

## Learning and Writing Poetry: Guidebook

Mona Van Duyn, the first woman Poet Laureate of the United States, once commented on the state of poetry today by saying that few people buy it, more attend readings of it, but when it comes to writing it, “Everyone wants to be a poet.”

It’s true that the idea of writing a poem has a great appeal to many of us. Perhaps it’s because of the shortness of the form. Even though poems can be quite long (think “Canterbury Tales” or “Paradise Lost”), a lot of poems say what they have to in a dozen lines or less. Therefore, unlike a novel or a screenplay—other literary forms that many people fantasize about writing—a poem doesn’t demand a long-term commitment of months or years. Still, it’s easy to confuse brevity with simplicity. Considering that a word in a poem might be chosen with the same care as an engagement ring or that a phrase might be polished like a new sports car, we can’t say a poem is “simpler” than any other type of writing. Actually, it can be a lot more complicated.

Whatever the reason, the urge to versify is in a lot of us. And for those of us who haven’t felt that impulse, poetry might be something to consider. It’s a way to get things off our chest, to examine our emotions and feelings, to address others, to reflect upon our experiences, to work with language in an intellectually stimulating manner, to feel part of a tradition as old as antiquity, and many other motives.

Poets who get serious about the art might even want to participate in poetry events (or “poetry slams”), in which poets read their works in front of an audience, sometimes in an open-microphone format. A good example of this vibrant scene is Da' Poetry Lounge in Los Angeles, which is the nation's largest weekly poetry venue and the home of the 2004 National Poetry Slam Champions (see the “Web Resources” section below).

One issue often raised by would-be poets is “What should I write about?” The great German poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe once remarked that he never wrote a poem unless it was “occasioned”—that is, a poem, for him, was caused by something: something he saw, experienced, or felt. And that’s a pretty good place to begin. But there are many resources, both in print and online, that offer suggestions. For example, the website “High School Hub” (see below) presents a list entitled “Fifteen poems you can write now”, which is as follows: “1) Talk to animals (and stars), 2) Shift perspectives, 3) Take a snapshot, 4) Use these words, 5) Write a one-sentence poem, 6) Write a no-sentence poem, 7) Tap your internal language, 8) Tell a story, 9) Collect fabulous realities, 10) Write a “how to” poem, 11) Begin, “When I . . .”, 12) Get deductive, 13) Start with an epigraph, 14) Follow a metaphor, and 15) Meditate” (all of these are explained in detail).

All the great poets began by studying the works of their predecessors, and many of today’s leading poets are keen students of the poetry of others, both living and dead. That’s why the more poems you read, the more ideas you will have and the wider view you will acquire of poetry’s range and possibilities.

The following resources will aid you in locating an abundance of fine poetry to read and study and will also help you find advice on how the poet's craft is mastered.

### **Poetry Collections**

- Harold Bloom, ed., *The Best Poems of the English Language: From Chaucer Through Frost*, (HarperCollins, 2004).
- Roy J. Cook, ed., *101 Famous Poems*, (McGraw-Hill, 1984).
- Richard Ellmann, ed., *The New Oxford Book of American Verse* (Oxford University Press, 1976).
- Margaret Ferguson, et al., eds., *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, (W. W. Norton & Company, 1996).
- Helen Gardner, ed., *New Oxford Book of English Verse, 1250-1950*, (Oxford University Press, 1972)
- William Harmon, ed., *The Top 500 Poems*, (Columbia University Press, 1992).
- Roger Housden, ed., *Risking Everything: 110 Poems of Love and Revelation*, (Harmony, 2003).
- David Lehman, ed., *The Best American Poetry 2004*, (Scribner, 2004).
- J.D. McClatchy, ed., *The Vintage Book of Contemporary American Poetry*, (Vintage, 2003).
- Czeslaw Milosz, ed., *A Book of Luminous Things: An International Anthology of Poetry*, (Harvest Books, 1998).
- Ed J. Paine, ed., *The Poetry of Our World: An International Anthology of Contemporary Poetry*, (Perennial, 2001).
- Jahan Ramazani, et al., eds, *The Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry, Third Edition* (W.W. Norton & Company, 2003).
- Katherine Washburn, et al., eds. *World Poetry: An Anthology of Verse from Antiquity to Our Time*, (W.W. Norton & Company, 1998).
- Oscar Williams, *Immortal Poems of the English Language*, (Pocket, 1983).

### **Books on Writing and Understanding Poetry**

- Kim Addonizio and Dorianne Laux, *The Poet's Companion: A Guide to the Pleasures of Writing Poetry*, (W. W. Norton & Company, 1997).
- Robin Behn, *The Practice of Poetry : Writing Exercises From Poets Who Teach*, (HarperResource, 1992).
- Paul Fussell, *Poetic Meter and Poetic Form*, McGraw-Hill Humanities/Social Sciences/Languages, 1979).
- John Hollander, *Rhyme's Reason: A Guide to English Verse*, Third Edition, (Yale Nota Bene, 2001).

Steve Kowitz, *In the Palm of Your Hand: The Poet's Portable Workshop*, (Tilbury House Publishers, 1995).  
Myra Cohn Livingston, *Poem-Making: Ways to Begin Writing Poetry*, (HarperCollins, 1991). (For younger readers).  
Frances Mayes, *The Discovery of Poetry: A Field Guide to Reading and Writing Poems*, (Harvest/HBJ Book, 2001).  
Mary Oliver, *A Poetry Handbook*, (Harcourt, 1995).  
Robert Pinsky, *The Sounds of Poetry : A Brief Guide*, (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999).  
Susan G. Woolridge, *Poemcrazy : Freeing Your Life with Words*, (Three Rivers Press, 1997).

### **Compact Discs**

*All Poets Welcome: The Lower East Side Poetry Scene in the 1960s, Includes 35-track CD of audio clips of poetry readings* (University of California Press; 2003).  
*The Caedmon Poetry Collection: A Century of Poets Reading Their Work* (Harper Audio, 2000).  
*Poetry Speaks: Hear Great Poets Read Their Work from Tennyson to Plath* (Sourcebooks Mediafusion, 2001).

### **Web Resources**

**<http://www.hti.umich.edu/a/amverse/>**: The American Verse Project of the University of Michigan, which is assembling an electronic archive of volumes of American poetry prior to 1920.

**<http://eir.library.utoronto.ca/rpo/display/index.cfm>**: Hosted by the University of Toronto, this large collection of verse can be searched by poet, title, first line, and last line.

**<http://www.promo.net/pg/>**: The website of Project Gutenberg, the Internet's oldest producer of free electronic books, whose collection ranges over a wide spectrum of world literature in many languages. Although it contains mostly prose works, it also has an extensive poetry library.

**<http://www.poetrymagic.co.uk/>**: From Great Britain, a very useful site entitled "Poetry Magic," which claims to be the "largest resource centre anywhere for poets, aspiring poets and students of poetry."

**<http://teenwriting.about.com/library/weekly/aa041403a.htm>**: Specifically targeted at teenagers, this site offers a "Beginner's Guide" to writing poetry.

**<http://highschoolhub.org/hub/english.cfm>**: From a site called "High School Hub," which calls itself "a free online interactive learning center for high school students," a section aimed at teenagers that is full of ideas, lessons, and suggestions for writing poetry. It also has a useful online rhyming dictionary.

**[http://dmoz.org/Arts/Writers\\_Resources/Poetry/](http://dmoz.org/Arts/Writers_Resources/Poetry/)**: From the Open Directory Project, a Web page containing a long list of hyperlinks to poetry-related sites.

For example, it includes a poetry cafe driven by bilingual/bicultural Hispanic/Latino writers, a directory of online resources for poetry writers and publishers, sites on which you can post your own work and read that of others, and a site called the Poetry Super Highway, which features new poets online every week, contests, and a poetry chat room.

**<http://www.dapoetrylounge.com/>** and **<http://www.greenwayarts.org/>**:

Information on Da' Poetry Lounge, the largest weekly poetry venue in the United States.

**<http://www.poetryslam.com/>**: The Web site of Poetry Slam, Inc., which oversees official poetry slams, registers slam series, and codifies rules.