

## An Introduction To Reading And Writing Poems

Developed by Cathleen Micheaels

A poet friend of mine once claimed that writing a poem finally was not such a big event and really only required a good five minutes. He was, of course, exaggerating (as he often did) to make a point. Writing poems comes not just out of the act of sitting down with a piece of paper and pen but from years and years of accumulated knowledge and experience of being alive in this world including growing up at a particular time in a particular family and place, reading and listening to language, observing the human and natural world, traveling from what is known and familiar into what is new and not yet known and, perhaps most importantly, waiting on that moment for a poem to arrive.

Many writers, especially fiction writers, advocate for the daily practice of writing in the manner of athletes who participate in daily training but I have never found that writing poems worked that way for me. Instead, what I find true is that reading poems and making notes about what I have seen, heard or experienced leads me to that right moment where ideas and words come together in the shape of a poem. Eudora Welty, that great southern writer of short stories, novellas and novels who started her long career as a writer not writing but taking photographs during the Depression for the WPA, said this about writing:

*I learned quickly enough when to click the shutter, but what I was becoming aware of more slowly was a story-writer's truth: the thing to wait on, to reach there in time for, is the moment in which people reveal themselves. You have to be ready, in yourself; you have to know the moment when you see it . . . We come to terms as well as we can with our lifelong exposure to the world, and we use whatever devices we may need to survive. But eventually, of course, our knowledge depends upon the living relationship between what we see going on and ourselves. If exposure is essential, still more so is the reflection. Insight doesn't happen often on the click of the moment, like a lucky snapshot, but comes in its own time and more slowly and from nowhere but within.*

So, I think in a way my poet friend was right; what he was saying was also what Eudora Welty was saying: "You have to be ready, in yourself; you have to know the moment . . ."

**Discovery.** Poems make discoveries about ourselves and the world around us. They ask questions of us and of the universe. They discover what we didn't know we knew. Poems are moments held still like snapshots—and like snapshots, they record moments we are not wholly aware of as they occur. In this sense, poems continue to reveal truths to us each time we return to them. Poems provide us with a format to look closely at what surrounds us day to day and also to step back and behold what is forever large and unknown. For me, reading and writing poems is a kind of prayer in this world. As Mary Oliver, one of our most widely recognized and treasured contemporary American poets, observed, the writing and reading of poems is a deep and unending desire—a need in this world that will never disappear:

*A final observation. Poetry is a river; many voices travel in it; poem after poem moves along in the exciting crests and falls of the river waves. None is timeless; each arrives in an historical context; almost everything, in the end, passes. But the desire to make a poem, and the world's willingness to receive it—indeed the world's need of it—these never pass . . . If it is all poetry, and not just one's own accomplishment, that carries one from this green and mortal world—that lifts the latch and gives a glimpse into a greater paradise—then perhaps one has the sensibility: a gratitude apart from authorship, a fervor and desire beyond the margins of the self.*

**Language.** Poems make discoveries about language. They make juxtapositions and suppositions of both the likely and the unlikely. Poems rely upon the commonality of language and yet they continually challenge our collective and individual understandings and expectations of what words mean.

**Form.** Poems occur in lines not sentences (not including the prose poem which straddles two worlds—the short, short story and the poem). They are broken up into many lines which are strung together like pearls on a necklace, each one whole and remarkable enough to exist alone but coming together to make one or more sentences and a more complete and resonate whole. Poems don't always start at the beginning. Sometimes poems start in the middle or at the end. In an informal sense, every poem discovers its own form, with the exception, of course, of poems that adhere to the strict rules of a specific form like the sonnet, villanelle or haiku. Here are a few critical observations from Mary Oliver about the difference between prose and poetry:

*The first obvious difference between prose and poetry is that prose is printed (or written) within the confines of margins, while poetry is written in lines that do not necessarily pay any attention to the margins, especially the right margin . . . The word verse derives from the Latin and carries the meaning "to turn" (as in versus). Poets today, who do not often write in the given forms, such as sonnets, need to understand what effects are created by the turning of the line at any of various possible points—within (and thus breaking) a logical phrase, or only at the conclusions of sentences, or only at the ends of logical units, etc . . . This subject—turning the line—is one that every poet deals with through his or her working life. And gladly, too—for every turning is a meaningful decision, the effect of which is sure to be felt by the reader. This is so whether the poet is working in metrical forms or in free verse.*

*The poem most popular today is the fairly brief lyric poem. By fairly brief I mean sixty lines or so, and probably shorter. A glance into any current anthology will quickly show how many poems of this type and length are being written, compared with poems of great length, or extreme brevity . . . This lyric poem is brief, concentrated, has usually no more than a single subject and focus and no more than a single voice, and is more likely to employ a simple and natural rather than intricate or composed musicality. It is not unlike a simple coiled spring, waiting to release its energy in a few clear phrases.*

**Groundrules.** Poems don't always seem to make complete sense at first but that's okay. Don't edit what you've only just written. Don't edit what you haven't yet written. There is no immediate right or wrong. Prompts or templates are just a place to start. You can always change or break the "rules" once you've started. You can always go back and make corrections or check spelling.

Before you ask yourself or a classroom of students to write a poem, consider what you believe about poems—what a poem is, where a poem comes from and why poems are written. The idea is always to engage in the process, to build on what you know and allow yourself to make your own discoveries.

Also, since a blank sheet of paper is often enough to prevent even the most confident and experienced writer from writing down anything, think first about the small and big things that matter most to you in the world and start a list of all the things you think of. This list will make a good resource and prompt a good habit—that of paying attention and taking note of what resonates with you. For me, many poems start here and sometimes while driving or riding my bicycle or riding the subway, I've had to repeat something over and over again until I could find a piece of paper and pen to write it down. So, it is not only waiting on the moment but also allowing that moment to take priority.