



## The Student Guide Milwaukee Public Library/Milwaukee Public Museum Youth Poetry Contest 2019

By Richard Hedderman, Poet, Education Programs Coordinator, Milwaukee Public Museum

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This year, the Milwaukee Public Library and the Milwaukee Public Museum are combining their student poetry competitions and encouraging participants to respond to the guiding question for Milwaukee's Field Work Poetry Project: "How do you see the natural world you live in?"

The contest welcomes submissions of original poems from Milwaukee County students ages 7-18 through the month of April 2019. The contest culminates with a poetry slam inviting participants to read and share their winning poems.

If you've never written a poem before but would like to give it a try and submit to the competition, take a look at the following poetry writing guide, which can help you get started. If you have written poetry before, the guide might still prove helpful!



## A Short Lesson in Poetry Writing

### So, you want to write a poem for the Milwaukee Public Library/Milwaukee Public Museum 2019 Poetry Competition?

Great -- there's nothing to stop you. Worried that you're not creative, you don't have literary talent, or you don't know anything about poetry? Don't let it bother you. Anyone who wants to can write a poem, and I'll show you how.

### There are a number of ways to go about writing poetry.

Here, we're going to focus on a very basic approach to writing a poem. We'll keep it simple. (And the topic list, by the way, is literally infinite; anything in the universe is fair game for a poem.)

### Though for this year's competition, we're sticking with the following theme: *How do you see yourself in the natural world?*

Still a really infinite theme. . . .

### Are you already a writer?

Are you a poet? Do you like poetry? Or do you groan and roll your eyes when you think of it? Do you think it is supposed to rhyme? (It doesn't.) Well, poetry is actually pretty cool. And it's *creative*, and being creative is a lot of fun. It's a great way to connect not only to the Library or the Museum, but to the world around us as well, hence our theme.

### Are you a creative person?

Here's some good news: The answer is yes. Everyone is. As people, we are all creative. It's one of the things that make us human.

Have you ever come up with a name for a pet, fixed something with glue or duct tape, or found a way to hide broccoli on your dinner plate? Of course you have. You're a person, therefore you're creative.

Poetry is just another way of being creative, but with words.

### You already know a poem. Yes, you really do.

I'm ready to argue that every one of us knows at least one poem. And by "know," I mean by heart. Don't think so? How about this:

*Whose woods these are I think I know  
His house is in the village though  
He will not mind me stopping here  
To watch his woods fill up with snow.*

Don't know that one? That's the first stanza of "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" by Robert Frost.

How about this:

*Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered, weak and weary,  
Over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore—  
While I nodded, nearly napping, suddenly there came a tapping,  
As of someone gently rapping, rapping at my chamber door.*

Doesn't ring a bell? Those are the opening lines of "The Raven" by Edgar Allen Poe.

Okay, then, let's try these:

*Oh, say, can you see  
By the dawn's early light  
What so proudly we hailed  
At the twilight's last gleaming?*

Sound familiar? Thought so. You likely recognize it as a song played or sung before sporting events, and you know it by heart. It was written by Francis Scott Key, but it wasn't a song at first. It was, in fact, written as a poem -- *then* it was set to music.

So, we all know some poetry, and we can all write it. You just need the right stuff.

**For example, what materials do you need to build a house?**

You need lumber, metal, brick, concrete, glass, nails, cement, screws, shingles, etc.

**What tools do you need to build a house?**

Well, you need hammers, saws, shovels, drills, etc.

**It's the same with a poem.**

You need materials and the right tools to shape those materials into a poem.

**What are they?**

Well, in this case, the materials are found in the competition's theme: How do you see yourself in the natural world?

### **1. Materials**

So, how do you see yourself in nature? Believe it or not, we all do this, and we do it every day -- whether you live on a farm, in the suburbs, or in the middle of the city.

For example, even if you live in the city, you'd likely be amazed at the number of different kinds of wild animals that live there, too. Some examples are hawks, owls, raccoons, opossum, turkeys, deer, and even fox and coyote, just to name a few. Is there a park near you? Does it have a pond or swamp or creek? Is it near a river or

Lake Michigan? As noted above, nature is all over the place, and we're all a part of it.

## 2. Tools

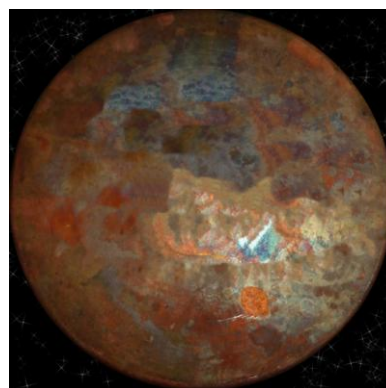
Of course, you need something to write with — a pen, pencil, or a keyboard, for example — and something to write on — a sheet of paper, a notebook, computer screen, etc. You also need your imagination, and we all have one of those. And you need words — the building blocks of poems. And everyone knows words. Now you just have to pick the right ones and put them in the right order.

There are a lot of tools we use to do this, but here we're going to focus on three of the main ones. These tools are also a lot of fun to work with:

- A. **Simile**— A comparison using the words “like” or “as.”  
Example: “I wandered lonely as a cloud.” (William Wordsworth)
- B. **Metaphor**— A direct comparison *without* using “like” or “as.”  
Example: “All the world’s a stage.” (William Shakespeare)  
Think of a metaphor as saying that an object, an experience, an emotion, etc. *is* something, instead of *like* something.
- C. **Imagery**— A way to describe something so that it connects with one or more of the five senses.  
Example: “Under the October twilight, the water/mirrors a still sky.” (William Butler Yeats)  
This image connects with the sense of sight.

**So, let's take a close look at these three poetry tools:**

**Similes:** Here's a picture of a mysterious object. Now try and describe it using either the word “like” or “as.”  
Example: It looks like one of the moons of Jupiter.  
Actually, this is not a moon but, believe it or not, the bottom of a copper frying pan.



**Metaphors:** Now describe the same image with a metaphor stating that the image *is* something.  
Example: The bottom of the frying pan is a moon of Jupiter.

**Imagery:** Here's the poem “In a Station of the Metro” by Ezra Pound. It's only two lines long, but it's packed with imagery and is considered one of the world's great poems.

First, let's quickly review a couple of the poem's vocabulary words:

- Metro – the Paris subway system.
- Apparition – a ghost or ghost-like image, something remarkable or startling.

*In a Station of the Metro*

*The apparition of these faces in the crowd;  
Petals on a wet, black bough.*

Wow. That's it. That's the whole poem, just two lines. The title is almost half as long as the poem itself. But Pound sure packs a lot into those two lines; not only meaning, but *imagery*. This poem has more imagery per syllable than other poem I can think of.

- **Important Lesson:** Poems don't have to be long to be powerful or effective, or even just plain good. Some of the world's greatest poems are short ones. (But longer poems are okay, too, of course.)

See if you can identify the images in the Pound poem (the words that in some way connect with our five senses). Does it connect with all of them?

- **Sight:** faces, crowds of people, the petals, the black, wet bough;
- **Smell:** the smell of the spring rain, the flowery petals;
- **Taste:** the sweetness of the petals, maybe? The tang on the tongue of the urban grit of the street and Metro station;
- **Touch:** the silkiness of the petals, the rough bark of the bough and slipperiness of the rain on it;
- **Hearing:** the bustle of the metro crowd, the rumble of the trains, the sound of the wind blowing petals from the trees.

**Here's another great imagery poem.**

It's by William Carlos Williams, and it's likely his most famous poem, read and appreciated by people around the world for decades. It's another short poem that's only two words longer than the Pound poem. And it's loaded with *plenty* of powerful imagery:

*The Red Wheelbarrow*

*so much depends  
upon*

*a red wheel  
barrow*

*glazed with rain  
water*

*beside the white  
chickens*

The imagery in this poem, too, can connect with all five of the senses (mostly):

- **Sight:** the glistening bright-red of the wheelbarrow;
- **Smell:** the smell of the damp earth, the barnyard;
- **Touch:** the rain-slick metal of the wheelbarrow (there's that rain slickeriness again);
- **Hearing:** the noise from the chickens bustling around the barnyard and pecking in the dirt for seeds;
- **Taste:** chicken for dinner, maybe?

## Writing Your Poem

### How to Begin

Once you have your main idea, begin by writing things down. Starting a poem really is that simple. Write down thoughts, ideas, descriptions which connect with the subject of your poem. What happened, what did you see and hear, what do you remember, where and when did the experience occur?

It's important not to think that everything you write down has to be "Poetry" (with a capital P) right away. Just record your impressions and ideas; they can be as sloppy, messy, unfocused, or as silly as you like.

If it needs the poetic touch, your writing can always become poetry later. We'll discuss that a bit more below.

### Collecting Words

One of the first — and easiest — things you can do when starting a poem is collect vocabulary. Make a list of as many descriptive words, phrases, or images about your topic that comes to mind. These will be the building blocks of your poem.

I call this "trolling for vocabulary." And it's okay to list vocabulary words that have nothing to do with the theme of your poem.

Let's say you're writing a poem about helping your mom weed her garden. Don't hesitate to write down the words:

xylophone, verbose, pink flamingo, lapidary, hacksaw, transfigure, cautionary

These words have nothing to do with the experience of helping your mom weed her garden -- don't let it bother you. If you think of the words, or otherwise come across them somehow, go ahead and write them down. What harm does it do? It won't hurt the poem.

So, using the list of vocabulary words, above, you might write the following lines for your poem:

The neighbors' pink flamingos gave us a cautionary regard  
As the sun beat down on us like a lapidary on a xylophone.

Unusual or unlooked-for words can push your imagination in directions you never figured on -- and when you're writing a poem, that's a really good thing.

### **Crafting a Poem**

But a poem is more than a just a list of words, right? Correct! In order to be a poem, the words have to be *crafted*. So, what does that mean?

#### **1. Structure**

One thing that helps right away is to decide on a *structure* for your poem. You might think of structure as shape. What shape will your poem have?

How long will it be? (The competition holds you to 30 lines.) Long lines or short ones, or a mix? How long are the stanzas -- four lines, three, two, or is the poem going to be just one long stanza? (Totally acceptable.)

Once you have a structure to work with, it's sometimes easier to complete your poem. Structure is kind of like building just the right size box to put your poem in. Then you can shape the poem to fit into the box. Having that shape to work with can be very helpful.

Play around with the structure of the poem. Feel free to switch the order of words and entire lines or stanzas. Again, you can't hurt the poem. But keep the early versions of it so you don't lose any material you might decide to go back to later.

#### **2. Line breaks**

This is a huge part of making a poem. Line breaks refer to the end of a line of poetry, where—and how— it stops.

If you carry a sentence in a poem over into the next line, this is called *enjambment*.

If you use punctuation (a period, comma, colon, semicolon, etc.) at the end of a line, this is called *end-stopping*.

Don't worry too much about the terms. Either way, spend some time playing around with the line breaks to get the kind of sound, rhythm, flow, or emphasis you're looking for. This is actually a lot of fun to do.

### Read the Poem

Read the draft of your poem with a critical eye. Read it over and over again. And be sure to read it out loud to yourself a few times, at least. Maybe read it to others and get their feedback.

### Questions to Ask Yourself

Look for parts that might sound a little awkward or confusing. Can you think of a way to fix them? Don't be afraid to make another version of the poem in which you leave out the parts that aren't working well.

Are there things you want to change, cross out, or add? What do you think of the images you have used? What about the metaphors? Does your poem have a sense of rhythm or musicality? What does your poem reveal?

One of the things that makes poetry vital and intriguing — and successful — is that it often *reveals* things that we don't already know. Poets are a special kind of detective, and they write to help themselves and the reader discover the poetry hidden in the world around us.

### “How do you see yourself in nature” Poems

Here are three wonderful poems in which the poet writes about seeing him or herself in nature. They'll give you an idea of how some professional poets have tackled this theme.

Note that not all the poems are set outdoors. In fact, in one of them, the poet sees himself as part of nature while standing at the kitchen stove. Notice, though, how in each poem the poet finds him or herself either entering the natural world, or standing just at its edge.

#### *Sleeping in the Forest*

By Mary Oliver, from *Dream Work*

*I thought the earth remembered me,  
she took me back so tenderly,  
arranging her dark skirts, her pockets  
full of lichens and seeds.  
I slept as never before, a stone on the river bed,  
nothing between me and the white fire of the stars  
but my thoughts, and they floated light as moths  
among the branches of the perfect trees.  
All night I heard the small kingdoms  
breathing around me, the insects,*



*and the birds who do their work in the darkness.  
All night I rose and fell, as if in water,  
grappling with a luminous doom. By morning  
I had vanished at least a dozen times  
into something better.*

### A Cup of Tea

*By Richard Hedderman, from The Discovery of Heaven*

*When I stand at the stove  
and pour you a cup of tea,*

*I am a tree bending low  
over swampy ground.*

*All around me, leaves steep  
in a cold mist.*

*Steam swirls quickly up  
into the air,*

*unravels its first sentence.  
Rising, it turns into light,*

*and the light becomes chill air  
leading me*

*into black night  
and the vault of stars beyond.*

*This is the first lesson  
of true living*

### A Blessing

*By James Wright, from The Branch Will Not Break*

*Just off the highway to Rochester, Minnesota,  
Twilight bounds softly forth on the grass.  
And the eyes of those two Indian ponies  
Darken with kindness.  
They have come gladly out of the willows  
To welcome my friend and me.*

*We step over the barbed wire into the pasture  
Where they have been grazing all day, alone.  
They ripple tensely, they can hardly contain their happiness  
That we have come.  
They bow shyly as wet swans. They love each other.  
There is no loneliness like theirs.  
At home once more,  
They begin munching the young tufts of spring in the darkness.  
I would like to hold the slenderer one in my arms,  
For she has walked over to me  
And nuzzled my left hand.  
She is black and white,  
Her mane falls wild on her forehead,  
And the light breeze moves me to caress her long ear  
That is delicate as the skin over a girl's wrist.  
Suddenly I realize  
That if I stepped out of my body I would break  
Into blossom.*

These poems might be good for inspiration, which is great. Don't be afraid to take inspiration from the work of other poets -- just don't take the actual poetry. It's a great way to learn and grow as a writer.

Want to see what other student poets have written? This link will lead you to many of the winning poems from past Museum poetry competitions:

<https://www.mpm.edu/poetry>

### **One Final Note**

As noted above, anyone can write a poem. The hard part is writing a good one. (And writing a *great* one, like "A Blessing," for example, is really tough.) Writing well takes a lot of hard work.

Getting a poem to a place where you're happy with it can take awhile, so be patient. Don't expect greatness on the first try, and just take the time to work on your poem. That's writing.

Okay, now give it try.

Send us your work, and we'll have a look.

Good luck!