

COLLEGE GUILD
PO Box 6448, Brunswick ME 04011

CREATIVE LANGUAGE

Unit 4 of 6

Poetry

People seem to either love or hate the idea of writing poetry. If you think you're in this second group, think of song lyrics. Write down the words to your favorite song and read them instead of singing them – a poem! One way to describe poetry is that it is an “imaginative interpretation” of its subject. Poetry is presented on the page in a different format from prose. Many poems don't even use full sentences or punctuation.

We'll begin with "couplets" (poems of only 2 lines.) We can use a rhyming poem (like “The Fly”) or free verse (“Guilt”).

The Fly
The Lord in his wisdom made the fly
And then forgot to tell us why. [Ogden Nash, from Beastly Poetry]

Guilt
A cop walks by.
I look at my feet. [John Yarbrough, from Boiled White]

The humor in the first works so well because of the simplicity; it reads like a casual observation which makes it much funnier than if it was explained or overwritten. The rhyme fits with the mood. “Guilt” is an example of saying more with few words than you could in a whole essay -- that's the challenge of writing poetry. All the action in Yarbrough's poem is a movement of the head. But combining that with the title and the cop, in only nine words this character and his life become real. Free verse fits with the mood.

Notice how rhyming poems frequently have an even METER – the lines are arranged in a rhythmic way, with the same number of beats.

A poem is said to be complete, not when there is nothing more to add, but when there is nothing more to take away! The following poem conveys the scene clearly with many fewer words than if it were written in prose. (Note: no title, no verb to make it a sentence, no punctuation)

*broken locks
filthy stairs
stench of garbage
absent landlord*

1) Complete two couplets by adding a second line, one rhyming, one in free verse:

Saturday I will plant a tree --

The bull frog dresses in mossy green –

2) Write your own couplet in rhyme.

3) Write your own couplet in free verse.

4) Take the subject of your rhyming couplet and the subject of your free verse couplet, and write a story (with plot and characters) that includes them both.

Here are nine subjects:

a spooky cellar	a person running for President	a grocery store
a cow barn	a man on a boat in a storm	a forest
a city at night	a birthday party	College Guild

5) Write a rhyming poem of any length about one of them

6) Write a free verse poem of any length about a different one.

7) Pick a third and write two poems about it, one rhyming and one in free verse.

8) How did the change in format change the way your two #7 poems came out, even though they are about the same subject? Which do you like the best?

Poetry Formats: Some poems have strict guidelines by definition. A “haiku” is an ancient form of poetry with specific requirements as far as number of syllables and lines. The definition is “an unrhymed Japanese verse form with 3 short lines of 5, 7 and 5 syllables.” Here is one by a CG student titled “Wildfire”:

<i>blazing embers send</i>	(5) bla zing em bers send
<i>dry autumn russets and golds</i>	(7) dry au tumn russ ets and golds
<i>crackling in anguish</i>	(5) crack ling in ang uish

9) Write a haiku on any subject you want.

Here are just a few more examples of poetry formats with some examples on the next page:

The English sonnet is a 14 line rhyming poem the rhyme scheme: abab cdcd efef gg.

An epitaph is a poem for or about someone who has died.

If each line begins with the same letter, it is an alliteration poem.

A tanka is a form of Japanese poetry similar to a haiku. It has five unrhymed lines of 5, 7, 5, 7 and 7 syllables.

In a cinquain, there are only 5 lines with a 2, 4, 6, 8, 2 syllable count.

In the acrostic poem, a word is selected; each line begins with 1 letter from that word.

A limerick is a humorous 5 line poem with the rhyme scheme aabba.

When you see “aabba” to denote a rhyme scheme, it means the first, second and fifth lines rhyme with each other, and the third and fourth lines rhyme, as in a limerick. The CG student who suggested a limerick assignment thoughtfully gave you an example. (The great thing about limericks is that you can get away with words like “Foo”!)

<i>There was a skinny young man from Foo</i>	<i>a</i>
<i>Who got himself in a bit of a stew</i>	<i>a</i>
<i>The cannibal man</i>	<i>b</i>
<i>Threw some carrots to Stan</i>	<i>b</i>
<i>So there'd be enough dinner for two.</i>	<i>a</i>

Here are examples of an acrostic poem and a cinquain by former CG student Jerry Zell.

Poem	The dream	(2 syllables)
<u>P</u> erspiration is required	like autumn leaves	(4)
<u>O</u> n occasion and	fades vibrant leaps of gold	(6)
<u>E</u> ffort rewards those who	imagination off its leash	(8)
<u>M</u> ake a try	unfolds	(2)

10) What would be the purpose of having poems (like haikus, cinquains and tankas) with such strict guidelines?

11) Why is studying different kinds of poetry formats relevant to prose writing?

A selection of poems by current or former CG students follows. As you read them and think about the assignments that follow, try to figure out why it is that some poems move you. You can discover techniques you want to use for your own work, prose as well as poetry.

Think about metaphor when you read the poems about the manatee and the pelican.

*I've often wondered in
the course of things I wonder
about, why are manatees so dumb?
Fat, happy sea cows floating,
chewing what they chew and
eating what they eat getting
hit by boats, backs carved up
by whirling propellers.
Nothing but aquatic speed bumps.
But then I empathize
because I too have been
run over by life's ship.*

Dan Grote

A Pelican

*Brown and ugly I am told
But my reflection off the
sea waters
as I dive and swoop
tells me you are blind.*

Johnny Soliz

- 12) Did the use of animals help the poets get their messages across?
- 13) Where are the metaphors in Dan's poem and what do they communicate?
- 14) Do the two poets leave you with different feelings? Did one have a more lasting impression? Explain.

Blue Event Horizon

*There is a great black hole,
astronomers say, at the center
of the Milky Way. A place
where even light marks time.*

*It is here, where time itself
slides backwards—slipping
ever so slightly, until seconds
take place over centuries*

*And centuries take aeons
to pass—that our hearts reside,
grasping at rays of light that
bend
and brake in gravity's dreadful
well.*

Jerry Zell

One Lesser Deity

*The Goddess of Dust
sits in the rain
blinking at clouds
through great muddy tears*

*She shakes her fist
at the leaking sky
cursing each drop
that falls on her drought*

*she succumbs to sleep
and has peaceful dreams
of sandstorms raking
across West Texas plains*

John Yarbrough

Note that Jerry uses the phrase “bend and brake”. The common phrase is “bend and break” but Jerry cleverly uses a homonym to reflect his subject, time slowly down.

- 15) Write a short poem that uses a homonym to reflect its greater meaning.

John uses the creature “The Goddess of Dust” to represent the opposite of what the people in a drought plagued landscape dreams of. Notice that his imagery of opposites carries throughout the poem.

- 16) What imaginary creature would you create to tell a story? What would the poem be about?

Broken

*The thunder of four hooves
 pushing crescents
 into the moist earth.
 A glistening russet coat
 with a white diamond
 between the eyes.
 The radius of a lead rope
 taut between spinning center
 and halter.
 A strap of leather
 belted around his gelded waist
 for the first time.*

Sean White

*I am the beach with no shores
 My waves are the sun's heat
 That have cooked my skin to an
 Enchanted golden color
 I have no purpose
 But I serve a purpose
 With my dunes that are
 The mountains of my beauty
 Majestic, lonely and barren
 I am the beach with no shores*

Johnny Soliz

Note that Sean's poem is titled, Johnny's untitled.

17) Why do you think the poet used a title for "Broken"? Would the poem have the same impact without it?

18) Why do you think the poet left the second poem untitled? Since the reader has to guess what voice is speaking, does that add to the experience of reading it? Does not having a title detract from it at all?

19) Which of the poems in this unit is your favorite and why?

20) Write a poem of any length in free verse.

Poetry comes in much longer forms too, like ballads, sestinas and villanelles. What follows is a short piece of dialog from William Shakespeare's As You Like It, a full length play in poetry! Since Shakespeare uses the theater as a metaphor for the ages of a man, we'll let his metaphor and dialog take use to writing for the stage in Unit 5!

*All the world's a stage,
 And all the men and women merely players;
 They have their exits and their entrances;*

*And one man in his time plays many parts,
 His acts being seven ages. At first the infant,
 Mewling and puking in the nurse's arms;
 And then the whining school-boy, with his satchel
 And shining morning face, creeping like snail
 Unwillingly to school. And then the lover,
 Sighing like furnace, with a woeful ballad
 Made to his mistress' eyebrow. Then a soldier,
 Full of strange oaths, and bearded like the pard,
 Jealous in honour, sudden and quick in quarrel,
 Seeking the bubble reputation
 Even in the cannon's mouth. And then the justice,
 In fair round belly with good capon lin'd,
 With eyes severe and beard of formal cut,
 Full of wise saws and modern instances;
 And so he plays his part. The sixth age shifts
 Into the lean and slipper'd pantaloon,
 With spectacles on nose and pouch on side;
 His youthful hose, well sav'd, a world too wide
 For his shrunk shank; and his big manly voice,
 Turning again toward childish treble, pipes
 And whistles in his sound. Last scene of all,
 That ends this strange eventful history,
 Is second childishness and mere oblivion;
 Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.*

pard – leopard

honour – European spelling of honor

capon – rooster

saw – adage, wise saying

pantaloons – baggy pants

shank – lower leg

sans – French for without

The poems of John Yarbrough are from the book Boiled White © 2002 John Yarbrough.

Remember: First names only & please let us know if your address changes