

## Poetry Tips

### Getting Started

Start by brainstorming—just as you would for any other project. What’s on your mind? What’s in your heart? What moves you? What do you care about? Do your best to come up with your own idea. This isn’t supposed to be a class assignment, but a chance to share a piece of yourself and practice your love of writing.

Start writing, even if you haven’t come up with your final idea yet. This is called “free writing.” It’s been said that if you write for seven to ten minutes, your brain will come up with an idea.

Once you’ve created your “raw material,” it’s time to begin writing your poem. Now, we’ve moved from inspiration to perspiration, from free writing to craft.

### Crafting Your Poem

Poems are crafted—every word is chosen and placed in its position in the poem for a purpose. You should never submit a rough or first draft because judges look for your ability to craft your poem and that can take many drafts.

#### General craft ideas

- Show, don’t tell
- Be concrete and specific
- Create original images—no clichés
- Choose the right title (which may come any time in your process)

#### Grammar, Usage, Word Play

- Choose active verbs, e.g., “sit”, not “is seated” or “is sitting”; see if you can think up “punchier” verbs that make your point stronger.
- Verbs and nouns are strong, while adjectives and adverbs are weak. Concentrate on verbs and nouns and use adjectives and adverbs sparingly.
- Play around with your poem to make sure every word and its place in the poem are exactly right. You can play “switcheroo”—move around words, phrases, clauses, whole stanzas to see what works best.
- Must poems rhyme? No. Many of today’s best poets don’t use rhyme. If you want to write in rhyme, remember that it’s difficult to write well in rhyme. Make sure that your rhyming words make sense and move the poem forward. Rhyme for its own sake doesn’t work. (In most cases, rhyme is more effective for humorous rather than serious subjects.)
- Highlight the best phrase or couple of phrases in your poem and see if you can bring the rest of your poem up to the same level.
- Use repetition with care. Make sure there’s a reason for using repetition.
- When you think you’re done, see if you can cut out some words from your poem. It’s easy to let too many “little” words slip in, like “the” and “a” and

prepositions and conjunctions, when you don't need them. Poems should be "dense," saying much in as few words as possible.

- The best way to learn to write poetry well is to read poems by successful poets and pay attention to the way they use language. Poetry employs the same words as prose but is usually richer in imagery and figures of speech, particularly metaphor and simile.
- After you've read a poem you love go back and re-read the first and last lines and ask yourself how the poet gets in and out of the poem? It's usually most effective to rocket your reader into the heart of the poem instantly, without any introduction or wind-up. Last lines are most effective when they leave readers with something dramatic or memorable to think about.

### Layout

- Experiment with line breaks. Do you want short lines or long lines? Choose the end of your lines with purpose every time.
- Experiment with your stanzas, too. Long, short? What's best to convey the meaning and feeling of your poem?
- Another thing to avoid is centering your poem. If there's no reason inside the content of the poem to center it, don't. It may look "pretty" to you, but if it's not appropriate to the poem, it shouldn't be centered, but lined up along the left-hand side of the page.

### Sound

- Listen to the sounds in your poem. Are they hard? soft? What do you need in your poem? Change words or move them around to get the sounds you want.
- Listen to the rhythm of your poem. Is it too sing-songy? If so, make more changes.
- Read your poem out loud or ask a friend to read it to you. Does it sound the way it should?
- Read your poem with a pause at the end of every line. That will help you to see if your line breaks are in the right place.

### Time

You can't write a poem in a hurry. Don't try to write a new poem when the deadline's due. Give yourself a few weeks. After you've written several drafts, set your poem aside and come back to it again in a couple of weeks. Read it aloud and try some of the tips again. You'll be surprised at how much you can improve.

### Submitting

Only submit a poem when you're confident it's the best you can do and it's ready to go. Judges can tell when a poem's not ready, but they love to read the poems that are your very best effort.