

Editing Poetry

(found on the internet)

This is your “**Having a Writing Conference with Yourself**” for poetry

1. **Eliminate structure words:** Structure words are words which express spatial, temporal, or casual relationships (prepositions, conjunctions) or which indicate a particular thing or differentiate between two or more things (article, relative pronoun, demonstrative pronoun, etc.)

Example:

moving **through the** green rooms **of the** summer

moving through green rooms of summer (articles deleted)

2. **Eliminate implied words:** In the above example, the verb “moving” is implied by the preposition “through.” The idea of going “through” something implies motion, either in space or in time. Consequently, we might be able to cut “moving” and tighten up the sound of the line without sacrificing the sense of the sentence.

Example:

through green rooms of summer

3. **Eliminate unnecessary modifiers:** Modifiers (adjectives, adverbs) express specific qualities of things (nouns) or actions (verbs). Ideally, they allow us to describe objects, emotions, and ideas more precisely and thus to communicate more clearly. The problem with modifiers is that they are often used to “prop up” vague or poorly-chosen nouns and verbs. Rather than using a noun and an adjective, for example, we can often find a precise noun which will do the job of an adjective-noun combination all by itself. Substituting a strong noun for a weak noun propped up by an adjective makes our language more incisive.

Example:

The very old man ran extremely quickly down the very narrow road.

The **codger bolted** down the **lane**.

4. **Eliminate repeated subjects if it sounds good** to do so: Sequences of verbs can give your poem an interesting chant-like quality and allow you to emphasize rhythms.

Example: She walked through the doorway from the garden, holding a single white orchid.

She held the flower to her lips

She began to eat the soft petals

She spat out a couple of aphids

Romance, she concluded, is dead

with subjects eliminated:

She walked through the doorway from the garden, holding a single white orchid.

Held the flower to her lips

Began to eat the soft petals

Spat out a couple of aphids

Romance, she concluded, is dead.

(note also, the arrangement of lines)

5. **Use repetition—but only when it adds to the rhythm of the poem.** Recall how Martin Luther King handled repetition in “I have a dream.”
6. **Use interesting words.** Part of the enjoyment we derive from reading poetry comes from the texture of the language. We can build up that texture by choosing original and interesting words.
7. **Use concrete language.** Abstractions can mean different things to different people; a concrete noun or adjective communicates sensory information, and such information is specific enough that we can all see the image the writer had in mind.
8. **Use visual space.** The “white space” of the page is a field of composition for the poet and a system of notation through which she or he communicates the music of the poem. White space is a pause between rhythmic units.

9. **Experiment with punctuation.** Every poet invents his or her own system of punctuation. Obviously, they can use standard mechanics and punctuation, but they can also choose to use punctuation marks only within lines and let the line breaks indicate pauses at the end of lines. They can also choose to eliminate punctuation marks entirely—even the capital letters which usually mark the beginnings of sentences can be deleted.

10. **Experiment with line forms:** When you've written down the ideas and images that come out of the initial inspiration for a poem, the next step is to begin to work on the sound of the poem. Try re-arranging the lines and stanzas, experimenting with short lines or longer lines, varied line-length or relatively regular ones, etc. The best way to do this is to read the poem out loud, sounding each beat fully. Watch out for plodding, too-regular rhythms. Watch out for bumpy, non-flowing rhythms. Try to make the sound of the poem fit the sense of the poem.

11. Avoid pointless impressionism

Example: drips of water slowly
 drip down the window pane.
 It's
 raining
(Yeah. Okay. so what?)

12. Avoid lists of "ing" verbs that go nowhere

Running down the alley/Turning Burning/Catching a fallen neutron star/Smiling!/Sliding into second
base/Falling through the webs of his memories
Driveling/on incessantly about nothing

13. Be yourself

There's a temptation, when we're writing poetry, to use formal or self-consciously "poetic" language. We find ourselves using words we wouldn't be caught dead using in conversation with our friends—"gossamer" or "eldritch," for example.

14. Have fun

Poetry should be as enjoyable to write as it is to read. Crafting art is one of the most rewarding of human activities, and we should never lose sight of that fact. Poetry is a celebration of language and its relationship to our world and to our feelings and ideas.