

one | getting started

the crafting of a poem

YOU'VE BOUGHT YOURSELF A notebook. You've tried recording your voice on one of your devices or practiced reading something you've written aloud. But *what* should you write about and *how* should you write it? Unless poems are already pouring out of you, which I hope they are, you may be wondering how to get started. With any writing project, beginning is often the most difficult part. Maybe this is because writing feeds on confidence; the more confidence you have in your writing ability, the more you tend to write. And it's easy to psych yourself out before you've even begun. Know this: you have the ability to do great writing. Poetry is not for the select few. Though many people are shy when it comes to their writing, if you publish a journal or zine, participate in a community writing contest, or drop in on an open mic night at your local bookstore, you'll soon find out that almost everyone has tried writing poetry at some point. But few of us believe we're any good.

From an early age, we're taught that writing poetry, like doing artwork, is a rare talent, reserved for a gifted few. For years I visited a K-12 Catholic girls' school to teach poetry for a day each spring. My day began with the kindergarten class, and by the time I left in the afternoon I had

CRAFTING POEMS

visited through Grade 5. The teachers and girls were delightful across the board, and I loved watching the girls light up as they listened to poetry read aloud or tried their hand at a writing exercise. However, each year I noticed a disturbing phenomenon: a steep drop-off in enthusiasm at Grade 4. It wasn't that the girls weren't excited to see me; they all enjoyed spending some time on poetry. But whereas the younger children were eager to read their poems aloud, often raising their hands so high they were almost standing, the older girls practically cringed when I asked if any of them would like to read their work to the class. Rather than being proud, each one of the older girls seemed to feel that the act of writing poetry was somehow not for her.

You could easily explain this phenomenon by discussing developmental changes according to age group: by arguing that the steep drop-off in enthusiasm had nothing to do with poetry or creative expression and everything to do with a typical sense of self-consciousness, which generally presents in pre-teen years. However, if you'd been with me in those classrooms, year after year, I'm sure you'd agree that creativity was what was (and is) at stake. We start off feeling confident and sometimes even gleeful about our innate abilities, and we end up in early adulthood dead on arrival. If you think back to your own childhood, you may recall your first experiences with creative affirmation—or the lack thereof. Were you encouraged to pursue your creative passions, told that you had talent? Or did you receive the explicit or implicit message that creative expression, in general, and creative writing, in particular, was for someone else? I'm not suggesting that you dwell on this question, since, as adults, we get to determine for ourselves what we can and cannot achieve. But I am suggesting that if a little voice inside tells you that you *can't*, you probably picked up this misconception from others or from the culture at large. So, it's time to toss that self-negating idea to the trash heap for good. And if you already possess a healthy self-confidence, get ready to surprise even yourself with the ways in which you can grow as a writer.

Once you've gotten in the right mindset to write, you may still struggle with the questions of when to fit writing into your busy life and where you can find the necessary conditions to do so. If you've ever sat down to a computer with the sole purpose of composing a poem on the spot, you may have faced a rather daunting experience. The blank screen and that ever-annoying blinking cursor may as well be staring at you as if to say, *let's make a bet. I dare you to try writing a poem.* And if there's the added pressure of producing a poem within a certain time frame for class, the prospect can become uncomfortable enough to make you not want to write at all. This experience of expectation and sometimes even debilitating pressure is familiar to almost all poets, regardless of their level of experience. Most of us find that we have to trick ourselves into writing:

a process that usually involves simply taking notes or journaling, with no thought of the product until later.

And what about finding the right environment in which to generate material? Here too, the perfect silence of an uninhabited lake house can turn out to be not so perfect if you're feeling pressured. In fact, many writers start off scribbling notes for poems in between interruptions—on a grocery list or the back of an envelope, in between meetings or classes. And many of us are used to getting started in public places, rather than in solitude. Recently, while at a secluded arts residency, I met a well-established Portuguese novelist who was having difficulty writing in his serene woodland studio, since he was accustomed to composing in noisy Lisbon cafés. He ended up working half of the day in the residency's library to break up all of that solitude, if not silence. Although my first poetry teachers instructed us to refrain from listening to music while we wrote, I now find that having music in the background (especially if it's instrumental rather than vocal) often feeds my imagination, frees me up, and gets me writing. And many of my students report the same: that music helps to create a conducive environment.

The long and short of it is: there's no right way to do it. What's important is making yourself feel comfortable so that you'll *want* to write. To establish a productive routine (however unorthodox it may be) takes some trial and error. You may benefit from setting aside a certain time of day and a certain place in which to write. See what suits you. I often think of my writing life as a relationship I'm in; I need to know that there's a familiar routine I can count on, but I don't want it to get stale, to feel like a chore. I want to keep it joyful or at least pleasant, and in order to do this, I have to keep the pressure at a low simmer, unless, of course, I temporarily need to bring it to a brisk boil. So, keep it simple; do what feels good; keep trying.

Sources

As we've already discussed, there are really no off-limits topics for poetry. But if you're just beginning or want to generate new material, it may be useful to review sources for possible subject matter. If you've been writing for a while, maybe you can add some of your own tried-and-true sources to this brief list. I've drawn the first three from poet Kenneth Koch's landmark study, *Wishes, Lies, and Dreams: Teaching Children to Write Poetry*. Although Koch describes his method of teaching children, specifically, his ideas are easily adapted, and many working poets continue to use similar strategies.

CRAFTING POEMS

- **Wishes:** Desire is generally a fertile ground for poetry. Are there specific relationships or experiences you'd like to have, places to which you'd like to travel? Maybe you've always wanted to walk the shores of Belize or see what it would be like to fly. Like poems, wishes need not be realistic, just specific.
- **Dreams:** Many poets keep a notebook beside their beds to record their dreams. And thinkers from Aristotle to Freud have explored the connection between sleeping, dreaming, and poetry. The French surrealist poet, Saint-Pol-Roux, reputedly hung a sign on his bedroom door that read, "*Le Poète Travaille*" ("Poet at Work"). Whether or not you end up using actual dream material in your poems, cultivating an awareness of your dream life will help you tap into your unconscious mind for starting points and associations.
- **Lies:** This common "ice-breaker" exercise for the first day of class can also be useful for your writing. Try writing down two truths about yourself—and one lie. Then try making up some lies about the world around you. Similar to mining for material in your wishes and dreams, this process focuses your attention on the often-blurred line between reality and fantasy.
- **Secrets:** What would you say if you were completely unafraid of the response? We all have secrets: some big and some small. The revelation or partial revelation of secrets often provides poems with a necessary source of tension. Whether or not your poems end up being autobiographical, you can mine for material by thinking more about the secrets you carry.
- **Mixed Emotions:** Most of us find that writing a powerful poem grounded in a single emotion, such as happiness or anger, is difficult, if not impossible. And, as readers, we seem to crave poems that come out of a state of **ambivalence** or mixed emotions: love *and* resentment, joy *and* melancholy, the bittersweet. As you search for subjects, focus particular attention on experiences that feel complex or unresolved. Maybe you're still wondering why you and your sweetheart broke up, or why you hold mixed emotions in relation to a family member. The questions in our lives, the things with which we're wrestling, almost always provide useful fodder for poems.
- **Sounds:** Some poems simply begin with the sound of a line or **wordplay** (language used in an inventive way). And it's certainly not necessary to have a subject, topic, or theme in mind before you begin.

Are there words or combinations of words that draw your attention? Maybe you've seen a turn-of-phrase online, on a billboard, or in a newspaper. Feel free to incorporate this **found material** into a poem.

- **Daily Observations:** As poets, we're always observing the things around us: the way the moon looks on a particularly clear night, our mother crossing her smooth hands when she speaks about a painful topic, the smell of hot coffee filling the house on a cold morning. We're particularly tuned-in to how things look, hear, feel, smell, and taste. This kind of **sensory detail**, also the topic of the next chapter, makes up the bulk of our daily observations. And these observations are key to writing powerful poetry.

Active Reading

Equally important as finding sources of material is learning to read actively: that is, engaging with the reading you do in a way that will yield results for your own writing practice. In the following poem, notice the way that Serbian-born United States poet Charles Simic (b. 1938) uses carefully observed sensory detail to develop a basic comparison between **the speaker** (the voice behind the poem) and “a big shade tree.” This first poem is annotated to model the process of active reading. If you can get in the habit of marking up poems—including memorable lines, questions, poetic elements that seem significant, and definitions—you'll not only be ready for class discussions, but you'll also be more likely to internalize and remember whatever is most significant for you personally. You may also want to keep an online dictionary, such as merriam-webster.com, close by as you read. Since poetry depends so highly on each word, it's helpful to review various definitions, even for words such as “enchanted,” with which you may be familiar.

✿ The World

As if I were a big old shade tree *simile—speaker & tree*
 On a side street with a small café.
 Neon beer sign with the word “cold” shining in it. *sense of sight and touch*
 Summer dusk.

The solitary customer, who looks like my father, *why “like” his father?*
 Is bent over a book with small print
 Oblivious of the young waiter
 Who is about to serve him a cup of black coffee. *sight and taste*

CRAFTING POEMS

I have an incalculable number of leaves
Not one of which is moving. *interesting paradox*
It's because we are enchanted, I think. *placed under a magic spell*
We don't have a care in the world.

Craft Questions

- What details does Simic use to develop the comparison between the speaker and the shade tree? What feelings do you associate with these details?
- What is the role of the “solitary customer, who looks like [the speaker’s] father” in the poem?
- What feelings do lines 9–10 evoke?
- In the last two lines, the poem switches to the plural, “we.” How might this switch expand your understanding?
- Thematically, what is this poem about?

.....

In discussion, you may have some difficulty agreeing on a single theme. (Though we can probably all agree that there are many things that this poem is *not* about: cats, serial killers, or race cars.) Rarely does a poem mean just one thing, especially when you ask multiple people. Simic has begun with a **simile** expressed in a hypothetical statement, has developed the comparison through concrete particulars, and has left us to draw our own conclusions. Notice how he doesn't have to *tell* us about emotion or about the human condition; he *shows* us those feelings through a series of carefully placed details. We'll take a closer look at the role of such details in the next chapter, but before we do, we'll discuss self-portraits and try some jump-starts to help us get started writing poems.

Self-Portraits

Underlying this chapter is the assumption that *you* are actually the richest source of material for your own poems. Like a tortoise who carries their home on their back, you contain all you need to write. Whether you end up writing historical poems, poems with a social conscience, poems that require some research (more on this later), or poems in which you adopt a persona, it's your unique perception of things, your heartaches and mysteries, your vision of the world that makes your work engaging to others. After all, you need to create buy-in; your readers need to believe that your story is authentic in some way, even if it's not literally true.

As we discussed, in the case of Simic's "The World," a great deal can be inferred by the extended comparison. However, we can't be sure whether the "I," the speaker of the poem, refers to the poet, Charles Simic,

himself. And, in a sense, it doesn't really matter, if we trust the voice of the poem. In your own work, there are times that you may want to write more directly about your life, however. And especially as you're getting started, it may be useful to do just that.

To get you started thinking about ways to write about your own life, what follows is a folio of self-portraits: poems in which the poet takes up the subject of their own life more—or less—directly. After all, poems are always so wily! The folio begins with a poem by British Romantic poet, John Clare (1793–1864). Clare's life was challenging, and his work often reflects on this fact. Suffering from mental illness, poverty, and a relative lack of poetic recognition for most of his life, Clare nonetheless created a body of groundbreaking work, of which this gem is a part:

✿ Lines: "I Am"

I am—yet what I am, none cares or knows;
My friends forsake me like a memory lost:
I am the self-consumer of my woes—
They rise and vanish in oblivious host
Like shadows in love-frenzied stifled throes—
And yet I am and live—like vapours tossed

Into the nothingness of scorn and noise,
Into the living sea of waking dreams
Where there is neither sense of life or joys
But the vast shipwreck of my life's esteems;
Even the dearest that I loved the best
Are strange—nay, rather, stranger than the rest.

I long for scenes where man hath never trod,
A place where woman never smiled or wept,
There to abide with my Creator, God,
And sleep as I in childhood sweetly slept,
Untroubling and untroubled where I lie,
The grass below—above, the vaulted sky.

Craft Questions

- What images does Clare use to describe himself?
 - What contradictions and ambivalences does he explore?
 - Can you tell that this poem was written in an earlier era? Which elements seem Romantic and which seem contemporary?
 - Discuss the significance of place in this self-portrait.
-

CRAFTING POEMS

Next in our chronological folio of self-portraits is a poem by twentieth-century United States poet, Laura (Riding) Jackson (1901–91). Jackson was a fiercely independent thinker and writer, whose poems often explored metaphysical questions, language itself, and gender roles. This self-portrait touches on some of these concerns:

✿ Postponement of Self

I took another day,
I moved to another city,
I opened a new door to me.
Then again a last night came.
My bed said: ‘To sleep and back again?’
I said: ‘This time go forward.’

Arriving, arriving, not yet, not yet,
Yet yet arriving, till I am met.
For what would be her disappointment
Coming late (‘She did not wait’).
I wait. And meet my mother.
Such is accident.
She smiles: long afterwards.
I sulk: long before.
I grow to six.
At six little girls in love with fathers.
He lifts me up.
See. Is this Me?
Is this Me I think
In all the different ways till twenty.
At twenty I say She.
Her face is like a flower.
In a city we have no flower-names, forgive me.
But flower-names not necessary
To diary of identity.

Craft Questions

- How does Jackson describe the self?
- How is the poem organized?
- What is the role of gender in this coming of age story?
- Discuss the simile at the end of the poem.

.....

Our third and most definitive self-portrait is by contemporary United States poet, Evie Shockley. Both formally experimental and lyrical in nature, Shockley's poems, like Clare's, are often interested in place. And like Jackson, Shockley frequently explores questions of subjectivity, perception, and identity.

✿ mirror and canvas

self-portrait with cats, with purple, with stacks
of half-read books adorning my desk, with coffee,

with mug, with yesterday's mug. self-portrait
with guilt, with fear, with thick-banded silver ring,

painted toes, and no make-up on my face. self-
portrait with twins, with giggles, with sister at

last, with epistrophe, with crepuscule with nellie,
with my favorite things. self-portrait with hard

head, with soft light, with raised eyebrow. self-
portrait voo-doo, self-portrait hijinks, self-portrait

surprise. self-portrait with patience, with political
protest, with poetry, with papers to grade. self-

portrait as thaumaturgic lass, self-portrait as luna
larva, self-portrait as your mama. self-portrait

with self at sixteen. self-portrait with shit-kickers,
with hip-huggers, with crimson silk, with wild

mushroom risotto and a glass of malbec. self-
portrait with partial disclosure, self-portrait with

half-truths, self-portrait with demi-monde. self-
portrait with a night at the beach, with a view

overlooking the lake, with cancelled flight. self-
portrait with a real future, with a slight chance of

sours, with glasses, with cream, with fries, with
a way with words, with a propositional phrase.

Craft Questions

- Which images jump out at you?
 - What do these images or objects reveal (or not reveal) about the poet's identity?
 - Describe the poem's pace and rhythm.
 - In what ways can the poem be read as "canvas" and in what ways as a "mirror"?
-

Notice how list-like Shockley's poem is. You may want to start working on your own self-portrait poem by simply listing a series of your attributes—along with the colors, objects, places, and music—that seems tied to you in some way. Once you've generated a list, you can circle the elements that seem most suggestive or evocative, and start working them into a poem. Or you can hold off for now, and use your initial list once we get to the "I'm Nobody! Who Are You?" exercise at the end of the next chapter.

In addition, after you've spent some time with the self-portraits by Clare, Jackson, and Shockley, you can consider their historical and chronological context in greater depth. Since the first is drawn from England in the nineteenth century, the second and third from the United States (twentieth and twenty-first centuries, respectively), we might expect differences in content, as well as style. Do you detect such differences? And what about similarities? In fact, this book will often place older poems next to newer ones, in order to generate a conversation on poetic traditions and innovations. Depending on your level of interest, you may even decide to do some quick research on the poets you're encountering here. At the very least, by reading poems from different periods side-by-side, you'll get a sense of the complex and often contested history of poetic practice.

To round out our discussion of the process of getting started writing poems, try a few (or all) of the following jump-starts. And feel free to jump around among them. These exercises and ones like them at the end of each chapter aren't homework. They're food for thought, ways of tapping into your own innate creativity and sense of invention. If you start one and find that it takes you in a different direction, follow your hunch.

Exercises

Jump-Starts: Use any of these jump-starts to generate material. Once you've completed an exercise, set it aside for at least a day, come back to it later, and try gradually turning your notes into a poem.

1. **Automatic Writing:** Time yourself. Write by hand for ten minutes without lifting your hand. Don't read back over what you've written, just keep going until the time is up.
2. **Ambivalence:** Recall a time in which you felt strongly mixed emotions: joy *and* grief, anger *and* empathy.... Write about the experience in prose without thinking about *how* your piece is written.
3. **I Remember:** United States poet Joe Brainard (1942–94) wrote a book-length prose-poem called “I Remember,” an experimental, tongue-in-cheek memoir in which each entry begins with the phrase *I remember*. Here are a few lines:

I remember the only time I ever saw my mother cry. I was eating
apricot pie.

I remember when my father would say “Keep your hands out from
under the covers” as he said goodnight. But he said it in a nice
way.

I remember when I thought that if you did anything bad, police-
men would put you in jail.

Write your own list of memories, beginning each one with the words *I remember*. Your list, like Brainard's, can include a combination of the serious memories and those that may seem silly or random. Generate at least 10 entries.

4. **Found Speech:** Bring your notebook with you to a public place: a bookstore, café, bus stop, or store. Write down the first bit of speech you hear. Or else, wait until you hear a phrase that seems particularly evocative. Begin a poem with this bit of stolen language, and see where it takes you.
5. **Meditation on Place:** Observe the same scene each day for several days: the birds at your bird feeder, the homeless man who stands in front of your corner store. Record this scene in writing by noting both what has changed and what has remained the same.
6. **Dailies:** For one straight week, write a daily poem on whatever's on your mind that day. The only rule is that your daily poem's title should simply be the date. At the end of the week, you'll have seven dailies. Consider whether they can be read as a poetic sequence or series.

CRAFTING POEMS

7. **Erasures:** Try an erasure poem. This experimental form of poetry involves erasing, crossing out, or whiting out portions of an existing text and creating a poem from the words that remain. You can either leave the marked page, so that readers can discover the poem by piecing together words that haven't been whited out or crossed out, or you can use the remaining words to create a new poem altogether.