

SPL Guide to Prose Poetry

A prose poem is often, but not always:

- presented without the line breaks of a poem, and with a neat, justified margin on both sides
- more short and condensed than prose
- using many of the heightened sound effects, rhythm, imagery of poetry

Its tone and subject might also be:

- surreal, or mixing the everyday with the extraordinary
- like a translation from another language
- celebrating contradiction or impossibility
- centred around a single moment
- expanding on, or hinting at, an extended metaphor

So what makes a prose poem any different from a piece of short prose? This form may not give you all the answers you want, but try some of these questions and see if you find a way in.

Sight

Ask yourself what you see on the page in front of you. What does the prose poem look like? one paragraph, or longer? Is the right margin justified and straight, mirroring the left margin, or are the lines ragged? Is it one condensed run of text, or is it broken up by paragraphs, direct speech, lots of punctuation?

Sound

What does the prose poem sound like if you try reading it aloud? Those unbroken lines may be rushing you breathlessly to the end of the text, not letting you take a break. Or maybe the tumbling words sound exuberant, or lavish, or big-spirited – supply your own description.

Or perhaps there are other ways the poet has used to give the piece a kind of audible texture – exactly the kinds of rhythms, rhymes or sound patterns you might find in other poems.

Does the sound of the prose poem say anything about its subject? Maybe the poem seems to be unusually poetic in its language, calling on elaborate or romantic phrases and images, but offsetting this very poetic language with the shape of prose. Or maybe its language is short, sharp, aggressive, using the prose style to punch home a point.

Boundaries

If the prose poem form makes it very clear that the poem isn't obeying one of the biggest boundaries of a poem – the line break – then does it ask you to look at other kinds of boundary? Where does the poem, or

the story, stop? Does it leave you feeling that anything is unfinished? What do you feel the prose poem is about – and does this make it interesting or important not to have the boundary of the line-break?

What do I expect from prose anyway?

Some prose poems might rely on our expectations of prose. Think about what you might instantly expect when you see prose on a page. Does it simply feel easier to read prose than poetry? Is there a sense that prose is a relief, offering plain-speaking style, functional clarity, information? If the prose poem is short, is there any kind of writing or speaking that you associate with short sections of prose, or short bursts of speech?

Try thinking in translation

Prose poems sometimes feel as if they come from a different culture, a different world. Sometimes they feel like a strange form of translation – perhaps like a literal translation of some imaginary poem in another language. While prose poems only have a relatively recent history in poetry in the UK, and a longer history in English-language poetry in the US, they have their roots in French poetry. Nineteenth century French poets like Charles Baudelaire and Arthur Rimbaud wrote exuberant, molten-formed prose poems which rebelled against the idea of what a French poem should be; and those poems may in turn have had their roots in translations into French in earlier centuries. Perhaps the prose poem has always had a different voice.

A world of opposites

The name ‘prose poem’ makes readers expect opposition, or a hybrid of two very different things. After all, the most obvious first reaction to a prose poem is, how do I know whether it’s prose or poem - surely those two things are the opposite of one another, so how can it be both? Does the prose poem you’re reading get its energy from matching opposite with opposite – perhaps creating a tension between pairs of opposing images, phrases, rhythms?

Down to earth or wild fantasy?

A mixture of the fantastical and the ordinary can create a surreal world. Perhaps the poem uses a prose style to play up an extraordinary situation, or an apparently mundane story becomes wildly stylised. Perhaps a prose poem opens with a metaphor, which is extended so that the whole piece begins to feel like a metaphor for something outside the margins, or perhaps it takes on the quality of a fable.

Falling short

Maybe the prose poem you’re reading feels like an experiment. Does it matter if the experiment seems to be successful, or has failed? Is there something about a prose poem that changes the idea of what is successful in a poem? Russell Edson described a prose poem as ‘a cast iron aeroplane that can actually fly, mainly because its pilot doesn’t seem to care if it does or not’ (see David Lehman’s introduction to *Great American Prose Poems*)

Growing up or getting too big

Is the prose poem you're reading part of a sequence, or does it stand alone? consider whether you expect the poem to develop in some way, either in the rest of the sequence or beyond the end of the piece; perhaps there is an implied story of which you've only been given a fragment, or a character who will develop. Does a piece of writing have to develop, and do we expect it eventually to offer up something – a moral lesson, an insight, an answer, which we can't help adding? Or do we allow them as we read to go unfinished?

Further reading at the SPL

Great American Prose Poems: From Poe to the present, edited by David Lehman (Scribner Poetry, 2003): SPL shelfmark 2.73

This Line is Not For Turning: An anthology of contemporary British prose poetry, edited by Jane Monson (Cinnamon Press, 2011), SPL shelfmark 2.42(20)

Hedge sparrows

Richard Price's poem, 'Hedge Sparrows', was chosen to represent Britain in our Written World project, which presents a poem from each country competing in London 2012. It was read by Jim Broadbent on the BBC.

"One of the things the poem is about is about being able to express yourself within a framework of constructive anarchy, an ecology that needs complexity, needs borders even as it acknowledges their limitations; doesn't always need 'globalisation' though loves the globe.

I wrote this prose poem a long time ago but it's one of the few poems I still read at most of my readings: Jim Broadbent has his own way, but I read it fast, fast, fast. It's meant to be (in my head, anyway) half a punk record, half a praise poem. It's meant to be a challenge but also a work of affection. Yes: a prose poem of punk praise."

This prose poem gives the feeling of endless, burbling birdsong – and at the same time, maybe it plays with our discomfort with the idea of the prose poem form. It almost looks like a hedge: a squared-off thicket of words. Choosing a form that doesn't have the traditional hedges and boundaries highlights the sparrow's nostalgic enthusiasm for those boundaries; but at the same time, the prose poem shows that, even without the hedges and boundaries it loves, the sparrow's voice is every bit as vivid and strong. It knows perfectly well what makes us all, in our own ways, sing, and shows how the bird, and the reader, can adapt to new habitats.

Read 'Hedge Sparrows' by clicking on Britain on our [Written World map](#)