

12 Ways to Write a Poem

1. Make a list of five things you did today, in the order you did them.
2. Quickly write down three colors.
3. Write down a dream. If you can't remember one, make it up.
4. Take 15 minutes to write an early childhood memory, using language a child would use.
5. Write a forbidden thought, to someone who would understand.
6. Write a forbidden thought, to someone who would not.
7. Make a list of five of your favorite "transitional objects." Choose one and describe it in detail.
8. Write down three questions you'd ask as if they were the last questions you could ever ask.
9. Write down an aphorism (e.g. "A stitch in time saves nine").
10. Write down three slant rhymes, pairs of words that share one or two consonants rather than vowels (moon/mine and long/thing are slant rhymes).
11. Write three things people have said to you in the past 48 hours. Quote them as closely as you can.
12. Write the last extreme pain you had, emotional or physical. If the pain were an animal, what animal would it be? Describe the animal.

Tips

- Use one of the questions as the first line, each of the colors more than once, the slant rhymes, and the aphorism with a word or two changed.
- Try using any part of, or all of, the material in any way you want—a line from your dream might work well on its own or your description of the animal might better describe your great uncle.
- Let the poem be between 20 and 30 lines; let each line be 10 or more syllables long. Think of the poem as a dream or a psalm you are inventing, and don't force it. Write in your own speech, allowing its music and sense to speak through you.

No human experience is unique, but each of us has a way of putting language together that is ours alone.

How to write a poem - expressing your insights

1. Don't state the obvious. Everyone knows that grass is green, and that snow is cold. If you mention grass, readers will suppose it is green unless you inform them otherwise. It's not necessary to mention the color of the grass unless you have something to say about it that the reader doesn't already know.
2. But don't force originality. If the grass is actually green, you don't have rack your brain for another way to express the color just to be "different." Keep looking, focus on your subject matter, to find the real details that make it unique, the hidden meaning.
3. Choose the right words. I'm not talking about words that are "poetic" or "impressive," I'm talking about words that express your subject matter. In his essay about animal poems, Hughes talks about words as if they themselves were living animals, each with a certain appearance and sound and way of moving.

Think of the words "glow" and "glitter." Both describe light, but different kinds of light. When I see the word "glow," I think of a gentle warm light coming from inside of something. When I see the word "glitter," I think of many tiny pieces of light reflecting off of a hard surface. The word "glitter" gives me more of an idea of motion. The sounds of the words also create different feelings. "Glow" has a soft, round sound; "Glitter" has a hard sound and is broken into two parts, like light that is fragmented or moving.