The Language of Poetry

Emily Dickinson once wrote, “If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry.” A good poem can make readers look at the world in a new way. A simple fork becomes the foot of a strange and unearthly bird; death itself appears as the driver of a carriage. After reading a poem, you might find yourself repeating lines in your mind or remembering images that “spoke” to you from the page. What gives poetry such power? Read a poem closely, and you’ll see how it has been carefully crafted to affect you.

Part 1: Form

What you’ll most likely notice first about a poem is its form, or the distinctive way the words are arranged on the page. Included in a poem’s form are its graphic elements, such as the length and placement of lines and the way they are grouped into stanzas. Similar to a paragraph in narrative writing, each stanza conveys a unified idea and contributes to a poem’s overall meaning.

Poems can be traditional or organic in form. Regardless of its structure, though, a poem’s form is often deliberately chosen to echo its meaning.

Traditional

Characteristics

- follows fixed rules, such as a specified number of lines
- has a regular pattern of rhythm and rhyme
- includes the following forms: sonnet, ode, haiku, limerick, ballad, and epic

Example

Does the road wind up-hill all the way?  
Yes, to the very end.  
Will the day’s journey take the whole long day? 
From morn to night, my friend.  
— from “Up-hill” by Christina Rossetti

Organic

Characteristics

- does not have a regular pattern of rhythm and may not rhyme
- may use unconventional spelling, punctuation, and grammar
- includes the following forms: free verse and concrete poetry

Example

wear your colors 
like a present person 
today is 
here & now 
— from “Look Not to Memories” 
by Angela de Hoyos

Analyze the Example

- Identify the rhyming words at the ends of the lines to see the rhyme pattern of the stanza.
- Read the lines aloud to hear their regular rhythm.
- Notice how the singsong musical quality emphasizes the comforting message.
**MODEL 1: TRADITIONAL FORM**

The following two stanzas are from an ode, a complex lyric poem that addresses a serious theme, such as justice, truth, or the passage of time. While odes can follow just about any structure, “The Fire of Driftwood” is traditional in form because of its regular stanzas, rhythm, and rhyme. Here, the speaker—the voice that talks to the reader—sadly reflects on how he and his friends have grown apart.

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**from THE FIRE of DRIFTWOOD**

Poem by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

We spake of many a vanished scene,
   Of what we once had thought and said,
Of what had been, and might have been,
   And who was changed, and who was dead;

And all that fills the hearts of friends,
   When first they feel, with secret pain,
Their lives thenceforth have separate ends,
   And never can be one again.

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**MODEL 2: ORGANIC FORM**

This poem is written in free verse, with no regular pattern of rhythm and rhyme. Notice how its form differs from that of Longfellow’s poem.

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**i am not done yet**

Poem by Lucille Clifton

as possible as yeast
as imminent as bread
a collection of safe habits
a collection of cares

less certain than i seem
more certain than i was
a changed changer
i continue to continue
where i have been

most of my lives is
where i’m going
Part 2: Poetic Elements

What gives one poem a brisk rhythm and another the sound of an everyday conversation? How can two poems on the same subject create dramatically different images in your mind? Prosody, the meter and rhyme of a poem, as well as other sound devices and imagery, give each poem its own character.

Prosody and Sound Devices

Much of the power of poetry depends on rhythm—the pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables in each line. Poets use rhythm to emphasize ideas and to create a mood that suits their subject. Some poems have a regular pattern of rhythm, which is called meter. Analyzing the effects of a poem's rhythm begins with scanning, or marking, the meter. Unstressed syllables are marked with a ('), and stressed syllables with a (‘), as in these lines from “A Dirge” by Percy Bysshe Shelley:

Rough wind, / that moan / est loud \( a \)
Grief / too sad / for song; \( b \)
Wild wind / when sul / len cloud \( a \)
Knéls / all the night / long. \( b \)

A regular pattern of rhyme is called a rhyme scheme. Rhyme scheme is charted by assigning a letter of the alphabet to matching end rhymes, as shown in “A Dirge.”

Poets also use many other sound devices to create specific effects. In each of the following examples, notice how the device helps to establish a mood, create a rhythm, and suggest different sounds and sights of the sea.

**Repetition**

a sound, word, phrase, or line that is repeated for emphasis and unity

Break, break, break.
On thy cold gray stones, O Sea!
—from “Break, Break, Break” by Alfred, Lord Tennyson

**Alliteration**

the repetition of consonant sounds at the beginnings of words

The scraggy rock spit shielding the town’s blue bay
—from “Departure” by Sylvia Plath

**Assonance**

the repetition of vowel sounds in words that do not end with the same consonant

The waves break fold on jewelled fold.
—from “Moonlight” by Sara Teasdale

**Consonance**

the repetition of consonant sounds within and at the ends of words

And black are the waters that sparkled so green.
—from “Seal Lullaby” by Rudyard Kipling
MODEL 1: RHYTHM AND RHYME

The speakers in this next poem could be understood to be the collective voice of the pool players mentioned underneath the title. Read the poem aloud to hear its unique rhyme scheme and rhythm. In what ways do these elements reflect the fast-lane lifestyle that the speakers describe?

We Real Cool
The Pool Players.
Seven at The Golden Shovel.

Poem by Gwendolyn Brooks

We real cool. We
Left school. We
Lurk late. We
Strike straight. We
Sing sin. We
Thin gin. We
Jazz June. We
Die soon.

Close Read

1. Even though the rhyming words in this poem fall in the middle of the lines, they sound like end rhymes. If you treat these words as end rhymes, what is the rhyme scheme?

2. One way to read this poem is to stress every syllable. How would you describe the rhythm? Explain how it echoes the speakers’ attitude toward life.

MODEL 2: OTHER SOUND DEVICES

This poem immerses you in the edge-of-your-seat excitement of a close baseball game. What sound devices has the poet used to create this effect?

The Base Stealer

Poem by Robert Francis

Poised between going on and back, pulled
Both ways taut like a tightrope-walker,
Fingertips pointing the opposites,
Now bouncing tiptoe like a dropped ball
Or a kid skipping rope, come on, come on,
Running a scattering of steps sidewise,
How he teeters, skitters, tingles, teases,
Taunts them, hovers like an ecstatic bird,
He’s only flirting, crowd him, crowd him,

Close Read

1. Read the boxed text aloud. The use of alliteration emphasizes the tension that the base stealer feels. Find another example of alliteration and explain its effect.

2. Identify two other sound devices that the poet uses and describe their effects.
**Imagery and Figurative Language**

*I can remember wind-swept streets of cities
on cold and blustery nights, on rainy days;
heads under shabby felts and parasols
and shoulders hunched against a sharp concern.*

—from “Memory” by Margaret Walker

Do these lines make you want to stay indoors, nestled under layers of blankets? If so, the reason is imagery, or words and phrases that re-create sensory experiences for readers. Through the highlighted images, the poet helps readers visualize the bleak scene—the way it looks, sounds, and even *feels*—in striking detail.

One way poets create strong imagery is through the use of figurative language, which conveys meanings beyond the literal meanings of words. Figurative language pops up all the time in everyday speech. For example, if you say “My heart sank when I heard the disappointing news,” your friends will understand that your heart did not literally sink. Through this figurative expression, you are conveying the emotional depth of your disappointment.

In the following examples, notice what each technique helps to emphasize about the subject described.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figurative Language</th>
<th>Example</th>
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| **Simile**
  a comparison between two unlike things using the words *like*, *as*, or *as if*

  I remember how you sang in your stone shoes light-voiced as dusk or feathers.

  —from “Elegy for My Father” by Robert Winner |
| **Metaphor**
  a comparison between two unlike things but without the words *like* or *as*

  The door of winter is frozen shut.

  —from “Wind Chill” by Linda Pastan |
| **Personification**
  a description of an object, an animal, a place, or an idea in human terms

  Death, be not proud, though some have called thee
  Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so.

  —from “Sonnet 10” by John Donne |
| **Hyperbole**
  an exaggeration for emphasis or humorous effect

  Here once the embattled farmers stood
  And fired the shot heard round the world.

  —from “The Concord Hymn” by Ralph Waldo Emerson |
MODEL 3: IMAGERY
Notice the imagery this poet uses to transport you to the hot sands of an island in the West Indies.

Midsummer, Tobago
Poem by Derek Walcott

Broad sun-stoned beaches.
White heat.
A green river.
5 scorched yellow palms
A bridge, from the summer-sleeping house drowsing through August.
Days I have held, days I have lost, 10 days that outgrow, like daughters, my harbouring arms.

MODEL 4: FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE
The use of figurative language in this poem strengthens the contrast between a lifeless winter day and the vibrancy of the horses.

from Horses
Poem by Pablo Neruda, translated by Alastair Reid

I was in Berlin, in winter. The light was without light, the sky skyless.
The air white like a moistened loaf. 5
From my window, I could see a deserted arena, a circle bitten out by the teeth of winter.
All at once, led out by a man, ten horses were stepping into the snow.
Emerging, they had scarcely rippled into existence like flame, than they filled the whole world of my eyes, empty till now. Faultless, flaming, 10 they stepped like ten gods on broad, clean hooves.

Close Read
1. One example of a simile is boxed. What does this comparison tell you about the air? Find another simile and explain the comparison.
2. In line 5, the poet uses personification to describe winter. What characteristics of winter does this comparison emphasize?
Part 3: Analyze the Text

Apply what you have just learned about the forms, techniques, and effects of poetry by comparing the next two poems. The first describes the dead-end life of Flick Webb, a former high school basketball star. Read the poem a first time, looking for details that help you to understand the character of Flick. Then read the poem aloud to get the full impact.

EX-Basketball Player
Poem by John Updike

Pearl Avenue runs past the high-school lot,  
Bends with the trolley tracks, and stops, cut off
Before it has a chance to go two blocks,  
At Colonel McComsky Plaza. Berth’s Garage

Flick stands tall among the idiot pumps—  
Five on a side, the old bubble-head style,  
Their rubber elbows hanging loose and low.

One’s nostrils are two S’s, and his eyes  
An E and O. And one is squat, without
A head at all—more of a football type.

Once Flick played for the high-school team, the Wizards.
He was good: in fact, the best. In ’46
He bucketed three hundred ninety points,  
A county record still. The ball loved Flick.

I saw him rack up thirty-eight or forty  
In one home game. His hands were like wild birds.

He never learned a trade, he just sells gas,  
Checks oil, and changes flats. Once in a while,
As a gag, he dribbles an inner tube,  
But most of us remember anyway.
His hands are fine and nervous on the lug wrench.

It makes no difference to the lug wrench, though.

Off work, he hangs around Mae’s Luncheonette.  
**Grease-gray** and kind of coiled, he plays pinball,
Smokes those thin cigars, nurses lemon phosphates.
Flick seldom says a word to Mae, just nods
Beyond her face toward bright applauding tiers

Of Necco Wafers, Nibs, and Juju Beads.

Close Read

1. In the second stanza, Flick stands next to gas pumps, which are personified as athletes. Citing details in the stanza, describe this image as you see it in your mind’s eye.

2. Identify the simile in the third stanza. What does it tell you about Flick’s athletic ability in high school?

3. Now that you know more about the character of Flick, reread lines 1–3. How does the image of Pearl Avenue remind you of him?

4. The poet uses alliteration in the last stanza. One example is boxed. Find two more examples.
The description of basketball players in this poem provides a sharp contrast to the sad portrait of Flick Webb in “Ex-Basketball Player.”

Poem by **Yusef Komunyakaa**

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Fast breaks. Lay ups. With Mercury's
Insignia on our sneakers,
We outmaneuvered to footwork
Of bad angels. Nothing but a hot
Swish of strings like silk
Ten feet out. In the roundhouse
Labyrinth our bodies
Created, we could almost
Last forever, poised in midair
Like storybook sea monsters.
A high note hung there
A long second. Off
The rim. We'd corkscrew
Up & dunk balls that exploded
The skullcap of hope & good
Intention. Lanky, all hands
& feet . . . sprung rhythm.
We were metaphysical when girls
Cheered on the sidelines.
Tangled up in a falling,
Muscles were a bright motor
Double-flashing to the metal hoop
Nailed to our oak.
When Sonny Boy's mama died
He played nonstop all day, so hard
Our backboard splintered.
Glistening with sweat,
We rolled the ball off
Our fingertips. Trouble
Was there slapping a blackjack
Against an open palm.
Dribble, drive to the inside,
& glide like a sparrow hawk.
Lay ups. Fast breaks.
We had moves we didn't know
We had. Our bodies spun
On swivels of bone & faith,
Through a lyric slipknot
Of joy, & we knew we were
Beautiful & dangerous.
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