

We know, we know: you hate poetry. Whether you are a poetic newbie laboring to compose a sonnet for a school assignment, or a tormented William Blake figure with a drawer full of tear-stained quatrains, poetry asks a lot of you as a reader and writer. It can look like an antiquated art form, a roundabout or overly confusing way of expressing something, but in fact a good poem should cut directly to the heart of the matter in a way that expository writing can't, and a good poet should be able to adapt the medium of poetry to any vernacular or subject. In this, the second installment of a series on ways to get your writing going, Eduify presents five ways to start writing poems that are different than anything you've ever written before.

### **Poem as apology or confession**

One of the most famous modern poems is William Carlos Williams' "This Is Just to Say":

I have eaten  
the plums  
that were in  
the icebox  
  
and which  
you were probably  
saving  
for breakfast  
  
Forgive me  
they were delicious  
so sweet  
and so cold.

Williams is apologizing to his wife, but the third stanza makes it apparent that if the poet sincerely regretted what he had done, he would not be luxuriating in the sensuous description of what it was like to eat the plums. One doesn't say, "I'm sorry I borrowed your bike and lost it, but if it makes you feel any better, it was really wonderful to feel the wind whipping through my hair as I rode." The poem, then, is only taking the apology form as pretext to go somewhere stranger.

Write your own poem in the form of an apology or secret confession. It can be sincere or sarcastic, revealing or surreal. For additional inspiration, look at [PostSecret.com](http://PostSecret.com), where contributors write down their deepest, darkest secrets on postcards.

### **Love poem with animals**

For people who only infrequently write poetry, the love poem is often the first poem they are inspired to write. It crystallizes a passionate impulse into a few lines of expression, which is one

of the things poetry is good for. The master of the stormy, turgid love poem is undoubtedly Pablo Neruda:

“Maybe January light will consume  
My heart with its cruel  
Ray, stealing my key to true calm.

In this part of the story I am the one who  
Dies, the only one, and I will die of love because I love you,  
Because I love you, Love, in fire and blood.”

(from “I Do Not Love You Except Because I Love You”)

However, the stock images of roses and sunlight, burning desire and a beating heart might, if not expanded in creative directions, provide the writer of love poetry with a relatively limited assortment of metaphors and ideas to choose from. Try this exercise to stretch your love poetry:

Make a list of ten animals, the first ten that come to mind. Then get another sheet of paper and, next to this list, write a ten-line love poem that compares the loved object, or the relationship, to a different animal in each line. You will find yourself with an undoubtedly creative poem if you have to find ways in which the guy of your dreams is like a manatee or a cicada, and it might help you figure out new aspects of your beloved that remind you why you’re writing a poem to them in the first place.

### **Pick a form, any form**

Ever since poets like Walt Whitman and T.S. Eliot started composing poems that weren’t bound by meter or rhyme, free verse has become the form of choice for thousands of aspiring poets. But free verse, and the A-B-A-B rhyme scheme of Hallmark cards, are not the only forms out there.

You could, for instance, try a ghazal: a Middle Eastern form of love poetry in which each couplet ends with a repeated word preceded by a repeated rhyme. Or a sestina, in which each word from a list of six appears in a different order in each of six six-line stanzas, and again in a tercet at the end. (Definitely be familiar with poetic terms before you tackle these more complicated forms. A stanza is any unit of one or more lines in a poem, a couplet is a stanza of two lines and a tercet is a stanza of three lines.) There is always the classic haiku, with three lines of five, seven, five syllables. Writing haikus can be addictive, but writing good ones is harder than it appears.

Sometimes the constraints that a specific form puts on your poem is just what you need to start thinking in a new direction, even if it seems awkward or forced at first. Think of form as the rules of the poetic game, and as Robert Frost said, “Free verse is like playing tennis without a net.”

### **Take the poem off the page**

With all the new forms of communication sprouting like mushrooms in our culture, many of them short enough to lend themselves well to poetry, why do poems have to be limited to scribbled lines in a notebook or Moleskine journal? Try a poem that looks like something else: Facebook status updates, a government questionnaire, a personality quiz, a fast-food menu, an instruction manual. Bringing the associative leaps and emotional content of poetry to these often superficial or impersonal types of writing can surprise the reader into really paying attention to your poem.

If you are truly bold, you could put your poem in a place where one generally doesn't expect to find writing at all. Write it with a Sharpie on an old volleyball, making use of the spherical surface to find new possibilities in the words. Chalk it on the sidewalk or scratch it with a stick into the snow. One of my favorite poems is John Ashbery's untitled poem commissioned for a bridge in Minneapolis. You can read it starting from either side of the bridge, going in different directions, and while it is not only about a bridge (that would be boring, since we can already see the bridge for ourselves) it carries some of the essence of the unusual surface it is on.

The entire poem (in photographs) is available here.

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/7239727@N02/sets/72157621935769959/show/>

### **Blind translation**

This is an experiment in how a poem can make sense without necessarily making sense at all. Go to the library and find a few poems that have been written in another language and are still published in that language, whether Czech, Italian or Brazilian Portuguese. (Poems in a language that uses a different system of characters altogether probably will not work for this purpose, and don't pick a poem in a language that you already speak, such as Spanish.) Even if the English translation of the poem is available on the opposite page, don't read it yet!

Now, type out the poem with the same punctuation and line lengths, but instead of using the original words, replace them with your own words in English (or whatever language you write poetry in.) This is not a real translation, so do not worry about whether the words you come up with have the same meaning as the original. You should be writing a new poem of your own based purely on the visual look of the first poem.

Did you feel any connection to the rhythm of the original poem, even if the meaning turned out completely different? We are used to writing to convey straightforward information and reading to absorb information in the same way, but poetry is often more like music: the sound and meter of the words may sometimes be more important than the meaning of the lyrics. The information you went on while doing your "blind translation" – the length of the lines, a mysterious exclamation point here and question mark there, a repeated unfamiliar word – may have been enough to start you off on a new poetic tangent of your own.