

t a n i a r u n y a n

How to Write a Poem



based on the
BILLY COLLINS
poem "introduction
to poetry"

includes anthology
& prompts!

•FG *field guide series*

a post-it note

*i've put some
poems
in the icebox*

*they'll be cold
and sweet
when you get home*

—william marr

How to Write a Poem

*based on the Billy Collins poem
“introduction to poetry”*

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• FG *field guide series*

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How to Write a Poem: Based on the Billy Collins Poem

“Introduction to Poetry”

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to jeremy, who has walked the lines with me

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How to Use This Book

You are invited. And the party is all about your words: how to find them, express them, and *perfect* them.

Of course there is no formula for writing a poem. If poems came with instructions like IKEA® coffee tables, we'd all be missing the point. But this book will give you some strategies—some tools, if you will—to assemble your personal, imaginative raw materials. These strategies are focused primarily on free verse (for a comprehensive look at “form” poetry, which is one tried-and-true way you can start a poem, I recommend *The Making of a Poem: A Norton Anthology of Poetic Forms*). Yet, many of the concepts can also be applied to form poetry, at both the inception and revision stages.

Each chapter will introduce and model, through several drafts of the same sample poem, a concept you will explore in your own draft. You will continue to reshape your poem from chapter to chapter, ending with a thorough revision. And then you can start again with a new poem. Write and repeat. These are poetry-crafting strategies for life.

How to Write a Poem is written as a companion to *How to Read a Poem*, which uses Billy Collins’s “Introduction to Poetry” as a guide for enjoying poems. Like *How to Read a Poem*, this book is organized by chapters inspired by stanzas from Collins’s poem. While the two books work well together, they also function independently. (Do keep in mind that the best poets spend at least as much time reading and absorbing poems as they do creating their own.)

Your words are waiting. Are you ready to begin?

Introduction to Poetry

Billy Collins

I ask them to take a poem
and hold it up to the light
like a color slide

or press an ear against its hive.

I say drop a mouse into a poem
and watch him probe his way out,

or walk inside the poem's room
and feel the walls for a light switch.

I want them to waterski
across the surface of a poem
waving at the author's name on the shore.

But all they want to do
is tie the poem to a chair with rope
and torture a confession out of it.

They begin beating it with a hose
to find out what it really means.

1

Introduce Yourself: Find the Poems Inside

To a Poet, For a Poem

Jennifer Wagner

I listen to the darkness,
the beautiful kind
when the lights are off,
and I close my eyes
and see the last light
burned into my mind.

I sit, in my poetry nook,
in the corner of the room,
in a chair, arms leaning, at rest,
my feet propped.

I listen, listen,
ceiling fan low,
box fan high, pointed toward me
to carry the sound
of the silver crackle
of the millionth star
no less wonderful
than the first.

And it might be yours, the only light
in this dark room tonight.

The Poetry of Imperfection

Poetry is about freedom and the imagination. Ocean waves and flying geese. The *human spirit*, for crying out loud. Shouldn't I just jump right in?

Yes and no.

Yes to *inviting*—immediately and enthusiastically—the images, feelings, and ideas bubbling in your pen or keys. No to *crafting* “that perfect poem” right away.

As a young, perfectionist writer in college, I spent hours chiseling away at the perfect lines, one line at a time, in my poems. I wouldn't proceed to the next line—even word—until I believed I'd arrived at a previous final product. The results? Really technically expert poems. And not that much passion. I'd often forget what imaginative impulse had driven me to write in the first place because of my stilted approach.

Since then, I've learned how important it is to be free, open and fluid when beginning to write in order to let the poem find itself. Am I against revising? Absolutely not. In fact, by the time I'm done with you, you may wish the concept didn't exist. But to start, you must create an environment conducive to finding the poem inside. In fact, I recommend starting without a poem at all.

Freewriting

Peter Elbow, author of *Writing Without Teachers*, coined the term “freewriting” in 1975. You may have tried it before: setting aside a certain amount of time, say, five to fifteen minutes, during which you write your thoughts without stopping,

censoring, or editing in any way. While Elbow first promoted the practice for helping students in the classroom get started with papers, the process works well for all genres. I use it when I begin essays, fiction, and, always, poetry. The thinking behind taking this all-important first step? Preserving your voice, the poet's lifeblood:

The habit of compulsive, premature editing doesn't just make writing hard. It also makes writing dead. Your voice is damped out by all the interruptions, changes, and hesitations between the consciousness and the page. In your natural way of producing words there is a sound, a texture, a rhythm--a voice--which is the main source of power in your writing. I don't know how it works, but this voice is the force that will make a reader listen to you. Maybe you don't like your voice; maybe people have made fun of it. But it's the only voice you've got. It's your only source of power.

When you *start* with freewriting, you ensure that the spark of your voice takes precedence over line breaks, commas, spelling, and yes—even sense. You start in order to see where you need to start. You start with power.

“Focused freewriting,” or writing in response to a topic or prompt, offers a poet the benefit of freeing the voice within a general structure so she has some branches to hang her thoughts on. The prompt offers a focus, but you should never chain yourself to it. Use it as a base from which to explore.

Freewriting Starts

Now it's time to find the poems inside. The rules are simple:

- 1) Skim the list and choose a topic
- 2) Set a timer for ten minutes
- 3) Write or type without stopping
- 4) If you get stuck, keep writing "I don't know what to write" until more thoughts return
- 5) If the alarm goes off and you're in deep, keep going

- Your first memory
- A local injustice
- The ugliest place you've visited
- A best friend you've fallen out of touch with
- A curious adult from your childhood
- A meal that changed your life
- A song that haunted you in high school
- Someone who loved you whom you didn't love back
- A Facebook status or tweet
- Something you found in the road
- A tour of your home town
- Two famous people meeting outside of their times
- Lessons for your child/friend/lover
- Something odd your parents owned
- A missed opportunity
- A photograph: speak to the subject, as the subject, or the photographer
- Memories from a minor holiday
- A line from another poem

- A mistake you tried to cover up
- Something you wished for as a child and never received
- A roadside oddity
- One physical feature of a person you love
- A broken resolution
- A stranger you've encountered in the past week
- A smell that brings you back
- A word only your family uses
- A line from an advertisement or catalogue
- At the hospital
- Something that went wrong in the classroom
- An accomplishment that went unnoticed
- Something that keeps you awake
- A childhood haunt
- A photograph: what happened just before the shot? After?
Just outside of the frame?
- A significant storm, disaster, or natural phenomenon
- An inanimate object speaking
- A comeback in a conversation you missed
- Someone you wish you got to know
- A childhood embarrassment
- An “incidental” person at a historical event (i.e., a house
keeper at the hotel where MLKJ was killed)
- A time you got lost

Finding Your Freewrite's Shape

When you finish your freewriting, take a break. Make a cup of coffee, read a poem, or go for a walk. Then sit down and read through what you wrote, without making any changes.

What surprises you? Entertains you? Makes you catch your breath? It may sound like a regular diary entry in many ways. Or it may seem to have been written by a stranger. Either way, at least a few lines and phrases will most likely get your attention.

With a pen or highlighter, mark those portions of text that seem fresh or surprising in some way. Here is what I found in my freewrite about a roadside oddity:

Loch Ness in Wyoming, chomping on your seaweed chains. You have rust at the seams of your metal tubes. Rust around the bolt on your eye. I don't know why the kids run past you to balance on the curbs and flick rocks at cars when I can't stop staring at your hexagonal eye that has seen travelers from across the country. You hold the 100-degree sun in your aluminum skin. I touch my finger to your neck and it burns. So much you know! The legends of a small town trampled by planters of marigolds and I don't know I don't know who created you, Nessie of pipes, one who knows where I've gone—you've seen everything, reflective beast. A smooth chewer of twenty looped feet of links. You've been the most photographed, least remembered. Who in this town knows how to live in a mystery? How many days have they waited for you, and now, you rise into the summer fog like any forgotten legend. In the

winter, I imagine, your head barely shines
from the snow. Steps that can't be retraced
make me sad to travel, and today I think of
the people slamming doors and stepping out
to these cold meetings on the plains, and
you—you I don't know, I don't know, rumi-
nating, so sure of where we've come from
and all the places we will never go. Pipes fit
together, affixed to concrete—no picture of
the name, the town, the artist, aren't all leg-
ends a blurry shot, the wish to return and
never know the truth?

After highlighting key portions of text, start forming lines (either by hand or on a document on your computer). At this point, you will have just a skeleton of ideas that most likely won't connect in any obvious way. That's okay: just start forming a framework. We will work on specific line breaks later.

Here is the framework I built from my freewrite:

Loch Ness in Wyoming

Chomping on your seaweed chains,
rust at the seams of your metal tubes.
Kids run past you to balance on curbs
and flick rocks at cars.
You hold the 100-degree sun in your aluminum skin.
So much you know!
You've seen everything.
You rise into the summer fog

like any forgotten legend.
 In winter, your head barely shining
 from the snow.
 People slamming doors
 and stepping out to their cold meetings
 on the plains.
 No name, town, artist.
 All legends a blurry shot.
 The wish to return and never know
 the truth?

At this point, I don't even have a full draft of a poem, but I've preserved the most interesting parts of my subconscious that arose to the surface when remembering this sculpture in a small town in Wyoming. My next step is to put a little more flesh on the bones, to fill in some of the logical gaps of who, what, when, and where.

Loch Ness ~~in~~ Sculpture, Wyoming

Chomping on your seaweed chains,
you rust at the seams of your metal tubes.
 Kids run past you at the park entrance to balance
 on curbs
 and flick pebbles at cars.
 You hold the 100-degree sun in your aluminum skin.
 So much you know!
 You've seen everything
but rise into the summer fog
 like any forgotten legend.

In winter, your head barely shines
through the piled snow.
People slam doors
and step out to their cold meetings
on the plains.
I remember no title, town, or artist.
All legends are a blurry shot,
the wish to return and never know
the truth.

Like the legendary Loch Ness Monster, there are still some unanswered questions in this poem. As you will see later in the book, some of the questions will, and should, remain unanswered. But we have a draft—in its most rudimentary form—to begin working with.

Your Turn

Now it's your turn to make the beginning of a poem:

- 1) Underline or highlight words or phrases that strike you from your freewrite
- 2) Type or write the highlighted portions into lines
- 3) Fill in any “gaps” to add continuity