

Start making sense

4 essential elements for writing poetry your readers will understand

EVER READ A POEM that simply doesn't make sense, yet flows as if the author knows something you don't? You read it several times, thinking you've overlooked the obvious. Finally, you scratch your head, wondering if it's a secret known only to the author. Perhaps you feel stupid because—you *don't get it*.

I know the feeling. As an editor, I see many poems that do not live up to their potential. Recently I read several poems by the same author, all with short lines and stanzas. The feel was choppy, the subject unclear, because thoughts were not completely carried out. The imagery was confusing. Mixing your metaphors is a lot like mixing drinks. The more variety you have, the less things make sense. Readers must have satisfaction in knowing or surmising what the poem is about.

The first line is as important as the last. You must draw your reader in. Imagery works best, if you want to paint a vivid picture. Choose techniques wisely, especially for descriptive poems, where feelings or fragments of a story must work harder to convey an idea or emotion.

Your ending should also make a statement. You must wrap things up, as in a story. Everything should come together. Many poems have strong beginnings, only to be let down by a weak ending. The language of verse is different from a story or article, but the idea is the same: The author is trying to convey a point. And that point must be clear enough for the reader to draw a conclusion or interpret one. Otherwise, why write the poem?

When writing a poem for publication, these elements should help you make sense:

1 Subject Is your poem narrative or descriptive? Your subject may dictate this choice. If it's narrative, you'll need to flesh out a story or series of events and decide upon point of view. Are you the subject? If so, first person is your voice, making for a more personal poem. Is your verse serious, light or humorous? Let the sub-



ject speak. A descriptive poem may be more challenging if the theme is somewhat elusive. You can incorporate many elements in your poem, but that will work well only if your reader can relate to your subject.

2 Sequence and flow Does your sequence make sense? Chronological order isn't necessary; however, things should be logical or believable. Your writing should be cohesive, no matter how terse the verse. Tense plays into sequence and flow. Watch how often you're switching gears. If your poem contains a flashback, the reader must be able to recognize it. If there's no distinction between the past, present or future, no bridge, your reader will be lost.

A poem's pace from line to line or from

stanza to stanza should be smooth. Think of sailing in choppy waters. The boat is pitching and rolling, turning things, not to mention your stomach, upside down. If your poem has this effect, your readers will feel it. Choppy, sloppy or awkward verse can cause your reader to stumble or misinterpret your intent, or worse, lose interest.

A great way to test a poem's fluidity is to read it aloud. Note the inflections and tone in your voice. If you hesitate or feel lost, read it again. Sometimes, punctuation is the culprit. Other times, it's not such an easy fix.

A poem's visual content is important in constructing good flow. If there's more than one stanza, see where each begins and ends. Stanzas act like paragraphs, telling the reader where to look for change. Some poems read like prose—long, drawn-out sentences with little or no interruption. These are run-on-line poems, or enjambment. They are not very appealing to the eye. Style and technique can make or break a poem's flow.

Another way to test your poem is to bring it to your writers group. If one person stumbles while reading your carefully crafted words, you may need to make revisions.

3 Imagery Images speak louder than anything. They paint a picture in the reader's mind. What landscape are you trying to draw? What feelings are you hoping to evoke? What thought, idea or expression are you trying to achieve? It all comes down to using good imagery. Do you want to paint a vivid picture, creating a lasting impression? To achieve this, your images should be graphic, crisp and clear.

Or do you want to create a mysterious mood? You may only want to allude to something or make a slight impression. Perhaps you want more depth, incorporating multiple layers. This is harder to accomplish, but can have just as much of an impact, if done right. Give the reader something to ponder. Create thought-provoking work. Choose your images well.

Whether your images are obvious or subtle, make sure to hit your mark. Connect to something vital, and you'll connect with your audience. Here are some examples of imagery from my poem "Temperate Moon":

The summer is fading fast / into another glorious season of wisdom.

Further on it reads: *Like the dog days of*

summer, / sweltering under a cruel sun, / I have lain in waste at your feet, / panting ... holding onto a memory / that begs no more.

And my favorite: *ah, to play hide and seek with the wind again.*

These images work because they tie into the same theme. But can you play with the wind? This line is a bit ambiguous. Writing about intangible things stretches the imagination and gives your work originality.

4 Metaphors and similes These are great tools for comparing dissimilar things. A rose, for example, is a beautiful, fragrant flower, but watch out for those nasty, prickly thorns. Poets have devoted centuries to describing this botanical wonder. A rose is often associated with love and romance. It can be likened to a beautiful woman, while the thorns can represent pain and rejection! Ah, the pitfalls of love.

There are pitfalls as well for misusing metaphors and similes. To use these techniques correctly, ask yourself if what you are comparing and contrasting makes sense.

When comparing apples to oranges, you are still referring to fruit. Poets often use extreme or nonsensical things to make a point. But, remember that if your

images are too much of a contrast—if they don't connect in some way—they can be confusing to the reader.

If you follow this advice, your poetry should improve. Poetry doesn't have to be so philosophical and deep that people can't understand it. It's best not to preach or over-intellectualize. Try not to be too clever. You may lose your reader. Simplify, if you must. If you're the only one who understands what you've written, perhaps it's best to keep it to yourself.

Don't be afraid to edit. Spend time with your poem. Hang out with it, get to know it, understand it. Figure out what you mean to say, or not, and write it that way. A poem can always use a little TLC. If you spend time on crafting a good poem and are open to criticism, you will increase your chances of publication.

Good poetry should make sense, not just to you, but to your readers. That's where it counts. #

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