Prompts for writing poetry

It is a truth universally acknowledged that all of us who’ve tried to write a poem have at some point come up against a blank page. Regardless of whether you write every day or have never written a poem, here are some fun exercises to get you creating - there’s something in poetry for everyone!

**Automatic writing:** set a timer for 2 minutes (or longer or shorter, whatever you have stamina for) and try not to take your pen from the page for that duration of time - just write whatever comes into your head. It’s a good way of getting something down on the page even if you end up editing most of it out later. Something I find useful when doing this is looking at a particular object/scene/painting etc - one of the first poems I wrote came from an automatic writing exercise I did while looking at a clock!

**Blackout poems:** Part of the wider tradition of ‘found’ poetry, blackout poems are made by taking a chunk of text (you can use an article, a passage from a novel, a song - whatever you like!) and deleting parts of it in order to leave certain words uncovered and create a whole new thing!

Here’s an example I made - from George Orwell’s *Books v. Cigarettes*
In a similar vein are **dadaist poems**: (using the method of Tristan Tzara) ‘Take a newspaper. Take a pair of scissors. Choose an article as long as you are planning to make your poem. Cut out the article. Then cut out each of the words that make up this article and put them in a bag. Shake it gently. Then take out the scraps one after the other in the order in which they left the bag. Copy conscientiously. The poem will be like you. And here you are a writer, infinitely original and endowed with a sensibility that is charming though beyond the understanding of the vulgar.’

David Bowie composed some of the songs on Diamond Dogs using the cut-up method: [https://genius.com/David-bowie-candidate-lyrics](https://genius.com/David-bowie-candidate-lyrics)

**List poems**: make a list! It can be a shopping list, a list of your favourite foods, a to do list, a recipe - you name it. Then poeticize it - add metaphors, rearrange it, make it rhyme.


‘When I Grow Up I Want to Be a List of Further Possibilities’ by Chen Chen - [https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/143241/when-i-grow-up-i-want-to-be-a-list-of-further-possibilities](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/143241/when-i-grow-up-i-want-to-be-a-list-of-further-possibilities)

**Tiny poems**: write a poem small enough to fit onto a cupcake! If you’re really dedicated to this form, make a cupcake and ice your poem onto it - then eat and enjoy!

**Write about an anecdote or a memory.**

Translate a poem from another language (if you are familiar with another language/have access to a good dictionary).

**Nonsense poems**: Make up a nonsense world and populate it with nonsense creatures, then write a poem about them! Play with sound - create unusual rhymes, make up words, use repetition. You can also try writing in nonsense forms such as limericks and clerihews.

Sir Christopher Wren

Said, “I am going to dine with some men. If anyone calls

Say I am designing St Paul’s.”

-by Edmund Clerihew Bentley

**Kennings**: A good way of explaining kennings is that they are like little riddles: they describe things, people or places without naming them directly, instead using metaphor. Some examples include ‘avian superhighway’ for ‘sky’ and ‘whale road’ for ‘sea’. Try writing a poem using some of these!
Some poetry terms:
You don’t have to know about these to write poetry, but if you are interested, here are some terms that might be helpful when writing!

• **Form** - the physical shape of a poem, how many lines it has, what kind of rhymes. There are lots of different kinds of poetic forms - a few examples are sonnets, villanelles, sestinas, ballads, haikus, terza rima, and ottava rima

• **Metre** - the ordered arrangement of stressed and unstressed syllables in verse. Poetic lines are traditionally made up of ‘feet’, which are units of measurement usually containing at least one stressed and one unstressed syllable. An iamb, for example contains an unstressed followed by a stressed syllable - da-DUM. The traditional metre of sonnets is iambic pentameter (five iambics per line). For more detailed and better-explained information, check out Poetry Foundation’s definitions of ‘metre’ and ‘foot’: https://www.poetryfoundation.org/learn/glossary-terms/meter  https://www.poetryfoundation.org/learn/glossary-terms/foot

• **Rhyme** - the repetition of syllables, typically but not always at the end of a verse line. According to Poetry Foundation, ‘Rhymed words conventionally share all sounds following the word’s last stressed syllable’, so ‘tenacity’ and ‘mendacity’ rhyme because the stressed syllables are ‘na’ and ‘da’. Some other types of rhyme are eye rhyme, when the words rhyme on the page but not when you say them out loud, like ‘through’ and ‘rough’; and slant rhyme or half rhyme, an imperfect or near rhyme like ‘rhyme’ and ‘line’. A rhyme scheme is the arrangement of rhymes in a poem. https://www.poetryfoundation.org/learn/glossary-terms/rhyme

Useful websites for writing/reading poetry:
- **Young Poets Network** - lots of writing challenges, explorations of different forms, and interviews with published poets!
- **rhymezone** - does what it says on the tin
- **Poetry Foundation** - a database of poems which also offers detailed writer biographies, definitions of terms, and articles about poetry!
- **Academy of American Poets** - similar to Poetry Foundation but also offers a poem-a-day mailing list

We hope you find this helpful!
Poetry love,
Francesca and Giorgio