A Quick Guide to Poetry

1. Purpose: Why write a poem?
   • Why is the story that you are telling suited to the poetic form? Why not write a short story or a play instead?
   • A good definition for poetry is “emotion concentrated.” Unlike a story, a poem tends to focus on single moments and their emotional content.
   • Poetry is all about:
     o Invoking emotion in the reader, which is distinctly different from the poet just scrawling their own feelings all over the page. (Any poem written about your bad breakup will have a 99% chance of being absolutely terrible.)
     o Conciseness, which means expressing as much as possible in as few words as possible. Every word, line, and stanza should have been chosen and crafted for a precise purpose.

2. Central Idea/Question
   • What is the idea or question that you are addressing in your poem?
     o What question do you want the reader to ask? What do you want the reader to realize?
   • What is your poem really about?
     o Harry Potter is about a boy who goes to wizard school and has lots of adventures. But Harry Potter is really about the difference between good and evil.
   • This central idea/question should inform all the choices that you make while writing and revising your poem.

3. Form
   • Many poetic forms have associated purposes that go along with them. For instance, we associate sonnets with love, while we associate limericks with humor.
   • How are you using the form you have chosen to further your poem’s content?
     o Why write a quatern, as opposed to a sonnet or a haiku? Why write in free verse?
     o How does this choice impact your poem thematically? What might it say about your poem’s content or your poem’s speaker?
   • If your poem requires rhyming, don’t be afraid to use a rhyming dictionary. If your poem requires syllable counts, don’t be afraid to use your fingers to count them.

4. Speaker & Audience
   • Who is speaking in your poem?
   • Who are they speaking to (if anyone)?

5. Word Choice
   • When writing poetry, we tend to use simpler, shorter words. Such words impact the reader right away, providing a stronger emotional connection with the poem.
     o We have lingered in the chambers of the sea
       By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown
       Till human voices wake us, and we drown. – T.S. Eliot, “The Love Song...”
     o We have vacillated in pelagic chambers
       By Nereids wreathed with seaweed rubicund and russet
       Till anthropoid voices awaken us, and we asphyxiate.
   • Try to choose words and images which show instead of tell. Avoid adverbs like the plague. Avoid emotions, except on the rare occasions when they can have a lot of power.
     o night fall and purple light sinking
data down from clouds stretching
       earthward to meet white snow once
       held inside themselves
     o darkness comes quickly
       tired clouds turning a mournful purple, reaching earthward,
       trying to take back their snow from the cruel ground
6. Imagery

- How are your images working to express the larger idea of your poem?
- Make sure your images fit together.
  - When describing a raven, don’t say, “Black eyes cut from ancient flint, feathers shining like a grease-slick stovetop.” The images are completely different in tone and in association.

7. Literary Techniques

- Literary techniques are great for furthering the meaning of your poem, but make sure you’re using them with intent. Don’t just throw them in without having a clear idea of why you’re using them.
- Alliteration/assonance/consonance: All of these can help tie your poem together with sound and also evoke a particular mood. Just make sure you don’t overdo it.
  - Mist is sighing across winter fields – the “s” suggests the creeping mist, as well as the stillness and softness of the scene
  - And his hand holds on so tightly it hurts – the repeated “h” with its exhale suggests exhaustion/desperation (as the poem is about two brothers running away from an abusive father), while the “ai” vowel in “tightly” requires extra effort from the reader to pronounce and therefore suggests strain
- Metaphor: Poets love metaphors! Often a poem has a central metaphor as well as smaller ones throughout. But poems do not always have metaphors, so only use one if it occurs naturally.
  - Some metaphors are more direct:
    I would like to be the air
    that inhabits you for a moment
    only. I would like to be that unnoticed
    & that necessary. – Margaret Atwood
  - Some metaphors are less direct:
    Tea for Two (A Tragedy)
    It wasn’t until after
    I poured the second cup
    that I realized
    I was alone. – Pamela August Russell
- Allusion: Referencing other texts (whether they be novels or fairy tales) allows us to play with the ideas present in the original, extending them or challenging them in order to create our own unique work. You can also reference historical events or people.
  - Doctor, you say there are no haloes
    around the streetlights in Paris
    and what I see is an aberration
    caused by old age, an affliction.
    I tell you it has taken me all my life
    to arrive at the vision of gas lamps as angels,
    to soften and blur and finally banish
    the edges you regret I don’t see,
    to learn that the line I called the horizon
    does not exist and sky and water,
    so long apart, are the same state of being.
    – Lisel Mueller, “Monet Refuses the Operation”
  - For a while I thought I was the dragon.
    I guess I can tell you that now. And, for a while, I thought I was
    the princess,
    cotton candy pink, sitting there in my room, in the tower of the castle,
    young and beautiful and in love and waiting for you with confidence
    but the princess looks into her mirror and only sees the princess,
    while I’m out here, slogging through the mud, breathing fire,
    and getting stabbed to death.
    Okay, so I’m the dragon. Big deal.
    You still get to be the hero.
    – Richard Siken, “Litany In Which Certain Things Are Crossed Out”