read once that amateur composers find it harder to write long, flowing melody lines. The same might be true here. Short lines can make beautiful poetry, but often longer lines are more effective.

Content Mistakes

You may have noticed that I spent a disproportionate amount of space in this handout on form. That's because, as I said, form is the building materials for your poetry. Form is what makes poetry poetry. Good form makes for good content. I typically don't give people much content advice on a poem until they've cleaned up

their form. But there are still mistakes that are commonly made in poetic content, and here are some of them:

#6. Show, don't tell.

Prose is the best medium for argument; poetry is the best medium for apprehending. If you want to share an experience with a reader, try poetry. But if you're trying to explain something, stick to prose.

> I cannot fully grasp the love of God
> even if I could live a thousand years.
> Yet all my insufficiency
> won't keep away his love.

These are great insights. But they don't make for an effective poem. Consider, instead, this sestet which makes God's love real to the reader by drawing the reader into the story of the poem:

> Yet what is this?—this new thing You have done?
> Gone down to slumber in a bed of straw,
> Your splendor laid aside, Your rightful throne?
> What love is this, that dares to come as one
> Undone, unclothed—a homeless baby? Ah,
> Despite me, something stirs my heart of stone.
> —Rebecca Weber

Here are some tips for helping your statements show rather than tell:

- Use specificities—things that are tangible, common, and particular. Everyone has tasted a sour fruit, or felt a blow to the front of the head, or seen a jealous child. Capitalize on those experiences to draw the reader into the poem.
- Use crossmodals—words whose primary meaning is for one type of experience, but which help to portray another type of experience (e.g., a *bright* note, a *fluid* motion, a *crushing* darkness.). See this stanza, for example:

> Light fills the vacant corridors
> long since emptied
> by darknesses—
> and brings an intense ecstasy

Light **floods** the vacant corridors
long since **swept out**
by darknesses—
and **wakes** a **shivering** ecstasy
—Rebecca Weber

Such words immerse us into the world of the poem. If you catch yourself telling someone precise facts about the matter, chances are you're writing prose rather than a poem.

About big words and ethereal language:

Lofty and ethereal language has its place, but understated language can be more effective. A poem which consists of an effusion of transcendent or highly descriptive language feels like it's trying too hard.

Consider this poem that I wrote a number of years ago, containing lots of fun words of Latin origin. Today I'd call it a "word salad."

> The gods had longed to rule the universe,
> to bend the swinging stars to orbit them—
> the suns of myriads of societies,
> commanding minions on a trillion earths;
> worshipped by nebulas and galaxies!
> And in their peerless reign, to bow to none,
> annihilating any enemy
> with strength as fierce and bright as quasars' rays.

Yet this poem with mostly Anglo-Saxon words packs considerably more punch:

> The waves that night they crested tall and broad,
> Dancing a doom-filled dance of sea and sky;
> We watched them rise in fury, foam, and die,
> While under spell we stood, fear-fixed and awed.
> Our eyes they filled, and in our ears they called,
> Our hearts they shook, and with a deathly cry
> There rose one wave in fate higher than high,
> And every man of us called on his God.
> It swept expectant up the shallow sand
> And broke not on those stones which strewed its way,
> And swelled, still swelled; it swallowed up the land,

> Unstopping, inexorable and fey—
> It closed the world into its shoreless hand
> And us and all our kingdoms swept away.

The words we use the most, sometimes the very simplest of them, can often be the strongest words in poetry.

#7. Don't tie up your poem with a nice bow.

Poets often end their poem with a nice line or two that's intended to bring it to a satisfactory conclusion. Having a good ending line is good, but when an ending line resolves all the tensions in a poem, or makes the main thrust of the poem explicit, or highlights the spiritual nature of the poem, problems arise.

Note: It's not always easy to explain what makes the difference between a good ending and a poor one. That's not because there's no difference, but because, as before, the proof of a poem is in the hearing. So take these descriptions with a grain of salt.

Imagine if a poet who wanted to emphasize our need for Christ wrote a poem that describes the death of a man's wife. Suppose the poem ended,

> After the funeral, they filled his house with flowers
> till there was no room for him to sit.
> So he rested against the fender of his old pickup truck.
> He scanned the sky, as though looking for the second coming,
> then whistled for his dog and drove out to check the fields.
> *He pondered on Jesus, his only hope,*
> *and the New Creation of life that cannot die.*

An ending of this sort is a shortcut. Poets naturally want their poem to raise the appropriate conclusions within the reader. But the poet is concerned that the reader won't "get" what the poem means without a bit of clarification. However, even if that clarification is not "telling" rather than "showing," it creates these problems:

- Instead of having taken a journey steadily to its conclusion, the poem has, at the last minute, leaped forward, skipped over plenty of terrain, and ended up prematurely at its conclusion, like a preacher who is halfway

through his sermon when his time is up, and needs to conclude with a hasty injunction.
- The insightful reader, for whom we hope you are writing, will feel like you're talking down to them and that you don't trust them to understand the poem.
- There might not be any more need for the poem, if it's able to be summarized in the last line.

Instead, remove that last line or two, let the poem end with a tension, and just ensure that your poem's worldview points to the truth. Consider, for example, the hints in the previously mentioned poem which render a nice bow unnecessary. What phrases and concepts might these hint at our need for Christ, which the poet wants to demonstrate?

"But Lynn," you may ask. "How will people know that God is the answer, if we don't tell them?"

Some of the best poems in Western literature are about God. However, when a poem packs God in at the very end, they aren't being fair to anyone, let alone God.

Life doesn't come with a tag saying what it means, nor do people or nature. If God is content not to write "I am God" in the sky, but instead overwhelms people by the awesome nature of his work, can't we honor his preference for quality of expression rather than hasty sermonizing?

Art that is trying to drive a point risks being both poor art and a poor point-driver. Your job is to write poems with the worldview of God being the answer, and make it so compelling that people want it. If you really want that kind of ending, you will need to bring your reader there through the merits of the poem rather than through a nice ending that ties it all together.

There's a general rule that **if you can explain it, it's not a poem.**

That is, a poem is both form and content. If it can be reduced to content, then the form isn't pulling its share of the load. In general, the reason art is art is that it says something ineffable that can't be reduced to words. If that weren't the case, we could replace the art with those statements and lose nothing of value.

#8. Lists are not poems.

Many poets, in an attempt at parallelism, go so far as to create poems that are lists of different aspects of something. Here's a poem I wrote after the style of one poem we received. This is not in the least intended as mockery (our contributor's poem was definitely better than this quick imitation), but as a way to provide an example of this type of poem without pointing fingers.

> Our mighty God—
> The one creator of all things that move.
> Amazing worlds
> As yet untrod
> Are held together by the hand of love.
>
> Our Father, God—
> Whom every heart must long to seek and know.
> "We are his sheep"—
> The Shepherd's rod
> And living water makes cups overflow.
>
> Our Saving Lord—
> Redeeming humans from the pits of hell.
> Not one is good
> Who can afford
> To earn the love by which he makes us well.

Consider that this poem could continue indefinitely: The God of love, Returning King, Abraham's God, etc. There's no story or emotional journey that the poem is carrying us through. Even you arranged a list such that it hinted at, let's say, the story of our redemption, here's the issue:

- None of these strung-together episodes digs deeply enough into its subject to feel like we're doing more than summarizing that subject quickly.
- These episodes don't have references to each other, so they don't build on each other to move us toward the conclusion of the poem.

If you still aren't sure, consider this: Would this method work in any other art form? If you wrote a story in which all paragraphs are a parallel description of something, would it be successful? If you painted lots of pictures of the same

subject, just using different colors, could you combine them and make one successful artwork?

Artists do create series of works, like novels, poems, paintings, etc. that are in one series about one subject. But each item in the series is typically a deep enough dive into the subject that we can view an individual artwork and gain value from each one by itself.

When your poem is a list, it is essentially as many poems as there are list items. We recommend picking one thing from the list and diving more deeply into it. More on this will appear in the next point.

#9. Don't underestimate the need for cohesiveness and themes.

If a poem is a poem, we assume that there's something that makes it *that* poem rather than another one. This may sound overly philosophical, but it's important—what you put into a poem and what you leave out of it make all the difference. Poetry can communicate pretty much any subject, but what an individual poem contains should make intuitive/emotional sense as a unit.

After all, a beautiful sky might not make a good photograph. Only things that can fit into a camera's frame, and still look good, will make good photographs. For photography, the frame defines what is inside or outside of the photo, and what is inside should make intuitive/emotional sense as a unit.

Here are some ways this mistake might be made, along with some tips for correcting it:

- Don't use too many different images or metaphors in succession. Even if you are able to create a dozen good word pictures, if you put them in one poem, they might make the poem feel scattered.
- Perhaps a poem is about a specific subject or event, but the poem merely describes it in poetic language, rather than creating an emotional unit. See if, when editing, you can choose words that will hint at a certain theme or themes throughout the poem.
- Maybe the poem lightly skips over deep and meaningful ideas. Instead, as in #8, typically it is better to choose one concept/situation/moment and tell it well.

- If your poem is pretty long and covers your subject very thoroughly, you might just want to shorten the poem and make sure to strengthen whatever is left, using tips from this handout.
- If you're summarizing something, like the gospel, consider that poetry is actually not one of the best genres for summarizing. Poetry is best at giving a vivid picture of one moment, idea, or image. The more a poem shows particulars/specifics rather than generalities, the stronger it will be.

#10. Don't rely on the readers' knowing what you mean.

Obviously, one can't write poetry for an audience unless that audience shares one's language. That's not what this point is about. Poets sometimes make references to concepts that shouldn't be referenced unless they can be given justice to within the poem. Concepts themselves are not sufficient to create a poem.

One of our authors, for example, wrote a poem about the loss of a loved one. The writing of the poem was no doubt very meaningful, but the poem didn't really bring the readers into that experience (see #6). The poem would probably have struck a chord in at least somebody else who had lost a loved one—but because of their shared experience, rather than because of the merits of the poem. The best poetry that comes out of any emotion is the poetry that is able to stir those emotions in a person who might not otherwise know them.

I've written many a poem from very heartfelt emotions, but that just didn't convey those emotions well—they have been duly rejected by the people who may or may not have felt the same emotions in their lives, but the poem was incapable of making them re-experience them. So instead, use the tips found in this handout to create poetry through which readers can experience the poem's reality.

For another example, if your poem mentions salvation, remember that "salvation" is a concept. Within that concept, there's plenty of great material for beautiful poetry—but successful poems unpack the concept in language with specificities. Compare these two:

> Once I was lost—no hope in life,
> There was no meaning in my strife,
> And then I called upon his name,
> And his salvation came.

Long my imprisoned spirit lay
Fast bound in sin and nature's night;
Thine eye diffused a quick'ning ray,
I woke, the dungeon flamed with light;
My chains fell off, my heart was free;
I rose, went forth and followed Thee.
—Charles Wesley

When Charles Wesley describes his salvation, it is no longer merely a concept—he helps us re-experience joy and freedom through his rich metaphors and a powerful story. No one is wondering what emotion they should feel when singing this verse—it creates those emotions in the singers.

Also consider that many people don't hear the same thing that you do when you mention "salvation." Religious "nones," and even many religious people, may think that salvation is merely a transaction that will make sure you have a pleasant afterlife. But I hope our view of salvation is much more robust than that.

Remember that the richest of concepts still have no form to them. It takes the formal elements of poetry to make them come alive for the reader.

Some Bonus Tips

#11. Know how to follow the rules before breaking them.

All these rules can be broken, but you need to be good at following them before you can be sure you can break them effectively. Ever seen someone try to fishtail before they can drive a car properly? Or try an amazing new chess opening before they know anything about tactics?

#12. A good ending will make us forgive all sorts of things.

An ending sets the direction the reader will be thinking after the poem is over. Leave us with a tension, a paradox, a laugh, or something to consider. The following endings are from quite good poems, but even if your poem isn't this good, a good ending will work wonders.

I don't know. The birds veer off, to go
Home, perhaps. Mine seems so far away no roads
Could take me there but the one the swallows follow,

The one that flows in the obscurity of their wings and words.
—Myra Wollman

I trace the words that tremble on the page and pen the ache–
Read this my Lord—this hunger, this hollowness,
This burnt ground, this empty cup, my song to You.
—Lori Hershberger

One more day's measure
from the last word you spoke
brings one more evening
empty of your laughter
brings one more morning
into which your name, spoken,
will fall into space
as clear as water,
without a ripple,
without reply.
—Claudia Lehman

If you'd rather love not sear you,
Set a roadblock somewhere near you.
Hold your breath. Retreat. Reduce. Accept the lie.
You only need a little space to die.
—Sheila J Petre

#13. Use the most effective words.

Here are a few tips for making a good poem better. The sections of poems that I've quoted in this handout give many great examples of how to do it well.

- Replace being verbs with active verbs that bring flavor to your poem.
- Use specialized verbs rather than adverbs.
- Use metaphors rather than adjectives.
- Write about specific, concrete subjects.
- Remove as many useless words, phrases, etc., as you can, or replace them with more useful ones. I call this "tightening up" a poem.

#14. If someone else does it well, try doing it better.

When you see an element of someone's poem that works really well, imitate it. Obviously you can't copy from their poem, but you can try out their methods, emulate their style, explore the same ideas, etc. Just make it your task to do what they did better, fitting it into the intent and style of your poetry. Some of the best works of art were created as imitation of someone else's art.

#15. I offer writing advice.

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