THE SUNK ISLAND POETRY COURSE

A Quick Introduction to Writing Poetry

by

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1. INTRODUCTION TO THE ESSENTIALS

Poetry is one of the oldest arts and still plays an important part in the lives of thousands of people. Today there are hundreds of poetry magazines and presses and even more writing groups. There are numerous poetry competitions, with prizes totalling tens of thousands of pounds. There are poems on buses, on the underground, on the radio and TV. There are dozens of literature and poetry festivals as well as readings in pubs, arts centres, libraries, and some out-of-the-way places.

Poetry is still popular because it is intensely *personal*, even when it addresses public matters. You can be very personal in a poem, talk about emotions, people, events that are important to you as an individual, at the same time as you address an audience of people you have never met. And yet they can share those emotions with you. This is part of the power and attraction of poetry. In other words, poetry provides us with a public platform for many of our private concerns.

Whatever your talent, whatever the level of proficiency you may have attained as a poet, you can always improve your skills. The elements of the craft of writing can be learned - if you are willing to put in the time and effort and study. You may not turn out to be a genius, of course, but you will certainly improve your chances of writing good poems and getting them published and appreciated!

Things have improved for poets over the last decade or two. The number of writers groups has increased, as has the number of workshops and residential courses. Those who are tentatively starting out on the poetic path have much more chance of meeting experienced poets, of talking to them, having their work discussed by them, than at any other time. There are still many writers, however, who can find it difficult, for one reason or another, to get that important access to the poetry scene. That is one of the reasons this course has been put together.

Learning a craft is fraught with difficulties and pitfalls. If you are struggling on your own with no expert to put you right you can waste a

long time on technicalities and problems that are in truth easy to solve. One of the benefits of this course is that the essentials of good writing are spelled out for you in clear and straightforward language.

HOW TO GET THE BEST FROM THE COURSE

The course is structured to take you through the process of writing poems, right to the end product and beyond, into the world of publishing and performance. Once you have worked your way through the units you should keep on referring back to them all, as there will be elements in each that you may have overlooked or which may become more relevant at particular stages in your development.

As you are working your way through the modules you should also be extending the range and depth of your reading. It is vital for anyone truly wanting to improve their writing that they also *read* seriously. Every editor will tell you that too many people who submit poems to them have read little or no poetry. The results are always, unfortunately, very obvious. Again, every good poet throughout the ages has been an avid reader of poetry and has kept abreast of contemporary developments. Go into the house of any respected poet and you will find it cluttered with books, pamphlets and magazines.

Your reading should take in not just collections of the fashionable contemporary poets but also the numerous pamphlets, anthologies and magazines published every year. Now normally you will not encounter these down at your local bookshop or WH Smith. You need to track them down first of all by consulting *The Writers' Handbook*, published annually by Macmillan and by picking up information from the first magazines you look at. You will soon find your way around the poetry scene, however. We strongly recommend you to subscribe to magazines and buy titles from the small presses, as they are called. This makes sense, when you think about it - why should anyone want to buy your poems if you are not prepared to buy someone else's?

Writers' groups can be very useful in providing a forum for writers, particularly at the earlier stages of their development. They can help

with building confidence, not just in subjecting work for general discussion but also in reading it out in front of others. If there is a group within your area, try it out. It may be to your advantage.

Creative writing workshops are even more valuable because you will be set tasks to do there and then by an experienced poet. You may also have the chance to discuss your work with them on a one-to-one basis and they will be able to give you advice on any aspect of the poetry business. Such contacts can have far-reaching consequences - the poetry world is fairly small, so networking is an important way of working.

Residential courses are increasing in number and these, too, usually offer excellent value for money. A bit more expensive, obviously, than non-residential workshops, but if you pick your course well then they are worth their weight in gold. They certainly allow for greater time with the tutor(s), which is all to the good.

Readings take place in numerous venues, from bars and arts centres to village halls and libraries. Sometimes they are arranged by writers' groups, bookshops or library services, sometimes by enthusiastic individuals. Sometimes they put on really famous poets, sometimes they throw the floor open to anyone who wants to stand up and read. Listening to a poet reading his or her own work can be a valuable experience. Often they will talk about their work in general as well as about specific poems - the kind of material you ought to be collecting and storing away in your mental scrapbook! Some poets are excellent readers - others are not. Again, that is something you can learn from.

Recordings of poets reading have been around for a long time and these days you can also buy cassettes. These can provide a wonderful sound archive, and provide fascinating insights into the poets themselves as well as the social context in which their poems were written. Listening to Dylan Thomas, for instance, is always a stimulating and uplifting experience!

WHAT IS POETRY?

This is the kind of question most poets dread, simply because it is so complicated, and for every good example you produce another can be found that appears to contradict it. The days when someone in a group or workshop would staunchly assert that a poem had to rhyme to qualify for membership of the club seem to have gone. Which is just as well when you consider that some of the greatest verse in the English language, including the major part of Milton's output, and Wordsworth's, never mind Shakespeare's plays are all unrhyming. We'll deal with rhyme and metre in a later module.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge spoke of poetry being 'the best words in the best order,' while Wallace Stevens came up with 'Poetry is a pheasant disappearing in the brush,' which apart from being a provocative and fruitful statement is also wonderfully imaginative.

A contemporary poet, when asked to define poetry at a workshop, said that although it was almost impossible to describe it in words it is like a lion - 'you'll recognise it when it's coming at you!'

Poetic theories and the history of poetry are fascinating subjects and are well worth studying. However, you must not get sidetracked by theory if you want to become a poet. An hour of practice is worth a year of reading theory: poetry, like all the arts, can only be learned by doing it. This is one of the reasons that people without an academic background in English Literature and who may be coming to the writing of poetry later in their life have an advantage over eager young Eng Lit garduates - their minds are free of academic theory and a desire to impress university critics. They also have a greater store of knowledge and experience on which to draw for inspiration.

FUNDAMENTALS OF GOOD WRITING

There are certain elements of craft that all good poetry shares in various degrees. You should bear them in mind whenever you put pen to paper or set your fingers on the keyboard. They all work together and form different facets of the same process.

Remember, you will have to come back over these points as you progress through the course. They should make more and more sense to you as you do so.

When we have touched upon them we will take a brief look at a poem that exemplifies these qualities.

The essential elements are:
- simplicity
- precision
- economy
- physicality
- appropriateness of diction.

Simplicity. Keep everything as simple as possible: the thought, the emotion, the language. By this we do not mean simplistic but something, strangely enough, a bit more complicated. If you have a complex idea or situation you want to write about then you should break it down in your own mind into its simplest parts. When you come to choosing the words you should do the same. Avoid using 'poetic' or uncommon words (unless there is a very strong reason); avoid trying to impress the reader with the profundity of your thought or the depth of your reading. Simple, ordinary, everyday words can carry the weight quite well.

Keeping things simple will help you, too, in your writing, however difficult the material you are handling.

Precision. Poetry gains a lot of its power by being precise about things. Imprecision - vagueness - is one of the commonest faults of the amateur poet. If you are writing about something, be specific - don't say 'bird' when you mean a blackbird, or a sparrow, for instance. Part of this is finding the proper word, that is, the word that is most accurate in the context you have set yourself. You should have in your mind a complete picture of any scene or person you are writing about, so that you can select the telling detail.

Economy. Everyone overwrites - even experienced poets. The difference between most experienced poets and beginners is that the former go through their work and cut it down, eliminating any unnecessary material. Again, one of the commonest faults of the amateur is being too fond of particular phrases or images that really do not add anything to the poem as a whole. You have to learn how to be ruthless with yourself and remove whatever is superfluous. It takes practice, of course, to learn just what *is* superfluous, but you will never become a decent poet until you do! The easiest way to do this is to practise putting as much as you can into the fewest words. Don't explain your meaning, especially if you have just presented the reader with a powerful image. Go through your poem and see how much you can remove without reducing it to nonsense. This requires much practice and a lot of faith on your part, but it will work.

Physicality. Poetry for the most part deals with emotions, and emotions are notoriously abstract things. And, as Ezra Pound wrote in his famous article, 'A Retrospect', you should 'go in fear of abstractions'. Abstractions, that is words that do not refer to physical objects or actions, eg 'eternity', 'faith', justice', 'love', etc, are a trap for inexperienced poets. The trouble with them is that although we all think we know what they mean, they don't conjure up anything precise in our mind's eye. As poets we communicate emotions and feelings through the description of physical things and actions, just as a dramatist presents us with a spectacle happening in front of our eyes. By concentrating on physical things we are giving the reader something to picture and understand and interpret for him or herself.

Appropriateness of diction. Diction just means the actual language that you use when writing poetry. This should not be a 'special' language; in fact it should be the language you use everyday, only heightened, cleansed of abstractions and clichés, and used with imagination. You are writing at the end of the twentieth century, not in the middle of the nineteenth, or some other time, therefore you should use the language that is recognisable to your age. Those archaic forms - 'whithsoever', 'where'er', 'fain', etc, together with inversions (turning the word order around particularly when trying to rhyme - very common in hymns!) are to be expunged immediately. Like the bustle and stove-pipe hat,

they belong to a different time and a different world. If you want to use them, do so, but don't expect that the rest of us living in the late twentieth century to take you seriously. Luckily, this is a fault that seems to be dying out. Remember that there are no especially 'poetic' words; there are only the right words. Or, as Coleridge said, 'the best words in the best order'.

So let's look at a short poem to show us how these principles work. This is 'The Western Wind', an anonymous poem from the Middle Ages, presumably in the voice of a sailor at sea.

Oh western wind, when wilt thou blow,
And the small rain down shall rain?
Christ, that my love were in my arms,
And I in my bed again!

There are various versions of this poem, with slightly different words here and there, but all recognisably the same poem.

How does this short poem exemplify the virtues of simplicity, precision, economy, physicality and appropriateness of diction whilst successfully conveying real emotions?

First of all, let's examine the overall impression. We are presented with the image of a man at sea, separated from his wife or lover and yearning for her. The emotion is very straightforward and cleanly communicated. There are only two sentences here, one of them a question, the other an exclamation. we have no doubt about the emotion being expressed. We can feel that sense of longing because we have all experienced it in some form ourselves. We know what it is like to be separated by distance and time, we know what it is like to be in bad weather and hoping for a change. Five hundred years lie between us, yet we can feel for that man as if he were alive now.

What is happening in the poem? Firstly, the poet is **precise**. He talks of the western wind - not just any wind. Sailors (and meteorologists) know that winds vary in character depending on which direction they are coming from. In this case it's the western wind blowing from the

Atlantic and warm, compared with the easterly or northern winds. So here is a sailor, out on the Atlantic, waiting for a westerly to spring up and blow his ship eastward to Britain. We know he is waiting and either becalmed or suffering adverse winds because he is wondering when the western wind is going to blow.

He is also addressing the wind directly, as if it were a person: a common human trait, and a sign of not being in control. We often call out at something when we know we cannot influence or change it - a car that won't start, a horse that is running in a race, the numbers of the Lottery, etc. This medieval sailor could no more control the weather than we can.

Now the 'small' rain is one detail that has always intrigued and delighted me. You don't often think of rain as small, though a bit of consideration soon gives meaning and significance to the phrase. This rain is obviously not those big fat drops we recognise in a heavy downpour or during a thunderstorm. This rain is literally smaller, finer, perhaps more like a shower or even a 'fret' or 'haar'. This is not only precision but also **physicality**. Real rain precisely described.

Combined with the physicality ('wind', 'rain', 'arms', 'bed') is simplicity and appropriateness - the language is plain and direct. Every word is there for a purpose and carries its weight. And the poem's form is one you could encounter today - the quatrain (four lines) with a familiar rhyme scheme.

Go back to the poem and examine your own responses dispassionately - the images that come to your mind, the emotions, the interpretations. Every time you do this you appreciate even more how much the poet communicates without stating things directly - and with what economy.

AND FINALLY, THE MAIN THING TO AVOID

is the cliché: the trite, worn-out phrase or word that springs to the mind so easily - 'a bubbly personality', 'too little, too late', 'conspicuous by his absence', 'life's rich tapestry', etc. It is safest to cut this out instantly

rather than play around with it and give it a twist. Remember - no surprise for the poet, no surprise for the reader.

2. THE KEYS TO INSPIRATION

Where do poems come from? This is a question we often ask, particularly when they refuse to show themselves! The truth is the materials for poetry lie all around us as well as inside our minds. Sometimes, however, we need a key to unlock our vision, as it were.

Robert Frost talked of an emerging poem's 'tantalising vagueness'. Gerard Manley Hopkins said he it was the *rhythm* of his great master-poem, 'The Wreck of the Deutschland' that he had in his head for years before the words appeared. Eliot, too, spoke of 'The Waste Land' as a piece of 'rhythmical grumbling'. Coleridge's experience of visualising 'Kubla Khan' in an opium revery is well-known, though I don't recommend you follow his practice. Other poets have found less unhealthy modes of putting themselves into a receptive state. The German writer, Schiller, for example, liked to seat himself in a room full of rotting apples before he started writing. Apparently the smell of the apples acted as a trigger to his creativity.

Most poets, though, employ more mundane methods of finding inspiration. One thing you should not do is just sit around waiting for it come. Poetry, like genius, as the old adage goes, is ten percent inspiration, ninety percent perspiration.

One of the first things you require is a **notebook**. Ideas, images, phrases, words come into our minds at the most unexpected times. You have to note them down as quickly as you can: like dreams on waking, they are easily lost. There a few things more frustrating and depressing than losing an idea or even a whole poem because you failed to jot it down as soon as you could.

Your notebook or file could also contain pictures or photographs, as well - there's no need to restrict yourself just to text.

It is also important to **keep a copy of all your worknotes** - even the poems that don't work, or that remain mere jottings. It is one of the benefits of experience to realize that something you had worked at unsuccessfully perhaps years ago is coming to fruition or finding a

'home' in a poem you are writing now. Dylan Thomas was notorious for reworking material that he'd produced as a young man in old school exercise books; in fact many of the poems he wrote and published in later life were reworkings of adolescent notes.

In addition to your working notebook you should also keep a **daily diary**. The purpose of this diary, however, is solely to get you into the habit of writing regularly - and writing to a set amount. You should give yourself time first thing in the morning to sit down and write three pages in your notebook. Don't attempt to polish or correct what you write, just put down anything and everything that comes into your mind - recollections of your dreams, things that pop into your mind, images that present themselves to you, anything. Don't worry about legibility, grammar, spelling or anything like that. In a way this is an accumulation of automatic writings as mentioned in the techniques section.

Because the aim of this practice is to establish a new habit and not to produce masterpieces (or even finished works) you should not read what you have written for at least six weeks. Once you have finished your three pages in the morning put the book away and leave it till you come back to it the following day. As soon as you open it up start writing.

The importance of this exercise is in establishing the **habit of writing** and in creating a regular link between your unconscious (the imagination) and your conscious minds. Writing a fixed amount also helps the internal discipline which you need to develop.

Novice poets often believe that certain subjects are innately 'poetic' and others are not. This is a variation of the 'poetic' words idea and is equally false. As William Carlos Williams said, 'Anything is fit material for poetry'. Anything, in other words, from having a cold to walking the dog to falling in love or losing a loved one or wondering what to do with your Lottery winnings. What is important is how you deal with your material. That's where the element of craft comes in. And, as another American poet said, 'the all-commanding subject matter of poetry is life, the never-ceasing source.'

If this is the case, then why is inspiration sometimes so hard to come by? Well, the answer lies in the difference between the conscious and the unconscious minds. The conscious mind shapes and analyses the material thrown up from the unconscious. The unconscious is where the imagination lives. It is unpredictable, intractable, tricksy and occasionally troublesome; it doesn't often do what the conscious mind wants. However, it is fertile, infinitely resourceful, adaptable and full of wonders. It comes up with poems at the oddest of times, poems on subjects that we had not consciously been thinking about. It *surprises* us. That is important, because unless we surprise ourselves we will not surprise our readers.

This explains why the poet must always be practising the craft, even when there seems to be no inspiration. When the poem appears, the conscious mind must be in total readiness for it. That's when the hard work of writing, revising and polishing begins. The mind may be appear to be idle and passive during the fallow periods, but in truth it is involved in **active waiting**.

The following points are worth studying and bearing in mind when you come to practising the exercises given in this course and any others you will find yourself engaged in.

Serendipity: poetry, like any art, is as much to do with happy chance as deliberation and planning. We have just been considering the unpredictable nature of the unconscious. As a poet you must train yourself to be open to the luck of circumstance and be willing to find your material wherever it appears. You need to develop a constant state of awareness, to fine tune your antennae. As soon as you start to do this you will notice things you had previously missed and thus begin collecting the seeds of future poems.

Play: leaven your seriousness with a powerful dose of child-like playfulness when working on the techniques of writing. Too many poets (beginners and professionals alike) forget that the element of play is one of the most essential factors in creativity. In other words you must be like a child who decides to put one thing against another or say something out of place, just to see what happens. Again, this is a matter

of surprise and discovery at the same time. Art is about *what if* much of the time. You are allowed to play with your subject matter and the language you use. If you don't play, you don't learn. You can be deadly serious and be playful at the same time. Don't fall into the trap of taking yourself too seriously, otherwise you're in danger of becoming pompous and tedious.

Copy favourite models: everyone has a favourite poet or poems. Practise copying those models in your own style and voice. Don't worry about 'influence'. If the models have anything useful in them that you can learn you will absorb those lessons and discard the rest. When doing this, of course, it is best to treat most of the results as exercises until you feel you have truly developed your own authentic 'voice' (we'll deal with that in the following module).

Once we have learned the tricks, as it were, then we cease to be mere imitators and begin to develop our individuality. Having said that, however, I would warn you against a number of classic poets whose style is so individual and idiosyncratic that it is almost impossible to learn from them without producing pastiche. They are Shakespeare, Milton, Gerard Manley Hopkins and Dylan Thomas. Even Keats, who admired Milton enormously and studied him intensely during the last year or two of his life, couldn't absorb his influence successfully (take a look at the two versions of 'Hyperion').

What you should be studying other poets for, apart from enjoyment, is how they deal with their subject matter, what techniques they use, how they structure their poems, what kind of language they use, how they begin and end poems, what kinds of voices and viewpoints they employ and so on. Much of what you will learn and incorporate into your work over the years will not necessarily betray signs of influence.

Enjoy other art-forms: if you enjoy music or drama, painting or photography, etc, then spend time enjoying or taking part in them. Most people in the arts have more than one talent. One author I know is a talented jazz pianist; one poet makes masks and wood carvings; another is a painter. In Britain there is an unfortunate tendency to regard specialisms alone as important; anyone who can practise more than one

art successfully is denigrated as a dilettante or a jack of all trades and master of none. This is a ridiculous and destructive attitude that should be discouraged. The continentals have a more open-minded approach on the matter and recognise that creativity in itself is valuable and should be encouraged. Don't let small-mindedness poison your artistic creativity. If you have a talent then use it.

If you don't have a second talent you should still be enjoying other art-forms anyway. You can find inspiration in paintings, films, music, sculpture. You can learn new techniques from the other arts as well. There are many times when artists in different disciplines collaborate - this can be a marvellously liberating experience. Keep your mind open. Feed the artist within you with art as well as with the other material you gather every day.

Throughout your creative life you will learn many things about yourself as well as the world you live in. One of the first things you should learn is to **trust your imagination**. That is, when the imagination provides you with an image, a phrase, or even a complete poem, follow it and trust that it knows where it is going. You have to acknowledge that a poem that is working has a life of its own. This may seem to contradict the other lesson - that you must consciously shape your imaginative material to turn it into art; but it doesn't. The more you learn the elements of the craft the better you will become at recognising how well developed these emerging ideas are, and just how much leeway to allow them. At the moment, however, the main aim is simply to gather and generate material - and to get used to putting it down on paper, ready for revising and finishing.

So, to do that, here are some exercises you can use to stimulate your imagination.

1) Imagine you are something non-human - an animal or tree, a cloud, a house, a road - and explore the nature of its everyday life. Write down what it feels like to be whatever it is you have chosen.

2) When you are walking down a familiar street pretend that you are a complete stranger there for the first time. Imagine that you do not know

what lies behind the buildings around you or what you will find around each corner. Observe what emotions and ideas this evokes in you.

3) If you are in a public place where you can overhear people talking, write down the snatches of conversation you hear (without being observed!). Go through these later and flesh out a complete story from them.

4) Take a postcard, photograph or picture of a scene you do not recognise and imagine yourself into it, either as a participant or an observer. Ask yourself what the weather is like, what you can see, hear, smell, taste; what has just happened, what is about to happen.

5) Automatic writing. This is a workshop favourite for breaking writer's block. Take a blank sheet of paper, put your pen on it and start writing. Write for ten minutes without stopping, halting, thinking, going back, crossing things out, etc. Don't worry about sense, meaning or anything. You must not take the pen from the paper until you have finished.

6) Evoke a particularly detailed memory and write about it - **without describing or mentioning any of the emotions it contains**. You do this by concentrating on all the details of the senses: what was heard, seen, etc. This is a very useful exercise to get you to deal with abstract things by using physical things. On no account use an abstract noun or a word referring to a feeling or emotion.

7) Select at random two disparate subjects and work them together into a single piece. Make them relate to each other. If you have difficulties coming up with subjects out of your own head, go to a book or newspaper or magazine, note down the first noun you read, turn a few pages and note the next noun. You could end up with something strange and surreal - strawberries and cars, for example - but you will be surprised at how easily your mind can make connections.

All these exercises, and many others you will come across in books and writers' workshops as well as any you can devise for yourself, will strengthen your imaginative powers and extend your understanding of the creative process.

3. THE VITAL FIRST DRAFT

Out of us all
That make rhymes,
Will you choose
Sometimes -
As the winds use
A crack in the wall
Or a drain,
Their joy or their pain
To whistle through -
Choose me,
You English words?

('Words', by Edward Thomas)

These opening words by Edward Thomas pinpoint the special relationship between the poet and his or her language, since, for all our talk of craft and choosing our words carefully, there *is* a sense of the words (and the poem) choosing *us*. There is an essential need for you to trust your imagination as you create. The more you practise your craft the more you will understand this. The writing of poetry requires you both to hunt for the best words and to allow yourself to be hunted by them.

This idea of hunting is superbly described by Ted Hughes in his book *Poetry in the Making*: 'The special kind of excitement, the slightly mesmerized and quite involuntary concentration with which you make out the stirrings of a new poem in your mind, the unique living reality of it in the midst of the general lifelessness, all this is too familiar to mistake. This is hunting and the poem is a new species of the life outside your own.'

So what do we do when the inspiration arrives in its own peculiar form, and we are ready to compose a poem?

The first thing to do if possible, of course, is to start writing. If you are not in a situation where this is possible, you must do your best to make a few notes, capturing the key words or images that have come to mind. This is always preferable to thinking you'll just remember them when you come back to them later - you can salvage a great deal from even the most hurried and confused notes. The memory, alas, is frequently unreliable, and you are more likely to lose poems if you don't commit something to paper.

If you have the time to write, then make sure you are comfortable and in a quiet place. Your main aim at this stage is to get as much of the material down on paper as possible so that you have a first draft - even if in the end it is discarded. If you keep your working notes over a period of time and look back at them you will notice how messy they look - full of odd words, phrases, lines, scribblings, crossings-out all over the place. This is nothing to worry about. It may happen that within these rough jottings there will ultimately be more than one poem - which is why you should keep everything, as advised in the first module.

At this stage you should not be thinking that what you are writing is going to be a fully-finished and publishable poem. The more adept you become at writing the more you will develop your own techniques for stripping out inessentials and bad habits right from the beginning. You may have to go over this particular piece many times before it emerges as a fully-fledged poem. This requires application, hard work and a real willingness to be hard on yourself.

It is as well to start honing your language right from the start, to save yourself a lot of work later on. By this I mean that although your priority is to get the words down on the page, there are things you can do straight away to improve your work.

For instance, even as you are capturing your poem on the page you should be eradicating all clichés and hackneyed phrases: we noticed

some of these in the first module. You may think that your are being fresh and completely original as the inspiration flows, but if any of these lacklustre words find their way into your writing, you are being supremely unoriginal. Your aim is to be as fresh as possible, and the major way of achieving that is to use language that is fresh. Go back to the advice in the first module and familiarise yourself with the essential elements of writing. Remind yourself of them as you write, so that you get used to scanning your first drafts for the garbage of cliché.

Everyone works in a particular way. Some poets can finish a poem very quickly, with a small number of drafts and revisions. Others take days, even months to finish something, after pages and pages of hard revision. You must learn your own way. The only right way is the one that produces good poems.

GRAMMAR, PUNCTUATION, ETC

Although many faults in spelling, grammar and punctuation can be ironed out by publishers, it is not a good idea to present an editor with a script that is badly spelt or full of errors. Ezra Pound said the good poetry should be as well written as good prose. Luckily, because poetry is more condensed than prose and uses line endings which act as a form of punctuation, you do not need a degree in grammar or syntax to get things right.

If you have any difficulties with basic grammar you should consult a book from your library. If you are naturally a bad speller you should make sure you have a dictionary by you when you come to revising and correcting your poems. If you happen to be using a word processor, of course, the chances are that your software has a spell-checker (although these tend to be American English, so you may still have to be careful about specific words, such as American 'honor' for British 'honour', etc).

Be very careful in your choice of **adverbs** (words that describe how something happens, usually ending in 'ly'), eg gladly, boldly, happily, tendentiously, etc. The fewer you use, the better (and do you know when to use 'less' rather than 'fewer'?). You can do this by paying more

attention to the verbs they 'qualify'.

For instance, it is more effective to write, 'He gulped the beer down without taking the glass from his lips', than to say, 'He drank the beer greedily without taking the glass from his lips'. The former has more force and power of description because of that one word 'gulped'. The idea of greediness is already contained in that one word and is reinforced by the rest of the sentence. The sound of the word 'gulped' also adds to the picture by introducing another sense impression - we can hear him as well as see him. In the second version, 'greedily' may tell us something about the drinker, but the overall impression is considerably weaker. We don't have the sound effect, as it were, and 'greedily' doesn't convey half as much as 'gulped'.

I am not suggesting that you completely abandon the use of adverbs altogether; just that you should be sparing and judicious.

The example we have just looked at also exemplifies the power of **active verbs**, rather than passive ones. To see the difference, just change the form of the original sentence to the passive: 'The drink was gulped down'. The fact is that an active verb contains a great deal of information about *how* an action is conducted. Often, if you choose the right verb, you will not need to use an adverb.

The same advice goes for **adjectives** (the 'describing' words). There is no need for you to use an adjective with every noun. Indeeed there is much to be said for going through your poem and checking what the effect is if you remove every adjective. You will soon see then how well the piece stands up - whether it is stronger or weaker. It may be that it only requires one or two powerfully-chosen adjectives. You take the experiment further by re-introducing adjectives one by one to gauge their effect.

Keats's poem, 'Ode to a Nightingale', shows a fine example of the exact adjective in the lines:

Perhaps the self-same song that found a path
  Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home,

She stood in tears amid the *alien* corn.

Now, apart from the fact that in this instance Keats has been sparing with his adjectives, the work *alien* in this context has a galvanising effect. It sounds somewhat strange. We would probably expect the word 'foreign' or 'strange' instead. But neither of those quite carries the weight of 'alien'. It is precise - which reinforces the emotion felt because of its own strangeness and hardness. And it has altered the perspective on the image. Normally you would think of Ruth as the stranger, the 'alien'; but by transferring the adjective to the corn, Keats puts us into the mind and heart of Ruth so that we feel sympathy for her and experience her sense of alienation amid something normally quite familiar, but which has now become not just strange but also rather sinister and threatening.

Test that for yourself by reading those lines with other adjectives in the place of 'alien'. You will see how the whole interpretation and effect of a line can change with the alteration of a single word.

Having been told that you should be sparing with your adjectives, you will, of course, be able to go to many poets (including Keats) and find examples of the opposite - where adjectives are piled up on one another. This in no way contradicts what I have just said. It merely points up the need to know precisely what you are doing and why, and be prepared to bend the 'rules' when you are confident enough.

Take Keats as an example - again from his 'Ode to a Nightingale', where he writes,

Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray hairs.

Note how the adjectives are all plain; not fancy at all. Monosyllabic, to add to the sense of the life being shaken out of the body, reinforced by the repeated stresses. Each word contributes something different, precise and appropriate to the image.

This brings us neatly to **repetition**. There is nothing wrong with repeating a word or phrase for effect - provided you are quite confident

that it is necessary and appropriate. If it is not appropriate then don't do it.

At all costs you should avoid **archaisms** and the use of **eccentric** or **self-consciously 'poetic' words** that are used purely for effect. No editor in his or her right mind is going to look twice at a poem that is written in language that is not only hundreds of years out of date, but perhaps inaccurately so as well. Cut out all the 'thees' and 'thous' that might crop up (unless they are direct quotations necessary to the poem) as well as all the 'myriads' and other words you think will make it sound like poetry. So too with old-fashioned contractions, as mentioned in the first module.

This latter point is not a matter of opinion, as some people have argued. Poetry derives much of its power from its rootedness in the spoken language of its time; or, as Wordsworth described it, as 'language spoken by men'.

Be wary, too, of **neologisms**, that is, words you make up yourself. The language does indeed adapt and change, but a word you invent one day and think is brilliant may look rather dull or stupid the next. We are not in the situation where we can coin words and phrases with abandon as Shakespeare did. Occasionally, established poets will come up with something and it will be accepted (T S Eliot's hybrid 'juvescence' in 'Gerontion' springs to mind; though probably the most famous neologisms in English poetry are those of Lewis Carroll's 'Jabberwocky').

You will be familiar with other techniques available: **onomatopoeia** - words that imitate the sound of something ('buzz', 'bang', 'splash', etc) and **alliteration** - repetition of consonants or vowels through words ('round the rock', silly season story', etc). Again, use them sparingly and appropriately, otherwise they become an irritation. Use them, in other words, because they are necessary to the poem.

OTHER TECHNIQUES

Here is a useful tip: always *read out your poems* to hear what they

sound like. This is not only good practice for when you give public readings but also serves as a real test to show if there any faults within the poem. It is remarkable how often, and how unerringly, the voice will stumble or falter on a word or phrase that is either rhythmically clumsy or is somehow not quite right. Most poems are meant to be read aloud, so it is natural that they should *sound* right. Read aloud at every stage of a poem's progress.

It is best to write and read aloud in private and, once you have finished a poem, it is best not to show it to anyone else unless they, too, are practising poets whose opinions you respect. Family and friends, for the most part, are not the people to go to for opinions or judgements as to the artistic merits of a poem. They simply aren't properly qualified. They're more likely to be complimentary, either because they don't want to offend or because they are naturally disposed to praise you. You need to feel absolutely confident in your own craft and skills before you can show them your work and listen to their comments. This is why you need to read a good deal and make contact with other writers at all levels, through writers' groups, workshops, readings, etc.

As you progress you will learn a great deal about poetry - not just the obvious things, such as we have been dealing with, but also the less obvious. Titles, for instance. Sometimes the title for a poem will come to you early on in the writing, or even before. At other times you will be casting around after the poem has been drafted and finished to your satisfaction. It is always worth spending time on getting the title right. There are a couple of reasons for this.

The first is that a good title acts as a kind of billboard to the reader. Ask yourself, which title most attracts your eye in the first instance: 'Poem', 'Easter, 1916', 'Considering the Snail'? The first says absolutely nothing about the poem - it could be about anything: cathedrals, cats, or politics. The middle one is more specific and the third is also specific but eccentric, too, and therefore eye-catching. There are plenty of poems called 'Poem', some written by famous poets - but that's no excuse for not spending a little more time to finish things off. 'Easter, 1916', of course, is a famous poem by W B Yeats on the Easter Rising in Dublin; the date by itself has enormous significance for many people.

'Considering the Snail' is by Thom Gunn. As you will see in a later module, the title is important when entering competitions.

The second reason for working out a good title is that you can sometimes include in it material that is either useful or essential for a proper appreciation of the poem but which won't fit in the text. This is a common problem. You have contextual material you think the reader should have but despite your best efforts, whenever you work it into the body of the piece it stands out almost as if another voice had suddenly appeared to interrupt the poem. An easy trick is to devise a title which contains that essential piece of information. After all, no-one is going to complain that a title is too long or that it says too much.

I employed this trick in a poem called 'Czech Family Photos in a London Junkshop'. This tells the reader quite a lot that wouldn't fit inside the poem, however much I tried. The reader takes a look at the title, immediately grasps the information, almost unconsciously, then passes on to the text of the poem.

Try this out for yourself by going through the titles of poems by published poets, old and new, and working out how much (or how little) information is provide in the titles; and how a change in the title would affect your reading of the poem.

The first drafts of a successful poem are always exciting. There is something uniquely thrilling about putting down those first words and images. The point of learning conscious skills and techniques is to enable you to make the most of the raw material *as it appears* as well as when you come to revise.

Once you have the poem down open paper in its original form you then need to do two things: put it away for a week at least; then read through it and revise it ruthlessly. Some people recommend you put a poem by for a longer period - months, even - but you must learn your own way through trial and error. Then comes the hardest part: revising.

4. REVISING

The excitement of having produced your poem now modifies into rather

hard-headed, professional attention when you come to revise and polish it. Although this stage is the hardest part of writing a poem, it is the most important. Once you can go back to a poem with the commitment to making it is as strong as possible, even if that means cutting out your favourite lines, then you know are you on the road to becoming a proper poet.

The difference between the inspiration and the final product, for example, *Tolstoy's War and Peace*, is an awful lot of discipline, an awful lot of finger exercises and practices and rehearsals.
- Abraham Maslow

One of the major reasons for allowing some time to elapse between writing your first draft(s) and then revising your poem and perhaps considering sending it off to a magazine is that you need a cooling-off period. During this period your mind will naturally be taken up with other things. It is necessary to have a distance between yourself and your poems - a kind of psychic or imaginative distance that allows you to be more objective about them than you can be when writing them.

You need this **objectivity** to be able to apply the elements of craft to a poem and to make it become a piece of art rather than an outpouring of self-expression or sentimental self-indulgence.

We need to consider this tricky question because it is one that can stand in the way of real poetic development. Many amateur writers believe that their own lives and feelings are somehow miraculously interesting to everyone else and that all they have to do to be accepted as poets is to get their words down on the page. They tend to believe that sincerity is the touchstone of their claims to be artists. It is certainly true that as poets we make use of the material of our own lives and that we are sincere about many things. Neither of these guarantees that we can write good poems.

The following points need to be mulled over time and time again. They may seem harsh to you at the moment, but if you bear them in mind when writing and when studying the work of other poets, they will begin to make sense:

* You have to treat all your material, whether it is mined from your own life or that of others, or even completely made up, with the same objectivity as that which a potter uses when dealing with clay. This means that if something is not working in a poem you must eliminate it - it doesn't matter if 'it actually happened', as people have said in justification before - what is important is to rely on the imagination to point out to you the material that *it* wants to use;

* The reader is interested in the poem, not the poet. To be brutally frank, even if you are writing about the death of a loved one or the joy of a love affair, the reader is not concerned about *you* as an individual: what the reader wants is to be so engaged by the poem that they enter into its world and experience what is happening within it.

We are all keen to read the lives of the poets we love and perhaps even study them in great detail. This can be useful - *but it is not a substitute for being good readers and enjoying the poems on their own terms*.

* As I have said, objectivity is of more importance than sincerity. In fact it could be said that sincerity is of no use in writing poems. Just being sincere about a subject does not automatically guarantee either its quality or its worthiness. Remember that even when you are using truth and facts in a poem, what you are involved in is a process of *artifice*. Art is not life even though it is made up of bits of life.

* 'Only emotion endures' wrote Ezra Pound. Now this may seem to contradict a lot of what I have just been saying, but if you stick to your lessons you will understand how this works. To put it simply: emotion endures in poetry only if the poet has learned how to distance him or herself enough from that emotion to search for the appropriate words (images, phrases, cadences, etc) in which to embody it. The whole point of making a poem is to produce something that has a life of its own, that stands outside of the poet, able to engage with other human beings.

* Show, don't tell. Every good poet will give you this advice. In other words, trust the reader to understand what you're saying: don't spell out everything to them like a school report. Imagine if you went to the

theatre and the playwright stood at the side of the stage commenting one every action and speech made by the characters - 'Now this is where Simon expresses his love for Amanda, though he is too shy to make his feelings known - that's why he is stammering when he has to speak to her.' You would soon be heartily sick of that. The job of the playwright is to present you with characters who *enact* the drama. The same criterion applies to poetry. There are obviously exceptions to be found but at this stage you must stick to what is appropriate.

This piece of advice also applies to any overt 'message' you may want to convey to your reader. It may be something personal; it could be political, social or religious. In this case you have to be wary of appearing to preach. In most cases if you make your message too explicit you will simply end up being obvious and sentimental. As Keats said, we dislike a poem that seems to have obvious designs on us and stands there with its hands in its pockets. This frequently happens in poems that are a result of some public event - a disaster or tragedy, perhaps, or something important. Whether you are writing about the birth of a child in your family or a flood in Africa, you should always apply the same criteria.

These are hard and sometimes difficult lessons to learn but they are essential elements of the self-discipline you must exercise in order to become a good poet.

When you take your poem for revision the first thing you must do is scan it for the lacklustre words, images and phrases that slipped through while you were writing it originally.

Ask yourself if the poem works as a whole. Do the separate parts hang together? Is the opening strong? Is the ending also strong? Does it end on the right note? What does it sound like when you read it aloud? Do the line endings work?

If you have used a regular form or employed a rhymes scheme then you must check that you have the correct number of feet per line, with the appropriate stresses. Are the rhymes also correct?

BEGIN AT THE BEGINNING

The opening of a poem is often the most troublesome part and it thus requires particular attention. It is not uncommon to find that the first few lines, or even whole stanzas, are in truth redundant. This is because they tend to be 'notes' you are making to yourself to get the poem started. Or they are 'scene-setters' in which you are laying out information you think the reader needs. Or, in some cases, the opening belongs to a different poem altogether - we'll deal with that later.

This phenomenon is very common in short stories. The remedy is quite simple there, as well - cut it out immediately. The advice given to short story writers applies to poets: start *in medias res*, in the middle of the action. Don't waffle, you don't have time.

Every time you revise your poems you must be asking yourself, Do I need to say this here? Have I repeated myself? Is this statement implicit in what I've already said?

You can read again some of your favourite poems to see how other poets have done this. Read poems and poets that you are not familiar with to extend your knowledge. Take another look at 'The Western Wind', for instance.

TWO POEMS IN ONE

It sometimes happens that when you are writing one poem, another one appears, entirely unbidden and completely unexpectedly. This is not a problem if it appears as a separate poem - you need to note down the salient words and images as quickly as you can, of course, so that you can come back to it once you have finished the work in hand.

Occasionally, though, what happens is that the poem mutates half-way through and ends up as a different poem. You need to pay attention to what the poem is saying, if this happens, and that is a question of trusting your imagination. You can test the piece by splitting the two

parts away from each other and treating them as entirely different poems. This takes some practice, not only to recognise but also to remedy. If there is any doubt in your mind about such a poem then do not consider sending it out for publication.

FINDING YOUR OWN VOICE

You will frequently come across the idea of the individual poetic 'voice'. Each poet becomes aware of it in different ways. The voice to some is literally the voice they hear in their head as they write a poem. It is usually a version of your own speaking voice, but it seems to come from a deeper part of your mind and carries more authority than the little voice that is always chattering away as you go about your daily business.

The voice is completely individual and distinct. You cannot change it. You cannot make it appear if it has not already made itself manifest. If you work at your writing, practise it diligently, study and read poetry, then it will emerge. And you will recognise it when you hear it. Once you know your voice you will feel much more confident when writing because you know you will not only be in a more appropriate frame of mind but also you will be tapping in to that creative part of your brain that is the source of inspiration and imagination.

It may sound like mumbo-jumbo, but ask any established poet and they will tell you the same!

It is vital to reach this stage of development since your voice will identify you as a poet distinct from other poets. It will be an essential part of your own style and affect not just the subjects you choose but also the techniques you apply, the vocabulary you employ, even the line lengths and extent of your poems. And it should be flexible too, because it will grow with you.

Eventually you come to the end of what you can do with a poem. With a bit of luck, it will not only be a finished piece but a good one as well. As I have said before, you will learn through constant practice how to judge your own progress. This will give you greater confidence.

5. FORM, RHYTHM AND RHYME

Two of the essential distinguishing marks of poetry are its **form** and its **rhythm**. Rhyme is an additional *technique* that may or not be used, depending on the poet's own preference.

By **form** we mean everything from the shape the poem makes on the page to the length of the lines, the number of stanzas (or verses), etc. Forms can be either traditional, new or free. The sonnet, for example, is a traditional form with a number of variations in its structure. Other traditional forms include, the villanelle, the couplet, the quatrain, the ballad stanza, etc. **Free form** (or *free verse* as it is often called) is not based on any strict model and follows the poet's own patterns (and may, indeed, include rhyme).

'Free' is something of a misnomer since all good poetry has innate patterns; ultimately the only difference between the free and the traditional (or regular forms) is that free forms are generated by the individual poet rather than borrowed from a recognisable stock.

Poetry's origins are inextricably bound up with music and this musicality persists to the present, though the relationship is a complex one. In some examples the musicality of a poem is obvious from its strong rhythm and the richness produced by the sounds of its words (you can hear this particularly in poets such as Hopkins and Dylan Thomas, for instance). In others it is not so obvious (William Carlos Williams is a good example). Part of your personal progress includes developing a more acute 'ear', one that is sensitive to the rhythms and sounds of everyday speech as well as the subtleties of well-written verse. This is helped by the practice of reading your poems out aloud and listening to spoken poetry.

The starting point of all poems is the **line**. This is not the smallest technical unit of a poem but it is the smallest unit of *sense*. You will have noticed from your reading that until recently it was the

convention to start each line with a capital letter. That is no longer the case, so you are completely free to choose whether to follow the old style or the new. It makes no difference to the interpretation or the sound of a poem. A line may be a complete sentence or only part of it. Sometimes it may only be a single word. If you take another look at the quote from the Edward Thomas poem in the module on The Vital First Draft you will see that one line consists simply of 'sometimes'.

The line is broken down into rhythmical units which in English are based on syllables that are either stressed or unstressed (eg 'sómetīmes', where the stress falls on the 'some' part of the word). These units are called 'feet' (it sounds odd, but the terminology reveals the physical and musical basis of poetry as something originally chanted and danced to) and they contain a variety of stress patterns and numbers of syllables. The commonest foot in the English language is the 'iamb' or 'iambus', in which an unstressed syllable is followed by a stressed one, as in 'create', 'at home' (the stresses can be spread over different words), 'compare', etc.

Other metric feet you will come across include the trochee (unstress followed by stress) - 'common', 'something', etc; the spondee (two unstressed syllables) - 'house-proud'; the dactyl (stress followed by two unstresses) - 'hopefully'.

The technical term for analysing the metrical structure of a poem is **scansion**. When you analyse the rhythm and metre of a line, you *scan* it. This will be a familiar concept to those of you who did Latin or French at school.

You may be feeling a little confused or worried by now, especially as most of the words used to describe everything are Greek. Don't worry - you only need a basic knowledge of **prosody**, as the art of versification is called. All of these descriptions and rules were dreamt up by academics and armchair poets long after the real poets had written the poems. The important thing for you is to develop a good sense of the *musicality* of the spoken language and to exploit that musicality in your poetry. If you have a tin ear then no amount of study of prosody will turn you into a poet.

So now we have the line and the foot. When we have a certain number of feet in a line then we have a measurement of verse that can be described. A line that contains four feet (whatever they are), for instance, is called a tetrameter; a five-foot line a pentameter, and so on. The commonest line in the English language is the **iambic pentameter**, that is a line of five feet, each foot being an iamb. We shall represent a stress by the use of an oblique over the syllable , as in 'é'; and a non-stress with a dash, as in 'ē'.

Examples:

Thē cúr|fēw tólls| thē knéll| ōf pár|tīng dáy|
(Gray's 'Elegy in a Country Churchyard')

Hōw sóon| hāth Tíme| thē súb|tlē thíef| ōf Yóuth|
(Milton)

Spoken English appears to dispose itself naturally into an iambic pattern, which is why it is such a common metre. Unrhymed iambic pentameter is known as **blank verse** and was the staple metric of Shakespeare, Milton and Wordsworth.

However, it is important to remember that all such guides *are* guides and not strait-jackets. If you look at many examples of what appear to be textbook iambic pentameters you will find they sometimes contain deviations from the norm. Take the first line of one of Shakespeare's sonnets (probably the most famous):

Sháll Ī| cōmpáre| thēe tō| ā súm|mēr's dáy?

If you read this strictly according to rules its sounds ridiculous. The natural stresses dispose themselves according to the *sense*, playing *against* the regularity of the meter. You may justifiably say that the stress in the first foot should go on 'I', but you would be hard put to justify a case for emphasising the stress on 'to' in the third foot.

You will find many examples of variations such as this. In many cases

they result from the way the language is spoken (or was spoken) - including variations of local accent. We can look at another line, exemplifying this time a different foot at the same time:

Thē Āssý|riān cāme dówn| līke thē wólf| ōn thē fóld.
(Byron)

This is an anapaestic tetrameter: that is a line with four feet, each of which is an anapaest - two unstressed syllables followed by a stressed one (--/). You will note that in order to get the proper rhythm you have to pronounce 'Assyrian' as three syllables, eliding the 'rian' into one, instead of pronouncing it A-si-ri-an.

Poets have always had to take the vagaries of pronunciation into account when writing regular metres. If you look at older versions of some poems - those from the Elizabethan era, for instance - you will often find the poet has 'notated' the words to indicate which syllables should be pronounced. Hence the frequent use of an apostrophe to indicate elision (two vowels slurred together) or the omission of a syllable.

At this point it may be best to recap on the varieties of foot and line. First of all the feet:

iamb	-/
trochee	/-
spondee	--
pyrrhic	//
anapaest	--/
dactyl	/--
amphibrach	-/-

Secondly, the number of feet per line:

monometer	one foot
dimeter	two feet
trimeter	three feet
tetrameter	four feet

pentameter	five feet
hexameter	six feet
heptameter	seven feet
octameter	eight feet

You will have noticed how the choice of metre affects the sense and feeling of a line. The anapaests of the Byron poem catch the sense of headlong pursuit exactly, while the iambic lines of Milton and Gray are used to evoke a more pensive mood.

The line that ends with a stress is known as a **rising** meter; that which ends on a non-stress is a **falling** metre. This also brings us onto **enjambment**. Many lines are **end-stopped**, which means you either stop reading at the end of the line or pause significantly. This is demonstrated in the Gray poem:

The curfew tolls the knell of parting day,

where the comma delineates the break, before continuing with the following line. **Enjambment** simply means that you do not stop at the end of the line but continue almost without being aware of a break or pause to the next line, as in the Milton sonnet (given here in original orthography):

How soon hath Time the suttle thief of youth
Stolne on his wing my three and twentith yeer!

You will also notice how the poet has written the words to indicate how they should fit into the metrical pattern - 'stolne' (one syllable) for 'stolen'; 'twentith' (two syllables for 'twentieth'. Learning where to end a line, particularly when you are using free form, takes practice, as you will come to recognise that you are playing off three different 'beats' against each other at the same time: the beat of the natural line as it is spoken according to *sense*; the beat of the line as it spoken according to the *metre*; and the beat produced by the *sight* of the written line. Again, the best way to understand this is to read extensively and find out how other poets have coped with
the line break.

Some poets have used a variation on the traditional metric measures for their poems - the **syllabic** count. This, quite simply, is where you base the line length on a set number of syllables, irrespective of the number of stresses. Here's an example from the American poet, Marianne Moore ('The Steeple-Jack'):

Dűrer would have seen a reason for living
  in a town like this, with eight stranded whales
to look at; with the sweet sea air coming into your house
on a fine day, from water etched
  with waves as formal as the scales
on a fish.

An older alternative is the use of lines that are purely stress-based, ie you choose to have a set number of beats per line, irrespective of the number of syllables.

THE USE OF RHYME

Rhyme, like traditional form, remains a constant with poets, though its popularity comes and goes according to fashion. Rhyme is another means of creating pattern within a poem. There is nothing intrinsically *poetic* about its use; that is, it is purely a technical tool for poetry and neither its presence nor its absence confers by itself excellence on a poem (or *defines* a poem - or *makes* anyone a poet). If you decide to use rhyme then make sure you study it and deploy it well.

Rhymes are divided into masculine and feminine. **Masculine** rhymes use words of a single syllable (fat/cat) or words with the stress on the last syllable (create/rotate). **Feminine** rhymes use words with a rhyme-stressed syllable, followed by one or more unstressed rhyming syllables (travel/ravel). If you have words within a line that rhyme, they are called **internal rhymes**, rather than **end rhymes** - be careful with them, though, they can make your poem sound jingly.

These are all **full rhymes**. Often you can use **half rhymes** (sometimes

known as slant rhymes or near rhymes), in which the sounds are similar rather than completely identical (badger/lodger, sleep/slope. etc). A close cousin of the half rhyme is the **sight rhyme**, where the words look as if they should rhyme but don't (bough/cough, laughter/slaughter). Assonance and alliteration can play a major part in such rhymes; Wilfrid Owen is a major exponent of the subtle use of this technique.

In truth, there is not much more you need to know for practical purposes about rhyme.

SOME FORMS

Over the centuries poets have devised dozens of different forms for their work, some of them adaptations, some completely new. Some of them continue to be used, while others have fallen by the wayside. Adaptations of foreign forms have also been introduced. Here are a few that you are bound to come across and which you may wish to try for yourself.

The **couplet**: rhyming iambic pentameter, very popular from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, especially suited to satirical, humorous or moralising verse:

To Learning's second Seats we now proceed,
Where humming students gilded Primers read.
(Crabbe, from *The Borough*)

The **sonnet**: still popular and being adapted by contemporary poets (see, for instance, Tony Harrison's sonnets). The basic structure is 14 lines of iambic pentameter, disposed in a variety of ways. There are two traditional forms of the sonnet - the Petrarchan, and the Shakespearian (Milton also produced his own versions). You can take your pick (or devise your own).

The Petrarchan version follows the pattern set by the Italian poet Petrarch, in which the first eight lines (the octave) set out the subject of the poem, and the sestet (the following six lines) bring the poem to a

conclusion and new development. The rhyme scheme is fairly tight, consisting of only two rhymes in the octave (not difficult in Italian) and two or three in the sestet. Rhymes schemes are denoted by single letters, indicating which lines rhyme with which, eg the octave rhymes **abba abba** (with or without a gap between the two quatrains), while the sestet rhymes **cdecde** or **cdcdcd**.

The Shakesperian model was developed from the Italian or Petrarchan, which was introduced into Britain in the early sixteenth century. The scheme produced was **abab cdcd efef gg**. As you will see, the number of rhymes has been increased to make it easier for the poet since rhymes are not as abundant in English as in Italian, and the poem ends on a couplet, usually of an **epigrammatic** nature:

They that have power to hurt and will do none,
That do not do the thing they most do show,
Who, moving others, are themselves as stone,
Unmoved, cold, and to temptation slow;
They rightly do inherit heaven's graces
And husband nature's riches from expense;
They are the lords and owners of their faces,
Others but stewards of their excellence.
The summer's flower is to the summer sweet,
Though to itself it only live and die;
But if that flower with base infection meet,
The basest weed outbraves his dignity:
For sweetest things turn sourest by their deeds;
Lilies tht fester small far worse than weeds.

Many poets of the period used the sonnet, including Sidney, Drayton and Spenser, who devised his own version, using chain rhyme: **ababbcbccdcdee**. The sonnet has proved to be a versatile form, capable of being used for lyric purposes and narrative. Sometimes it has been stretched and altered so much (by the American poet, Berryman, for instance) that you may quibble the results are not sonnets at all, just poems with 14 lines. Whatever your personal opinion, you should read as many examples of the form as you can.

The **quatrain** is one of the commonest stanzas in English literature. Four lines long, it can vary in line from three to five feet, usually iambic. The rhyme scheme most often encountered is a simple **abcb**. A tighter scheme is **abab** - or even **abba**. It is often used for narrative and ballad, although sometimes it can be found on its own, as in the Western Wind poem already discussed. Stevie Smith used it to satirical effect in 'Miss Snooks, Poetess':

Miss Snooks was really awfully nice
And never wrote a poem
That was not really awfully nice
And fitted to a woman,

She therefore made no enemies
And gave no sad surprises
But went on being awfully nice
And took a lot of prizes.

A favourite form of people who like a technical challenge is the **villanelle**, which uses a complex sequence of repeated lines. Here's an example: one of the most well-known, Dylan Thomas's 'Do Not Go Gentle...' -

Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage. rage against the dying of the light.

Though wise men at their end know dark is right,
Because their words had forked no lightning they
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright
Their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Wild men who caught and sang the sun in flight,
And learn, too late, they grieved it on its way.
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight
Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

And you, my father, there on the sad height,
Curse, bless me now with your fierce tears, I pray,
Do not go gentle into that good night.
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

The poem is arranged in five tercets (three line stanzas), ending with a quatrain. It uses only two rhymes and repeats two lines: A1 b A2, a b A1, a b A2, a b A1, a b A2, a b A1 A2.

Many of you will be familiar with the Japanese **haiku**, a poem of three lines consisting of 17 syllables. This appears quite easy and simple at first, but if you study the requirements of the form within its true context you soon realise that it is quite complex. Haikus are intended to be written in groups, the subject matter (seasons and single states of emotion, etc) subtly cross-referencing with each other. They do, however, provide an excellent opportunity to practice conciseness and economy, as advised in the first module.

Another Japanese form, less often used but probably easier for the western mind to enter into, is the **tanka**. This consists of five lines, again syllabically ordered - 5,7,5,7,7. You can see how there's a natural pivot or turn at the end between the first three lines and the last two, almost like a mini-sonnet. If the haiku is just a little too short for you then the tanka may give you that extra bit of space.

Your previous reading of poetry through the ages will have acquainted you with numerous other forms and from now on you should pay more attention to the way they work. A sense of form, old or new, is something you must have in order to write good poems - practice will help you develop that.

6. GETTING PUBLISHED

At some stage you will want to see your work in print, eventually in

book form. Before that can happen, however, you need to build up a reputation and a list of acknowledgements in the small magazines. Although it can happen that a completely unknown poet suddenly appears with a contract with a major publisher, it is a one-in-a-million occurrence. The usual route requires hard work and persistence.

In my work as an editor and publisher I have often received phone calls and letters from novices hoping to have their collections published. I have had to tell them that unless they can prove they have a track record and that their poems have appeared in reliable magazines, then they have no chance of publication.

Usually you need to get your poems into the small magazines, as well as any anthologies that are being put together. You should already be reading the relevant magazines, as advised earlier in the Course. With some luck and persistence you may score with one of the larger and more prestigious journals, such as *The Times Literary Supplement* or even with one of the national newspapers when they go through their occasional (and unsustained) fits of interest in poetry. Local radio is always worth trying if they have an arts programme or a section of a programme that features local poets. Don't expect payment, though, unless your poems are taken by national BBC Radio.

In fact, you should not expect payment most of the time. The majority of magazines and presses are run by individuals from a living room, kitchen, bedroom or garden shed, in spare time and on a shoestring budget. There's often no money left over to pay either the contributors or the editor. The most you are likely to receive is one or two complimentary copies of the issue with your poems in.

Poems taken by magazines, and ones that win in competitions, count towards your reputation and will be included in the 'Acknowledgements' section in the first collection they appear in. This section is frequently the first place a poet looks when they pick up a book by a new poet or someone they do not know very well - because it says a great deal about the kind of work they produce.

You should be acquainting yourself, as advised, with the small

magazines and presses. Once you have had sufficient work accepted and printed in them you can think of trying to get a pamphlet published by one of them. Pamphlets are really the stock-in-trade of the poetry scene. They are cheap and easy to produce and easier to sell than book-length collections, especially at readings. With a good press and decent promotion you can move a print run of two or three hundred over a year. That may seem small (it is!) but in terms of the national poetry readership it is substantial indeed.

Once you have had plenty of poems in magazines and anthologies, as well as a pamphlet or two, then you can seriously think of submitting your full-length collection to a major publisher. 'Full-length' generally means a finished book of at least 60 pages.

Before you reach that point, however, you need to make sure you know the ropes about getting your poems published.

SUBMITTING MANUSCRIPTS - THE BASICS

* Present your poems typed or printed on one side of clean white A4 sheets. Handwritten manuscripts, I'm afraid, have no chance these days. Most poets are one- or two-finger typists and some have even got themselves word-processors. A typewriter is the absolute minimum that you need, so get hold of one if you don't have access to anything else. A PC makes the whole business a lot easier, from writing to editing and printing off.

* Don't staple your sheets together, just use a paperclip if necessary.

* Line spacing should be 1 to 1.5, Don't use double spacing (that's for prose).

* Observe the rules for ordinary typewritten work, ie one space between words, one space after punctuation. Above all, do not type everything in capital letters. This kind of work is a nightmare to read and, to be quite honest, no editor will waste time trying.

* Always include an adequately-sized stamped, self-addressed envelope for return of ms (manuscript) or reply. The absence of an SAE (or SASE as it is called in the USA) is one of the most annoying things for an editor and will result in immediate disposal into the bin, depending on how generous or otherwise the editor feels. When you consider that a magazine may be receiving up to a hundred submissions a week, you can understand why a hard-pressed editor does not relish the idea of paying for someone else's postage. The same applies when you are enquiring about a magazine or asking for other information by post.

Please note also the words 'adequately-sized'. Some manuscripts arrive in large envelopes but contain only a tiny one for return ('Just big enough for the cheque', as one irate editor said to me once). Trying to stuff pages of folded manuscript into a small envelope is guaranteed to make you unpopular, as is (to a lesser extent) only enclosing an address label and loose stamps. This requires the editor to search for a spare envelope and takes up time.

It is not necessary to package your poems in nice folders and ring binders or anything like that. Plain clean typed sheets are enough. Save your money. Binders and spines can also cause problems when being posted through letterboxes, etc.

* Send no more than 6 poems at any one time to a magazine. No one wants to read your collected works unless they are contemplating a book. You could always ask in advance for Writers' Guidelines - if they have any.

* Do not send the same poems to more than one magazine at any one time. Editors want first publication of a poem and do not take kindly to what are called simultaneous submissions. There are few occasions when you are justified in sending the same material to more than one publisher at once. The first is if you are submitting poems to publications outside the UK. The second is when you are submitting a full-length manuscript to a publisher. Once upon a time this, too, was frowned upon, but nowadays it is acceptable.

* Make sure your name (and perhaps address) is on each sheet you send. Many publishers are notoriously untidy, and once pages get separated from each other it can become extremely difficult to match them up.

* Keep a master copy of all your work. NEVER send your only copy of an ms to anyone; it's almost a law of nature that if you do so it will disappear for ever.

* Send a brief covering letter. All you need to say in it is this: ' Dear [Editor - and it's best if you've found out the actual name of the editor], Please find enclosed xx poems for consideration in your magazine. An SAE is also provided for return/reply. Yours sincerely, etc, etc'. THAT IS ALL YOU NEED TO SAY. Don't include a CV or a list of poems published in magazines, etc. At this stage the editor does not need to know. It's the poems that he or she is interested in.

It is not unknown for would-be poets to try to either blackmail or bribe editors into taking their work. It does not happen often and has not (in my experience) succeeded. Of course, every publisher of a small magazine wants you to subscribe, but they won't take your poems if you say you'll subscribe. Neither will they take anything if you come out with a sob story about how you've lost your home/job/loved ones, or worse. You may be using poetry as therapy but editors are not after therapy, they're after art.

* Expect to wait for a reply. And wait. And wait. Some editors are unbelievably quick at responding. The majority are not. It is not unusal to have to wait up to six months or more for a reply. Whatever you do, don't send your poems on Monday then phone up or write on Friday demanding to know if a decision has been made. If you have nor heard anything after say three months, drop the editor a line politely enquiring if anything is happening with their poems. If you want to submit them elsewhere, tell them you'd like to withdraw them for that purpose. Be polite. Don't phone.

It often happens that you may have to wait even when your poems have been accepted. Publication dates are infintely extendable in the small press world, and some magazines have large backlogs of accepted work.

You will have to live with this.

* Keep a log of all the titles you have of publishable quality, where you have sent them and when, as well as where they have been accepted.

* Accept the decision of the editor. If you have been rejected send off your poems to another magazine. Notice that I say accept the *decision* of the editor, not necessarily the *judgement*. That's because editors are human - and they have their own agendas of likes, dislikes, prejudices, etc. What one editor loves, another despises. If, however, you your poem keeps bouncing back time and time again, you may have to accept that it is isn't up to scratch. An editor can choose what they like - after all, it's their magazine. So never argue about a rejected poem - it's simply not worth the time or the aggravation.

Rejection is hard and it never stops, even for well-published poets. If you cannot handle rejection then you have no chance of succeeding in the poetry scene. Rejection notes come in various forms. Some of them are on preprinted slips, perhaps with a little comment by the editor. Sometimes you will receive a brief letter, or a note scribbled on your own covering letter. Sometimes you will just be told that the magazine can't take your poems. Occasionally some editors will tell you why they couldn't accept your work.

The editor's job is to choose material in this instance, not to act as an unpaid postal tutor or advisor, so don't expect comment and advice as a matter of course.

PAMPHLETS AND BOOKS

As I said earlier, pamphlets are cheap to produce and provide a useful means of getting a poet's work out to a public. If you have had plenty of poems published and you think you have enough for collection of about 16 to 18 pages you can always send them off, this time containing the acknowledgements, to one of the presses who issue pamphlets. Again, it is best to check beforehand that they are a) still doing pamphlets and b) are open to unsolicited material. You can do this either by looking in

one of the annual handbooks or by writing and asking (and enclosing an SAE, of course). This can save you time and money.

Send your poems to only one small press at a time.

The situation is somewhat different with books. The number of publishers dealing with book-length collections is fairly small, especially the large, commercial houses. Some of them have to deal with up to 50 submissions a week or more. It is generally accepted that you can send your ms to a number of publishers at the same time. If one of them expresses an interest you should tell them that straight away, of course and, if necessary, withdraw your ms from the others. Include your acknowledgements - this is important. Keep your covering letter brief and enclose an SAE.

Start at the top and work down. There's really no need to look for a local publisher.

AVOID THE VANITY PUBLISHERS

Once you have explored the small press scene you will soon become familiar with the names involved and the kinds of work they deal with. Whatever happens - particularly if you cannot find one of these presses to show an interest in your collection - do not be tempted to reply to any of the adverts asking for manuscripts. No publisher really needs to advertise for submissions once they've been going even for a short while.

You will have seen the ads in many places - not just in the writing magazines, but also in the national papers. They ususally say 'Authors wanted...' and are pretty broad-ranging in their interests - poetry, fiction, history, etc.

These are the Vanity Publishers (sometimes masquerading under the name of Subsidy Publishers - which is slightly different and will be explained in a minute). What they do is tell you your ms is brilliant and deserves to be published. Then they ask for a 'contribution' towards the

cost of publishing it. They will offer extremely good royalties - far above the industry norm of 7-10%. If you accept, they will take thousands of pounds off you, print the pages and covers of your book (usually with little or no decent design work and shoddily, to boot), bind only a small number of them, make no effort to sell them to the book trade or promote them by sending out review copies. After a while they will probably say that sales have been disappointing and ask if you want to buy up the remainder of the stock at a discount (you've *already* paid for the lot!)

The trick is based on people's ignorance as much as their vanity. Bona fide publishers put up their own money because they believe in the book to be published. They calculate that all costs can be covered and a profit made (usually small). The author should not need to stump up any money at all - quite the opposite; how else is a writer supposed to make a living? A Vanity Publisher misleads you by pretending to do that which he intends not to do, ie *publish* your work. To publish means to advertise, make available and sell to the public. A Vanity Publisher gets a printer to print your work as cheaply as possible. They take from *all* the production costs involved and a profit as well. Then they do nothing.

Not also that nowadays a printer is someone who *prints* (and binds and finishes) books, pamphlets, posters, etc. A publisher hires a printer to produce the physical object in the numbers required. The printer has absolutely nothing to do with the publishing. This is a fairly recent development, and if you are interested you should read about the history of printing and publishing - unfortunately there is no time to do that here.

Similar to the Vanity merchants are the people who sometimes call themselves Subsidy Publishers. This system works on the publisher and the author working together on a book, the publisher asking the author to share (subsidise) the costs of production. This is more common than many people suspect and is quite ethical. The unscrupulous traders, of course, ask for a 'subsidy' which is the same as a Vanity Publisher's 'contribution', ie all the costs and a profit upfront - after all, you will have no idea of the costs of having a book printed.

At this stage I would suggest you do not consider any venture that requires you to part with your own cash.

SELF-PUBLISHING AS A VIABLE AND HONOURABLE OPTION

There may come a time when you have had lots of poems in various magazines, anthologies, etc, and you would like to see some of them in a pamphlet - particularly if you are doing readings - but none of the presses wants to take you on. You can always publish them yourself.

Now, I have encountered quite a few people in the literary world (some of them who should nave known better, considering their position and how much they were getting paid) who could not tell the difference between self-publication and Vanity Publishing. It's very simple. When you publish your own work, *you* are the publisher, *you* are in control of every aspect of the business, *you* sell your product and *you* take any profit.

Self-publishing has a long and honourable tradition in the literary world and many poets still use it from time to time. Don't let anyone make out that it is a sign of failure or vanity. Walt Whitman, one of America's greatest poets, published his own books and used to carry a basket full of them wherever he went, selling them to anyone who would buy.

This is not the place to go into the pros and cons and the details of self-publishing. If you wish to follow this route then you can read a number of useful books, including Peter Finch's *How To Publish Yourself* (Allison & Busby). It can be great fun and sometimes leads on to publishing other poets. It does take up a lot of time, so you need to be certain you can afford to do it without sacrificing your own writing.

Being published is a momentous step for any poet and the thrill of seeing the first poem, the first pamphlet, the first book in print stays with you for ever. The next step, if you wish to develop further, is to learn how to promote yourself as a poet, in order to gain wider recognition through readings and workshops, etc.

7. PROMOTING YOURSELF AS A POET

It is natural that you should want to promote yourself in the poetry world once you have started to get your poems published widely - especially when you have a pamphlet to your credit. As with all areas of life you should not be in a hurry and try to make sure that you progress is built on solid foundations.

As you progress you will begin to meet other poets, editors and organisers. Some of them you will get to know first through correspondence, others may be living very close to you. Personal contacts are as important within poetry as they are anywhere else and you need to build up your own network of friends and acquaintances. This is why is it so important to attend writers' groups, readings and workshops as much as possible. Not only will you be advancing your own skills as a poet but you will also be meeting people who have had more experience and may be able to help you develop.

The poets who are best known and who appear on radio, TV, festivals and so on, have been able to make the most of their contacts. Their fame (such as is possible as a poet) is as much to do with luck and networking as it is with talent and persistence. Some of them become very good at self-promotion. This is, of course, necessary if you intend eventually to make a living out of literature. Some poets, of course, are more concerned with simply writing good poems and getting them published where they can. Much depends on your circumstances and natural temperament.

While you are sending out your poems to magazines all over the country you can also be making a start locally by getting in touch with your writers' group. Perhaps your WEA (Workers' Educational Association) or Adult Education group run regular writing courses. If you are lucky enough to live in a town or city where readings are held then you should make a point of going along as often as possible - particularly to listen to poets whose work you may not know or are perhaps not even keen on. You can learn a great deal from hearing someone talk about and read their work aloud. Whilst you are doing this you will be learning also about presentation and performance - this

will stand you in good stead when you come to take part in readings yourself.

The same applies to workshops, where you have an even better chance of talking individually to the tutor or tutors and establishing a personal relationship. Workshop leaders are keen to help new poets develop and will often recommend their work to editors and organisers, etc. These personal relationships can lead on to substantial work - readings, reviews, commissions, editorial posts, etc. Be discreet, of course.

If you are lucky you will meet other poets at a similar stage of progress to yourself and share your work with them in a critical but mutually constructive way. You need the support of your peers and it is very rewarding to take part in an *ad hoc* group as it grows and achieves success. Poets may be supreme individualists and fond of competing with each other but they tend also to be tremendously gregarious and love to get together whenever possible. Be warned, though - the commonest topic of conversation is money (or rather the lack of it!).

If you are invited to take part in readings then you should do so, provided you feel happy about the arrangements, etc. At first you are not likely to receive any payment, particularly if they are organised by writer's groups, etc. You may end up out of pocket, what with travel expenses, etc. There is no way out of this, really. If you want to take part then you have to be prepared to put something into it. As you get better known, of course, and are invited to give readings on a more professional basis, you should be properly paid.

The real advancement begins when you can get a small collection of your poems published in pamphlet form (as discussed in the previous module). Your publisher may be good at generating publicity and sales (but don't count on it), sending out press releases and review copies and perhaps organising a book launch. Even if they are geared up for it, you should still do as much PR yourself as possible. Remember that most small presses are single-person outfits, usually with limited time and resources.

Your best bet for selling copies of your collection is by attracting media

attention. For this you (or your publisher) need to send press releases to all local newspapers and radio stations. There are plenty of books available on PR and how to write press releases, etc. Local journalists are usually very good at featuring such items and you may even get your photograph in the paper.

That is why you need to make sure that either you or your publisher have managed to get books into the bookshops in your area. Often the best sales of a book or collection of poems take place within the poet's own town and region. If you do this yourself (which will definitely be the case if you have published your own collection) you need to be aware that the aim of a bookshop manager is to sell as many books as possible, whatever they are, and thereby make a profit. Their primary interest is not art. The usual cut that a bookshop takes of the retail price of a book is 35%. Books are normally supplied on a Sale or Return basis, which means that after a certain period the bookshop will want to return any unsold books to you, together with the money they owe for books sold.

This is not really the place to go into the details of publishing and bookselling, but it is worth getting to know the system. Again, there are a number of books you can read if you are interested.

To get bookings for readings often takes a lot of work and luck, but you can increase your chances by doing your own publicity. It may be a good idea, if you have the spare cash and the time, to produce a distinctive and well-designed leaflet that details your achievements and provides a contact address and phone/fax number and these days, e-mail address. The leaflet should also contain other information, such as pamphlets and books published, venues at which you have read, festivals or events you have taken part in, etc. Once you have had your collections reviewed, then you should select the most positive and quotable extracts from them for your publicity. Perhaps you could also print one of your shorter poems on it, to give people an idea of the kind of work you write.

Once you have produced your leaflet you need to assemble a list or database of the relevant organisers. This requires a little research, but

once you have done the initial work, you only need to update your list now and then. On your database you will have the names and addresses of the following: all County Council Arts/Arts Development Officers, District Council Arts/Arts Development Officers, Literature Officers of the Arts Council's regional offices, Literature Development Workers/Officers/Consultants, Festival Directors, Arts Centres, Writers' Groups or Circles. You may want to include the editors of various small press magazines and presses - those you know are involved in promoting readings, etc.

You need to send out your leaflets perhaps twice a year, depending on your finances, etc. Keep a pile of them at home to give to other people who require information on your activities.

When you do obtain readings, of course, you need to practise your public reading/performance skills. The following list of checkpoints will help you deliver an enjoyable and effective reading:

* before the reading, make a list of the poems you intend to read, complete with a couple of others as a stand-by; make sure you have these poems clearly bookmarked in your pamphlets or books, or in your folder - preferably not in loose sheets, as they tend to fall out if you're not careful;

* practise reading the poems out aloud so that you have developed a good feel for them - this will also help you to start memorising them, so that you don't have to rely too much on the page;

* practise speaking clearly and deliberately; too often beginners (and some more experienced poets) mumble or gabble their poems;

* work out in advance, as precisely as you feel appropriate, what you are going to say about each poem as introduction: it is advisable, of course, to keep this brief, since you can easily spend more time talking about the poem and where you got the inspiration, etc, than you do reading it! Be careful not to end up telling your audience everything about the poem in a spoken version; it's no fun listening to a poem which you've basically heard already as a piece of prose, complete with explanations;

* establish eye-contact with your audience. In other words, make it clear you know they are there and listening. Even if you do not consider yourself a 'performance' poet who is playing for very clear reactions (mainly laughter) you are still performing; people are watching you as well as listening, and any odd physical tics or idiosyncracies will affect them. Making eye-contact helps to establish a bond between you, which can be enhanced or diminished through other physical actions. I've seen some poets ruin their reading by holding their book or papers so high in front of them that the audience could not see their face (or hear very clearly); another had a distracting tendency to sway backwards and forwards.

* if you are going to stand up in public and ask people to pay attention to what you are going to say it is worth making a little effort to make yourself look presentable. I am not saying you should dress in your best clothes or look like you're off to a formal meeting, but nothing is gained from looking scruffy, unkempt or just plain ridiculous. Unless, of course, this is a deliberate part of your public persona as a poet. In my experience, however, poets are not in general terribly concerned about how they look - men and women alike. All I would say is that whatever your feelings are about this (that it's the *poetry* that's important, not the poet) human nature being what it is, people cannot but be affected by how you appear. It's worth making a bit of an effort.

* to listen to poetry with proper understanding and appreciation requires a special kind of concentration which is very demanding. Your mind can follow closely for about 15 minutes before it starts to wander, no matter how much you love what you are hearing. Most readings are time-limited, especially when more than one person is reading. This means you should pay attention to how many poems you read and how long the session lasts, inclusive of your intros. It is always tempting to keep on reading 'one more poem' because you have got into the swing of things - your audience, however, may have lost interest a long time ago and may be wishing for you to finish. The answer is simple: if in doubt, keep it short. If they like what they have heard they will want more, thus increasing your chances of selling your books, etc.
The more your poems appear in magazines, the more likely it is that

you'll be asked to take part in a reading. As you establish a personal network of contacts you may also be invited to tutor workshops or even run a writers' group. This can be very fulfilling, though you have to take into account how much time you can spare and ask yourself if the extra work will affect your own writing.

Once you have a substantial amount of material in print and a number of readings under your belt, you should be looking to apply for writers' bursaries or grants. You can now apply directly to the Arts Council for cash for a writing project. The competition for most is quite intense but it is always worth trying. Keep your eyes open for other organisations who provide either regular or one-off grants, bursaries and awards. One of the benefits of developing your own network is that your friends may inform you of something you have missed. Further down the line, you may be lucky to secure a Writer's Residency. This normally entails either producing work for a specific project or working with a particular group within the community (these days that could be schools, prisons, people with learning difficulties, football clubs, you name it!).

The poetry world is expanding all the time and offering innovative opportunities for the poet willing to take a chance. You may be quite content to write your poems and see them published in magazines and collections; or you may be more ambitious and want to aim for publication by a major firm, together with greater public exposure through readings and commissions, etc.

Whatever you do, remember that you always need to be practising the craft of writing. There is always something new to be learned. The poetry business is subject to fashions and trends just like anything else, and media attention comes and goes. Changes in business can sometimes mean established publishers being taken over by larger firms and disappearing entirely. Poets who are not good at keeping themselves in touch with opinion makers can drop out of view very quickly. The late WS Graham, one of Scotland's greatest poets, had been so long out of touch with his editors at Faber that they thought he was dead. The antidote to all this is, of course, to concentrate on the poetry and treat any popularity and fashionability as ephemeral.

8. WINNING POETRY COMPETITIONS

The number of poetry competitions has increased significantly in the last four or five years and the prizes range from a few pounds or book tokens to thousands of pounds. Many competitions, particularly those organised by writers' groups, publish the winning poems in anthologies. The total prize money in any one year from competitions is in the tens of thousands of pounds. That is a significant amount of money and represents a possible source of extra income for you as a serious poet. It also represents a great opportunity to establish your name and see your work in print.

If you are lucky enough to win a major competition, such as the National, you are guaranteed to gain credibility as well as the attentions of the well-established poetry publishers. But even winning at a less prominent level can bring substantial financial rewards - and the odds of coming away with something over a period of time are in your favour if you have talent and persistence.

If you are interested in entering competitions and believe you have a chance of winning prizes then there are a number of points to bear in mind to increase your chances of succeeding.

Where do you find out about current competitions? If you subscribe to a number of small press magazines (as advised right at the beginning of the course) you will receive leaflets about competitions now and then. Your local library may have copies of leaflets displayed on notice boards or distributed on their shelves.

The Poetry Society not only runs its own competition, the National, every year, but supplies information on others as well.

The Poetry Library on the South Bank displays information about small presses, magazines, etc.

Ask the Literature Officer of your Regional Arts Board. Most Arts Boards produce regular newsletters, so you should get yourself onto their mailing list as a matter of principle.

Sometimes you will see something in your local newspaper or hear mention of a competition on the radio. Follow these leads for information.

First of all - how to avoid being ripped off. Unfortunately, with the growth of bona fide competitions has come the occasional fraudulent 'competition' in which novice poets are fleeced of their money. Most competitions are completely honest, run by honest, decent people. Once you've accustomed yourself to the poetry scene, you will recognise most of their names straight away. This, again, is one of the reasons you should subscribe to the small presses.

You can usually recognise the scams a mile off. First of all they often give themselves grand-sounding names - The Cosmic Library of Important Poets, The International Biblioteque of Poetry, that sort of thing. They don't produce leaflets and you won't see any flyers in your poetry magazines. You *will* see advertisements in the national newspapers (and those are expensive). Often they don't charge an entry fee but they will tell you your poems have been shortlisted or even won a prize and if you'd like a copy of the (expensive) anthology then they will gladly accept your money. These 'competitions' are to be avoided. They are not usually run by people in the literary business, there is usually no proper judging process - instead they tend to do what vanity publishers do, ie tell you your poems are wonderful and print them for a fee - and publication does you no good at all. If you have any doubt at all about a competition then contact one of the small presses or your local Arts Board or the Poetry Society.

The majority of genuine competitions share a number of characteristics. Most of them charge an entry fee, for instance, except perhaps those run by bookshops, etc. That is quite logical when you think about it: how else are they going to cover not just the prize money but the costly process of printing and distributing thousands of leaflets? And paying a judge or judges? And, perhaps, printing an anthology?

Unless the competition is being judged in-house by a magazine or press, the judge or judges should normally be poets who have some track

record, whether that is a substantial number of poems in magazines, or a couple of pamphlets or books to their credit.

HOW TO IMPROVE YOUR CHANCES

Although you can never be guaranteed of winning a prize in any competition, there are things you can do to improve your chances, sometimes considerably. Once you have been through them you will see that they are all a matter of commonsense.

a) **Read the instructions**. Conditions of entry generally work along similar lines, but you must never take anything for granted. Some competitions, for example, require two copies of a poem rather than one.

Make sure you make a note of the closing date: you don't want to miss the deadline.

Check the permitted line limit. Until fairly recently most competitions restricted poems to 40 lines maximum. Luckily more and more of them are extending or relaxing that rule. But if you go over the limit you are jeopardising your chances from the start. Even if the judges and organisers do not notice (and to be quite honest, unless you submit a poem that is obviously way over the limit, no-one is going to count) there will be someone out there who will count the lines. And complain. It may seem sad that there are people who can be bothered to do that but they do have the rules on their side.

Where possible submit a poem that reaches or is close to the maximum length. If that is not possible then make sure that every poem you enter is at least 20 lines long. It is rare indeed for a poem shorter than that to win a prize and rarer still (I don't think I have ever encountered one) to take first prize. Judges have an in-built reluctance to awarding large sums of money to short poems. You can see the psychology of it: would you be able to justify awarding, say, £1,000 to a poem that was only ten lines long - even if it were the best poem you'd read in a year? It sounds unfair but that is the way things work. The more lines in a poem, the

more material there is in it, therefore the more scope there is for demonstrating your talent.

Make sure that your poem conforms to any other requirements, such as a particular form or theme. There really is no point in submitting a sonnet in a haiku competition, or sending your latest disaster poem to a competition looking for romantic verse.

Check all the other requirements: name, address, telephone number, pseudonym if required, etc. And that your cheque/PO is made out to the correct person. If an entry form is required, use an entry form, photocopied if permissible.

b) **Read the work of the judge or judges**. This again is quite logical when you think about it. Even if we have eclectic tastes in poetry, we are always going to be biassed in favour of the styles and subject matter we use ourselves. If you have work that you think will appeal to a particular judge then use that. If you are writing specifically for a competition, apply the same criteria. A judge who has never used rhyme, for example, is not going to be keen on a rhyming poem unless it really does strike him or her as exceptional. This is not to say that you should blindly imitate a poet (they may recognise the imitation and take it as flattery, of course!) or that you should automatically rule out a poem because it doesn't sound like a poem by the judge. Use your commonsense.

This piece of advice works best when there is only one judge, of course. With more than one you have the difficulty of reconciling the tastes of perhaps two radically different poets. You can look at this as an advantage, however, since provided the judges get on well while judging, they will probably tend to compromise. That means a more middle-of-the-road type of poem is likely to win: something not too contentious, difficult or technically adventurous - which leaves the field wide open. Nevertheless you should still read the work of all the judges. If nothing else, you will be getting yourself an education in contemporary poetry.

c) **Organise your entries**. When you gather information about competitions you should draw up a chart showing deadlines,

announcement dates, judges, entry fees, prize money, etc and update it regularly. Or you can keep the information in a notebook, making sure you record which poems you are sending where. This is really important if you aim to send poems to one competition if they fail to get somewhere in another. As with most things in life, persistence pays. You will soon learn which poems are not going to make it. In the meantime, of course, you should be writing others.

It is perhaps a good idea also to give yourself a budget for entry fees over the year, as they can soon mount up. One good win, even if it is not a first, can put you into profit straight away.

d) **Go for the easy targets**. Your chances of winning anything in a big competition such as the National are naturally lower than that of winning in a smaller, less well-know competition. The National attracts thousands of entries every year from all over the world, from complete novices to already well-established poets. A small competition, especially one that is in its first year, organised by a writers' group or arts festival, may not have as much to spend on its publicity as one that's been going for a long time. The fact that the number of entries will be smaller should stand you in good stead. Such competitions do appear - it's well worth looking out for them. One of the first competitions I entered was run by *The Spectator* magazine. Apart from advertising in the magazine, they didn't send out many leaflets. I didn't win a major prize but I did come away with a bottle of whisky.

e) **Ensure that your poem has a strong opening line** that grabs the attention of the judge. This will automatically improve your chances - provided that the line is in keeping with the rest of the poem. Likewise with the ending: a good, powerful ending will help lift your poem above the rest.

f) **Enter more than one poem.** If you have a couple of poems that fit the criteria for a competition it is a good idea to enter more than one. This could weight the odds in your favour if the judge has noticed one of them but is still uncertain about awarding it a place. If the attendant poem (which he or she will recognise as being by the same entrant - from the typeface, paper, etc) is also of above average quality, this could

sway the judge to give you the benefit of the doubt. That's because two or more poems reveal insights into your poetic strengths, giving a broader view of your talents and concerns, than a single poem. That, in turn, may convince the judge that a) the first poem he or she picked out is not just a flash in the pan and b) that there is more to it than first meets the eye.

This has happened to me, so I speak from experience. But you can back it up yourself by reading through the lists of winners and runners-up. You will notice that often the winners have also had other poems in the Commended or Recommended sections. So you see, that one extra poem could make all the difference.

g) **Present your poems plainly**. Apart from fulfilling the conditions of entry, as discussed above, you should also pay attention to the presentation of your poems. Keep everything simple: type or print them on one side of clean, white A4 paper. Even if handwritten entries are eligible you should make the effort to have them properly typed or printed. Handwritten entries are difficult to read and do not appear as professional as typed ones.

Spacing should be one to one and a half lines (not double spaced).

Don't type everything in upper case (ie in capital letters) or with incorrect spacing between words. This not only reveals a lack of professionalism but also makes reading a nightmare. If you have any doubts about spacing and punctuation you can always consult a book from your library - or (something a lot easier) just take a look at a printed page from elsewhere.

Don't enclose your poems in special folders or plastic slips, etc. Once they reach the organisers and judges these will be stripped off - they are no use to the judge in coming to a decision, and it is universally acknowledged by judges that the more elaborate the packaging the worse the poems tend to be.

h) **Subjects to avoid.** It is always safest to enter poems that you have written because they are important to you personally. In other words,

avoid sending in poems that are responses to topical events, disasters, tragedies, etc, unless the competition specifically asks for them. The reasons for this are quite simple. Firstly, an immediate response to a topical event is likely to be less well-written, however much you feel about it. Secondly, everyone else will be doing the same, thus rendering your poem one of a crowd, with nothing to distinguish it from the rest. And thirdly, by the time the judge gets to read your poem, it will be no longer topical.

It is also worth thinking about the topics that people typically write about and enter into competitions - the end of a relationship, the loss of a loved one or a favourite pet, the seasons, 'concerned' poems about the environment, war, man's inhumanity, etc. All these are fit material for poetry, as talked about earlier, but you have to be able to treat them better than everyone else if you want to beat the opposition. Far easier to choose less obvious subjects and appeal to the judge's desire for something fresh and different.

i) **Choose an interesting title.** Remember that in a competition your aim is to make your poem stand out from the others through its imaginative use of language and technique. A poem entitled 'Spring' or 'Reflections on Summer' or even worse, just 'Poem' or 'Untitled', is going to send one simple but ineradicable message to the judge - UNIMAGINATIVE. The title gives you a wonderful opportunity to set the whole context for the poem and to stimulate the curiosity of the judge. Don't waste it. Spend time coming up with a good title.

j) **The follow-up.** If you have won a prize you may be invited to a prizegiving and reading. Do so if you can afford it and really want to go. If you cannot get there someone else will be chosen to read your poem(s) for you.

If you have not won a prize, do not complain to the organisers, but get on with the next batch of entries. Do not expect your poems to be returned. This is usually stated quite clearly in the conditions of entry in most competitions (with occasional exceptions). The amount of work entailed in sending poems back would be immensely time-consuming and costly, which is why it is not usually done.

Often the organisers produce an anthology of the results and provide a complimentary copy to everyone included. You can buy extra copies if you wish. This is a useful addition to your personal library of publications and can be mentioned in the 'Acknowledgement' section of any collection of poems you may have published later. It will also add weight to your poetic CV if you are applying for grants, awards, bursaries or residencies.

FINAL POINTS

People often ask: is there such a thing as a 'competition poem'? Poets do talk about this and, indeed, Fleur Adcock has written a poem about it! The truth is that poems that win competition tend to have certain characteristics.

Obviously, they tend to be a certain length, given the general restrictions on numbers of lines. Their opening and finishing lines may be somewhat stronger than non-competition poems. Judges usually prefer poems that have distinctive voices, so that they stand out from the crowd. Winning poems tend to be more full of imagery and activity than other poems (judges like to feel that 'there is a lot going on' in a winning poem, which is why minimalist pieces rarely win). Winning poems are rarely experimental or very much out of the ordinary either in their content or their technique.

And finally, there is the effect of poetic fashionability. Poetry is subject to fads and fashions just as everything else in human society, and it is important to be aware of the fact. This has more effect in the larger competitions than in the smaller or purely local ones. Many of the poets chosen to judge prestigious prizes will be current favourites of the poetry scene. They will regularly appear at readings and festivals; their work will be published by the major poetry publishers and will be reviewed in the national papers and magazines, etc. They will often be examples of what is successful at the time. This doesn't mean that they are either good or bad poets, but they will, naturally, have a bias

towards certain kinds of writing. You have to make a decision about how much (if at all) you want to present them with work tailored to such fashions.

Winning prizes in competitions is a great boost to your ego as well as your pocket. It is always rewarding to feel that your work is appreciated by your peers. It adds to your case when submitting a collection to a publisher, just as a list of acknowledgements of previous publications does.

For poets who win the bigger competitions it often means being raised from obscurity or near-obscurity into the limelight, with big publishers and the media picking them up. For some it can mean the start of a poetry 'career', leading them on to tv and radio work, reviewing, giving talks, lectures and readings, as well as having the immense pleasure of seeing their books getting reviewed and appearing on the bookshelves.

Before you sit down with a stack of entry forms, with a head filled with images of winning the National, etc, remember to keep things in context. You will be competing against thousands of poets, many of them well-established, experienced writers. Whether you win small prizes or hit the big time, you should treat failure and success as Kipling advises, as imposters both - that way you'll preserve your sanity!

If you work hard at your writing and bear all these points in mind, you will definitely improve your chances of winning prizes.

Good luck!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael Blackburn's first collection, *The Constitution of Things*, was published in 1984 by Northern House. Other collections include *The Prophecy of Christos* and *The Ascending Boy* (Flambard Press).

A former Editor on *Stand Magazine*, he set up his own imprints – Jackson's Arm (poetry) in 1986 and Sunk Island Publishing (magazine and books) in 1989. He has also been a Literature Development Officer (Lincolnshire and Leicestershire) and Festival Director.

In 1995 he was Writer in Residence on the Internet, courtesy of Channel and The Arts Council. In 2004 he received an Arts Council award for his hypertext project *Portrait of the Artist as a Cyborg*.

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Further information about the author and his works can be found at: Art Zero – http://www.artzero.org.uk

ABOUT THIS COURSE

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