

The Tools and Rules of Poetry

The building blocks: Stanzas and Lines

Needles and Pins

-by Shel Silverstein

Needles and pins,
Needles and pins,
Sew me a sail
To catch me the wind.

Chasing the whales,
Sailing the blue
Find me a captain
And sign me a crew.

Stanza: A
"paragraph" of poetry.

Sew me a sail
Strong as the gale,
Carpenter, bring out your
Hammers and nails.

Captain and crew,
Captain and crew,
Take me, oh take me
To anywhere new.

Line: A "sentence"
of poetry.

Hammers and nails,
Hammers and nails,
Build me a boat
To go chasing the whales.

All poetry involves 3 things:

- 1. Language Play*
- 2. Image Painting*
- 3. Meaning*

Language Play: The amazing figurative language devices below allow poets to play with language in a way that prose writers often do not. Use these awesome tools to create powerful poetry!

A. *Alliteration* - The repetition of consonant sounds at the beginnings of words near one another.

"Lump lingered last in line for brains..."

- from the song "Lump" by The Presidents of the United States of America

- B. Allusion** - A brief and indirect reference to a person, place, thing or idea of historical, cultural, literary or political significance. It does not describe in detail the person or thing to which it refers. It's just a passing comment and the writer expects the reader to possess enough knowledge to spot the allusion and grasp its importance in a text.

The boy, her own personal Romeo, left a rose upon her desk.

To eavesdrop on this conversation would be to open Pandora's Box.

- C. Anaphora** – (say “an-AFF-o-ra) The repetition of words at the beginnings of three or more successive phrases, clauses or sentences. This is used to drive a point home. It's critical to use this effectively. Repeating words that are insignificant is not artistic. *It's annoying!* 😊

This passage is from Martin Luther King Jr.'s “I Have a Dream” speech:

So let freedom ring from the prodigious hilltops of New Hampshire. **Let freedom ring** from the mighty mountains of New York. **Let freedom ring** from the heightening Alleghenies of Pennsylvania...

- D. Assonance** - Assonance takes place when two or more words close to one another repeat the same vowel sound but start with different consonant sounds.

A thin wind, driven like thundering mustangs across the plains.

- E. Capitals out of Order** - This sounds like 'adjectives out of order', but it refers to the places where you would expect to find a capital letter and do not. It also refers to places where a capital is not needed, but one is there all the same. Reasons for omitting a capital would be to *reduce the importance or meaning of that word*. The opposite is true for capitalizing a word that doesn't need it. For example, if you are writing about a time during which you experienced great fear, you might choose to capitalize the word 'fear', to make it seem more *menacing*.

As the storm intensified, Fear climbed into our boat.

The capitalizing of the word 'fear' in the passage above also suggests that the word is a *proper name*, since fear is being personified.

- F. Consonance** - repetitive sounds produced by consonants within a sentence or phrase. This repetition often takes place in quick succession, such as in “**pitter, patter.”**

*Miss Rafferty wore taffeta
Miss Cavendish wore lavender*

- from “Private Dining Room” by
Ogden Nash

G. Hyperbole - An unreal exaggeration to emphasize the real situation.

*Neptune's ocean wash this blood
Clean from my hand? No. This my hand will rather
The multitudinous seas incarnadine,
Making the green one red.*

- from William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, Act II, Scene II

H. Irony - a figure of speech in which words are used in such a way that their intended meaning is different from the actual meaning of the words. It may also be a situation that ends up in quite a different way than what is generally anticipated. In simple words, it is a difference between appearance and reality.

There are two basic types of irony: (1) verbal irony, and (2) situational irony. **Verbal irony** involves what one does not mean. For example, when in response to a foolish idea, we say, "What a great idea!" **Situational irony** occurs when, for instance, a man is chuckling at the misfortune of another, even when the same misfortune is, unbeknownst to him, befalling him.

I. Lowercase "i" - It is a technique you are told to *never* use in your writing! By using a lowercase i, the poet can suggest many things. A feeling of being *small* or *unimportant* is certainly conveyed by the use of the small letter. Other feelings that go along with the lowercase i might be *guilt*, *loss*, or *shame*.

J. Metaphor - A direct comparison between two unrelated things that share similar characteristics.

The moon was a shining pearl set upon a canvas of black velvet.

K. Onomatopoeia - A word which imitates the natural sounds of a thing like **buzz**, **fizz**, **crash**, and **bang**. This technique can *ruin* a moment in a poem when it's not used effectively.

L. Personification - Giving a non-living thing or an animal human characteristics.

*"Ah, William, we're weary of weather,"
said the sunflowers, shining with dew.
"Our traveling habits have tired us.
Can you give us a room with a view?"*

- from "Two Sunflowers Move in the Yellow Room"
by William Blake

*They arranged themselves at the window
and counted the steps of the sun,
and they both took root in the carpet
where the topaz tortoises run.*

M. Simile - A comparison between two unrelated things that share similar characteristics using the words *like* or *as*.

“Harlem” by Langston Hughes

What happens to a dream deferred?

*Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore -
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over -
like a syrupy sweet?*

*Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.*

Or does it explode?

N. Symbolism – A concrete representation of an abstract idea. A flag bearing stars and stripes is a symbol for the idea of the United States of America. A dove is a symbol for peace. A heart is a symbol for love. A four-leaf clover is a symbol for good luck. Below are the lyrics to a song called “The Trees” by the rock group Rush. The drummer, Neal Peart, is the author.

*There is unrest in the Forest
There is trouble with the trees
For the Maples want more sunlight
And the Oaks ignore their pleas.*

*The trouble with the Maples
(And they're quite convinced they're right)
They say the Oaks are just too lofty
And they grab up all the light
But the Oaks can't help their feelings
If they like the way they're made
And they wonder why the Maples
Can't be happy in their shade?*

*There is trouble in the Forest
And the creatures all have fled
As the Maples scream 'Oppression!'
And the Oaks, just shake their heads*

*So the Maples formed a Union
And demanded equal rights
'The Oaks are just too greedy
We will make them give us light'
Now there's no more Oak oppression
For they passed a noble law
And the trees are all kept equal
By hatchet,
Axe,
And saw...*

O. Rhyme - The repetition of the entire sound of a word, except for the first letter or first syllables:

*Some dummy built this pencil wrong,
The eraser's down here where the point belongs,
And the point's at the top - so it's no good to me,
It's amazing how stupid some people can be.*

“Stupid Pencil Maker”
- by Shel Silverstein

*P. Repetition * - Every time I climb a tree
Every time I climb a tree or

And miles to go before I sleep
And miles to go before I sleep*

* Use repetition with *great care!* Repeating just to repeat is *annoying* and it actually works *against* your poetry. Repetition can drive home key points or critical images with power and authority.

*Q. Revision Techniques – Even though poems are short pieces, there is *always* room for a revision technique or two. Lines of poetry are basically sentences that are creatively carved into pieces. Look for places to insert these techniques to bring an image to life.*

R. Rhythm - Rhythm is the music hiding between the lines of a poem. Some poets create it naturally, accidentally; most poets use syllable counting to find it. To test whether or not your poetry has a rhythm, you should be able to pound out a beat as you read it.

*S. Single Word Lines – Another way to add weight to words and phrases is set them apart. The reader's eye is drawn to those words in particular and must pause on them for an extra second. This makes those words hold more weight and emotion. Choose the words set apart *carefully!* If you set *every* word apart, you might distract the reader from the message, feeling, or image that you are trying to get across.*

*In the cage
at the pound
the kitten sat,
alone,
looking between
the bars of its cage.*

T. Stanzas in Motion – Poetry is a playground for words. You should hang from the words and swing around on them and see what new, fun arrangements you can create. To create a feeling of motion in your work, offset words, lines, and stanzas.

*The new snow,
frozen, frosted stars,
fell like crystal tears
from the face of the Sky.*

There is a sense of *falling* in the words above. Did you notice the appositive? Did you catch the personification? Your poetry must be loaded with sensory images and figurative language or it will not have the **power** it needs to move your audience!

U. Trimming the Fat – To make poetic images as sharp as they can possibly be, a poet needs to trim the 'fat' words and leave the reader with a 'lean' poem that is packed with feeling and image. Small words like articles (a, an, the) and conjunctions (and, but, or) are a good place to start.

<i>Too fat!</i> <i>I was taking a walk yesterday I noticed the air was very cold It seemed like the sky was ready to snow</i>	<i>Nicely trimmed!</i> <i>Walking yesterday Winter slid up, grasped my hand Snow hung from the clouds like glittering ornaments</i>
--	--

Notice the significant improvements in the trimmed version:

- Line 1: Cut four of six words to create a lean image.
- Line 2: Removed common words and replaced them with personification.
- Line 3: Removed common words “was ready” and added a strong image + a simile.

Image Painting: The drawings, paintings, snapshots placed in one's mind by the words of a poem. Image painting relies completely on sensory detail – language that appeals to the five senses. Here's an example from William Carlos Williams' "The Red Wheelbarrow":

so much depends
upon

a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens

Meaning: The thoughts, feelings, emotions, and mood created by the words in a poem. Poems capture important moments in our lives. Sometimes it's an unforgettable image. Sometimes it's an overwhelming feeling: love, hate, fear, awe, indecision, gratitude, wonder. The list goes on and on. **FIRST** comes the feeling or the image. **NEXT** come the words. *In reverse order, poetry does not work.* In reverse order, stanzas are empty vessels waiting to be filled with meaning.