

STARTING TO WRITE

Mostly I'm a 'good cop' teacher of creative writing; an innkeeper rather than a gatekeeper, keener on welcoming new poets in than keeping them out. I still believe the best critics and poets are enthusiasts and encouragers.

But if you have got as far as opening this box you deserve both a big hug and a wee warning. Sound and sense; music and meaning, the one played off against the other to create tension between syntax and sensuousness. The right words in the right order and as few of them as is strictly necessary. Always let the ego serve the poem and not vice versa.

Writing can't be taught, but it can be learned.

The three most important means of learning: **reading, reading and reading.**

The three 'must have' qualities for beginning poets; **talent, temperament and tenacity.** And the greatest of these is tenacity. To modify the old Cistercian tag; work for what you pray for. While everybody can benefit from writing poetry, poetry doesn't always benefit from us. Nearly all published verse can be therapeutic to read but by no means all the therapeutic poetry being produced, tremendously healingly produced, will be publishably good. Feeling must also be thought or it's just sentimentality – soft hearts need hard work.

Poetry, like a joke, can never be explained. The best poems are up on a ledge no critic will ever reach. What lifts them up there is the paraphrase defying essence of excellence we call imagination. **Try 'defining' a dog. Now watch me panting, my hands extended like paws, BEING a dog.** A great poem, even a great bit of a good poem is like that, you know it when you see it. You get to know anyway. Starting to write, you enter a world where the only rules are rules of thumb. For a while you're all thumbs.

What's poetry based on? What's poetry based on? What's poetry based on?

Right! **Repetition**, whether rhythm, rhyme or stanzaic shape.

As an icebreaker, I often get students to complete the sentence, 'a poet should never...' My job then, is to say **a poet should never say never.** The most adventurous travellers use a guidebook. They also add to the store of lore, find their bearings and move on. Discover your own little cafe with the perfect espresso. **Read.** When aspiring versifiers – they are seldom poets – boast that they don't read modern poetry for fear of being influenced, I silently scream; increasingly, to be honest, not so silently! **Get under the influence at once and stay there,** drunk on Carol Ann Duffy's dramatic monologues that are also sonnets whose rhymes like landmines explode only after you have failed to notice them, such is their conversational fluency. Eschew literary sobriety for a week and marvel at the storytelling verve of Ciaran Carson whose tall tales contain such tiny details. Throw the cork away and follow Edwin Morgan to Glasgow, Frank O'Hara to New York and Pier Paolo Pasolini to Rome.

The Museum of Me

Choose three 'exhibits' that say something particular about you and curate these into three poems that contrast in style, form, tone etc. For example the items might be a tram ticket from Lisbon, a snapshot of your mother, the recipe for Scotch broth, each evoked by, in turn, a sonnet, an unrhyming poem in couplets and a ballad. Be imaginative in your choice. *The Guardian* newspaper runs a regular feature along similar lines.

Gone Blank

Pick a poem you have never read but one acknowledged to be of high quality. Do not read it or even glance at it. Next have a friend photocopy this poem and return it to you with four words blanked out. These excisions must be cunningly contrived so it's best to work with a partner poet for whom you can reciprocate. Avoid rhyming words. Indeed it's probably better to avoid rhyming poems altogether. The omissions should be well separated. Your task is to guess the missing words. In due course, with your 'study buddy' try this with your own poems.

Give Me a Break

Have the same friend, or, providing they are savvy, someone else, choose another poem of high repute but not known to you. This time the other person should retype the poem as continuous text resembling prose rather than poetry. Obviously a short poem will reduce the typing required. Your job is to reinstate the line breaks where you think they ought to occur. A rhyming poem will be lineated according to its rhymes and may tax you less, so stick with non-rhyming poems. That said, it can be fun to second guess the rhymes in poems or songs. And fun is important!

In the Picture

Get hold of a postcard from an art gallery and produce a poem inspired by the image there reproduced. Do not offer a Simon Schama or Robert Hughes style panoptic overview. Don't describe the painting as a museum guide would in detail and in toto. This is not the moment for what in the parlance of cinema, would be called a wide, master, or establishing shot. No. We want detail and imagination. So seize upon something in the background or that insignificant figure in the corner of the frame or the hat the principal character is wearing or whatever as long as it's 'left field' 'lateral' 'counter intuitive', not art criticism but poetry. A dramatic monologue by someone who has just left or is about to enter the picture? A song sung by a minor character? Over to you. Paul Durcan's 'Give Me Your Hand' consists of his highly inventive responses to paintings in the National Gallery in London.

Order; order

Compose a fourteen line non rhyming NARRATIVE poem whose lines could be assembled in any order. Yes, ANY ORDER, all fourteen of them, utterly, totally interchangeable with a tale to tell.

Rhyme as Reason

Write a ten line poem with the same rhyme sound ending every line, ie row, bough, how etc. Usually such emphasised rhyme is put to comic effect. So make your poem serious and steer clear of frivolity altogether.



I cannot recall which golfer, complimented on his good luck, replied that funnily enough the more he practised the luckier he got! Let's hope these exercises help you to get lucky.

Good poems have vision; great poems have revision.

Sherlock Holmes complains somewhere about, 'the fatigues of idleness'. Boy, do I know something about those. You write your charming, deft, amusing yet touching, deceptively simple little poem in, as Norman MacCaig used to say – the fibber, in the time it takes to smoke two cigarettes, and that's that. Well, I have never smoked but no it isn't, not for those of us who aren't geniuses, even, I'm pretty certain, for most geniuses. That consummate technician Philip Larkin wasn't always an old miseryguts. 'Imagine if no-one played tennis because they wouldn't get to Wimbledon', he said, thinking of poetry. Net, racquets, ball: pen, paper, ideas. Everyone pleasurably and productively plays.

But take it from a lazy man who fluffs every other service and whose own backhand still needs working on; remember to put the 'try' in poetry.

Now write, write, write. Right?

Add to your book list

Ruth Padel, *52 Ways of Looking at a Poem* (Vintage)

The Making of a Poem, eds Strand and Boland (Norton)

Dream State: The New Scottish Poets (Polygon), ed Donny O'Rourke

Donny O'Rourke

Donny O'Rourke is a poet, songwriter, translator, journalist, teacher, editor (of *Dream State: the New Scottish Poets*) and broadcaster.

His collections include *The Waistband and other poems* (Polygon, 1997) and *On a Roll: a Jena notebook* (Mariscat, 2001), and with Richard Price he published a pamphlet of versions of modern French lyrics, *Eftirs/Afters* (Au Quai, 1996). He has spent some time in Nuremberg, having received the Hermann Kesten Stipendium, and a dual language collection of poems resulting from his time



poetry box ideas

there was published in 2005, *Aus dem Wartesaal der Poesie/From Poetry's Waiting Room* (Spätlese Verlag, Nürnberg).

