

# Poetry Writing Handbook

Definitions, Examples, Lessons



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Illustrated by Leo Abbett

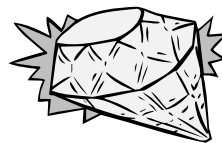


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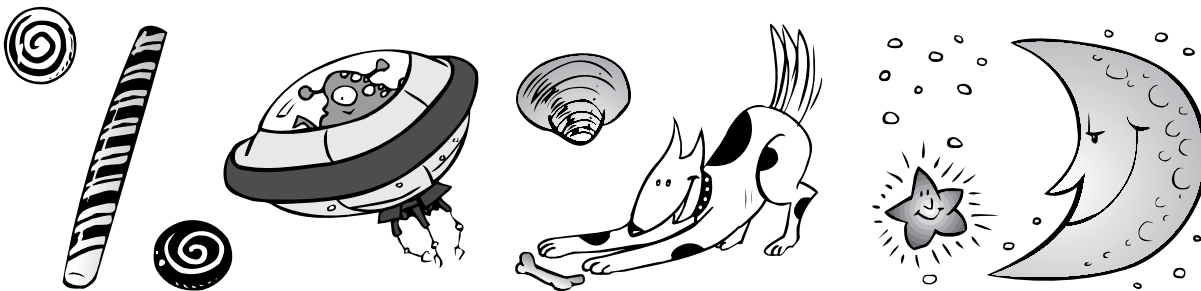
# Table of

Introduction .....	7
Getting Started .....	9
Acrostic Poetry .....	12
Alliteration .....	15
Alphabet Poetry .....	18
Catalog Poetry .....	20
Cento .....	23
Cinquain .....	26
Clerihew .....	29
Concrete Poetry .....	31
Couplet .....	33
Definition Poetry .....	36
Diamante .....	38
Haiku .....	41
Hexadquad .....	43
Hyperbole .....	46
Lai Verse .....	48
Limerick .....	50
Lune .....	53
Lyrics .....	56



# Contents

Metaphor/Simile .....	58
Occasional Poetry .....	61
Onomatopoeia .....	64
Pantoum .....	66
Parody .....	69
Personification .....	72
Poetic Cryptograms .....	74
Quatrain .....	77
Round .....	80
Sestina .....	83
Skeltonic Verse .....	87
Sonnet .....	90
Tanka .....	93
Tongue Twister .....	96
Triolet .....	98
Triplet .....	100
Villanelle .....	103
More Activities .....	106
Poetic License Document .....	112



## Dear Teacher or Parent,

If you read nothing else but this page (and then move into the content of this book), it is imperative to understand that we are not trying to make rhyming poets of our students! What is important is that we make every effort to help them discover the power of language and learn to use it well!

These exercises are about examining and polishing words; finding just the right one, tasting, feeling, shading, working through, listening, reciting, savoring, sweating over a challenging pattern—all the while coming to grips with the character, flavor and impact of words and how those words capture and express our views and personalities.

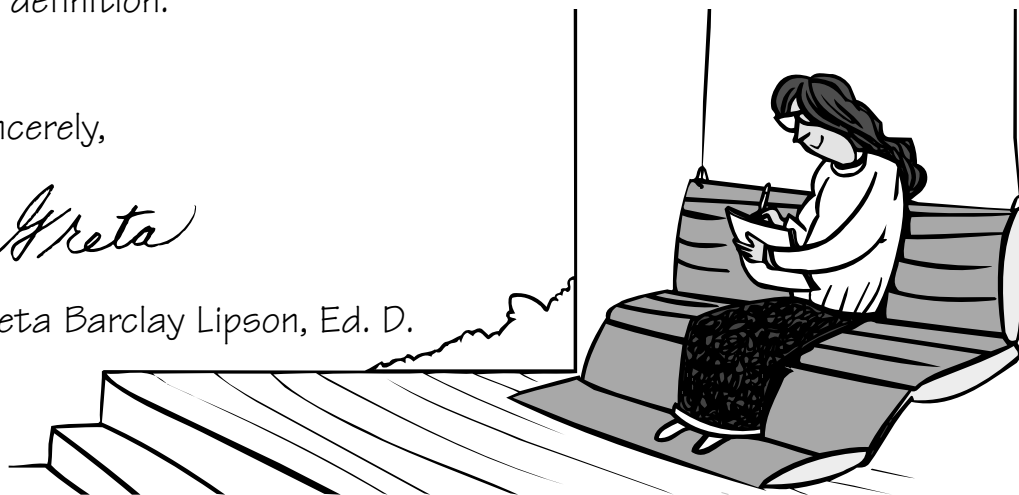
How do you shape your thoughts and ideas? And what does it tell the world about you?

Except when working with a specific rhyme scheme, forget about tortuous forced rhyming from young students. Most are not capable of such technical facility! Encourage them instead—to make sense—to dive in and flex their language imagination. The rewards are there for the taking. And that's what this book is about! Recalling the wonderful words of poet and author, Babette Deutsch: "On becoming part of a poem, a word exceeds its definition."

Sincerely,

*Greta*

Greta Barclay Lipson, Ed. D.



# Remember!

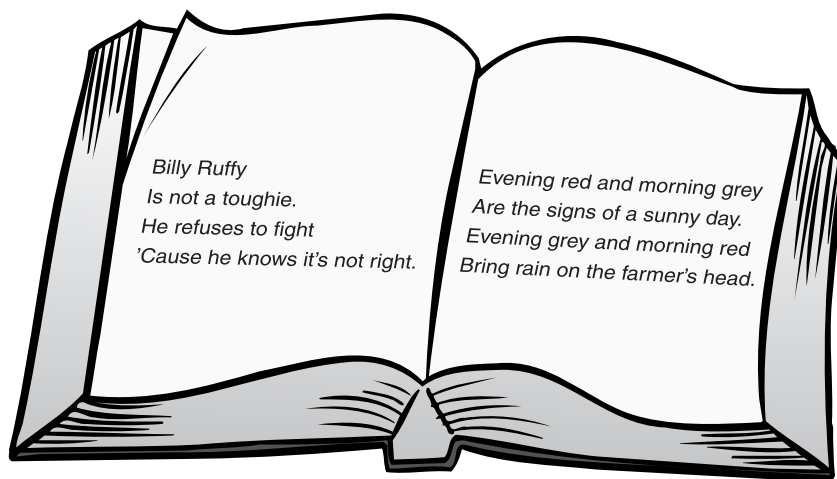
## April Is Poetry Month

### Introduction

Students must be helped to discover that poetry is written about many things. The subjects of poetry are not limited to nightingales, daffodils, anticipation of death, a yen for life at sea and romantic love. Poetry is also about cities, jukeboxes, oil barges, cars, hunting, prize fighting, outer space, adolescence, and wars. Students need to learn well that the subjects of poetry come out of the very things that they see and know, that the language of poetry depends on contemporary and available sources for its non-literalness, that the writers of poetry include all kinds of human beings.

by Stephen Dunning

*Teaching Literature to Adolescents: Poetry*  
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Poetry is the language of the heart, the mind and the spirit! Each word is finely tuned to express a distillate of feeling. Each word is like a crystal held up to capture and refract the light. A word carefully chosen is a compression of thought, feeling and essence. Words witness for us and tell our stories in extraordinary ways. As with any other creative expression, the response to it is singular to each of us because poetry is personal.

In teaching all subject areas, it is axiomatic that we begin instruction on a baseline described as “where the students are” in terms of maturity and interests. This holds true on all levels, which brings me to my classroom where I was trying to explore methods of teaching poetry. My students were aspiring educators who were teachers in training and once again the principle of “interest” held true.

The topic of poetry started as an exercise akin to torture for some students who had wearisome school memories of being force-fed archaic poetry—an obscure and boring experience. They had choked on these dry and dusty archives in their young school days and were not about to revisit the rigors of tedium.

But I was motivated by the strength of the true believer that somehow there was a way to reach their awareness that poetry, like music, is a precious relevant language, worthy of their participation.

Toward this goal I suggested the following facts of life: When we are ineffably happy, profoundly sad, inspired beyond words, defeated by life, hailed as a winner, madly in love, beaten by despair, exultant in life’s beneficence—we turn to the language of song and poetry to capture the moment in ways that prose cannot express! If not in our own words then we look to someone else’s words—those who say it for us with lyricism and understanding! “Ah yes,” we reflect to ourselves. “Those lines explain what’s going on in the far reaches of my heart and soul!”

For a productive learning experience it is critical to make that connection between the subject matter and the student’s world of experience and perception.

# Getting Started

*Culled from our collective experience, here are some “rescue” notes for teachers and students to help in the study of poetry. Add new revelations to the following posted list throughout the semester. You may want to use this or a similar list in your classroom. Here are a few guidelines.*

## What Is Poetry?



### Poetry . . .

- expresses the music and lyricism in language
- teaches us about the richness of language and its capabilities
- defines and frames deep feelings
- is personal and can be about anything and everything
- should give pleasure and speak to the reader and the listener
- is intended to be read aloud
- is a way of seeing, translating and hearing
- is intense and captures distilled perception
- communicates on all levels of intellect and emotion
- explores the meaning and mysteries of life
- must be age and interest appropriate to be appreciated

For starters—don't get bogged down with analysis and explication! Those are more academic lessons and often make the material forbidding. Leave those exercises for more mature audiences. Don't turn kids off with poetry that transports the critics but is a soporific for the young set! There is time enough in the upper reaches of academe for those who follow their star as English majors. Encourage your students to be true to their interests. Invite humor, muscle, grit, sentiment and their experiential concerns in class selections. Remember—your objective is to foster an appreciation for the power of language and what it can do!

# A Great Assignment



For a fruitful and revealing assignment, ask the students to find a poem that truly speaks to them as individuals. The rule is that they not be swayed by outside influence. Encourage them to find a personal favorite, copy it (including the author and source) and write a sentence to explain why that poem pleased or touched them. Collect these poems for insights to class tastes. Students willing to read their poems to the class are invited to do so! Plan on discussion which explores the variety of interests.

The results of this assignment can be eye-opening and fascinating. My favorite recitation came from a young man—very shy and reserved—who came to class with a baseball bat and a mitt. He stood in front of the class—leaned on his bat, turned his cap to shade his eyes and recited “Casey at the Bat” with such bravura that he brought down the house with applause!

Another impressive selection, less theatrical perhaps, was a vivid picture of a clanking, productive, noisy automobile factory in the heartland of Detroit.

In an ongoing effort, your class may continue to add to the list of all the things that poetry can mean and all the things it can do to enhance the spirit and extend language.

