Writing Poetry

What is a Poem?
What is a poem? A moment in time,
created in free verse, or captured in rhyme.
An acute observation of sights old and new
written from your individual view.

Something original out of your brain
sparked by emotions of pleasure or pain.
Written in words that are chosen with care
to paint verbal pictures for others to share.

It evokes all five senses in print or when read:
is informed by your soul and ruled by your head,
for the Muse when she comes must be mastered by craft
or your poem lacks shape, is dull, deadened or daft.

Simile, metaphor, content and form:
from such helpful learning is poetry born.
When you think it is done set your poem aside.
Come back to it later when you can decide

if it's as you intended or needs some repair.
Such final attention, such detail and care
is what makes our poets superb at their art
and their poems, finely written, live on in the heart.

How to Write a Poem
Oh, you write poetry? Don’t worry. You’re normal. Most of us have done it some time or another. When we hit puberty, for instance. That’s when our hormones over-react and our emotions are at their strongest. When there’s a world to be understood and claimed.

Later on we calm down and do something useful. Sell cars. Design software. A few of us, however, don’t grow up. We remain child-like forever, and continue to see the world as complicated, compelling, incomprehensible.

We are the artists, musicians, and poets. Our motivation is discovery and recovery. Our job is observation and description. Our reward is to understand, and to share that understanding with others.

Good poets do work as essential as road laying or mending broken arms, but it’s on a different plane. The work of the mind rather than the brain. Poets break rules, test limits, explore and explain. But how, exactly?

If you were to ask Joe Nobody to write a poem, he might say no at first, but could be persuaded to give it a try. It's only writing words on paper, after all … If you were to ask him to write a symphony, he'd refuse at once. "Sorry, I don't know how."

It's a common misconception that poetry is easy. Like any art form, you need training and technique to write a poem. Scribbling down your feelings won't do it any more than clashing saucepans together creates a concerto.

Rational people prefer definitions and I hear you asking, So what is poetry? Coleridge thought it was 'the best words in the best order'. Wordsworth described it as 'emotion recollected in tranquillity'. Gwyn Thomas says it is 'trouble dunked in tears'. Peter Porter claims it's 'a form of refrigeration that stops language going bad'.

But definitions won't help you to write good poetry. You need to learn not what it is, but how to do it. For example, by reading a poem daily from a good collection (e.g. Essential New Zealand Poems.) By understanding theory and putting it into practice.

Some beginners hate to show their poems to other people. That's not because what they say is silly or worthless. It's because at some level they know they haven't transformed their ideas and emotions into poetry. So comment is taken as personal criticism.

Good poetry is mostly is built around one simple idea or emotion. (She loves me, she loves me not … A rose is a rose is a rose … Clocks and time are fascinating … I am feeling pain or joy.) You can find out what this is by taking away the poetry – not what is said, but how. You can now identify what the poem is about – but you won't identify with it. The poem needed that method of expression to expand the idea or emotion into the common experience of any other man, woman or child.

In poetry, it is the method of expression that gives this idea or that emotion its individuality, and its universal appeal. Altogether, there are seven elements to a good poem:

1. A good poem is formal, i.e. it has a shape and a design.

2. A good poem is rhythmical, i.e. it has a metrical beat (e.g. rhymed poetry) or a musical quality (e.g. the cadence of free verse).

3. A good poem is complex, i.e. new things are found in it each time it's read.

4. A good poem is significant, i.e. it means something other than mindless waffle.

5. A good poem is intense, i.e. it concentrates upon essentials.

6. A good poem is concrete, i.e. it is written about real things and real situations, in real words.

7. A good poem is exact, i.e. the poet has turned the idea, the emotion, from something

general to something specific.

For example, your main idea might be ‘Life’s a bitch and then you die’. Each poet will then express this in their own words, e.g.

‘I feel I could be turned to ice

If this goes on, if this goes on.

I feel I could be buried twice

And still the death not yet be done.’

(from I Feel, by Elizabeth Jennings)

It is in the exactness that the communication is made. Something is seen clearly, and differently, for the very first time, and has been demonstrated. Think about the shades of meaning between ‘open’ and ‘opening’ in the following excerpt:

‘Pavement
step
the door she knocks upon
stages and boundaries
opening; open’

(from House, by Jenny Argante)

The poem needed both, to demonstrate progression.

To write good poetry you must learn to take an idea or emotion and turn it from a generalisation into something specific. Don’t write about a tree – write about a pohutekawa or a Norfolk pine. And examine it closely before you write. What shape is it? What is the leaf like – and the flower? Does it remind you of something?

Ah, now, be careful. You don’t want to say it’s like something else (‘those trees look like pencils’). Instead, develop the thought (‘the pinewood scribbled notes upon the wind’). Now read and re-read. What can you delete? What change for something better? When is it the best you can do?

Method is easy. The craft is hard and subtle.

Learn first to discipline the words you use. Later you can break all rules and find your own voice.

Writing a Poem About You!

Supported by Tauranga Writers Inc

A Writing Group Exercise

Step 1.
Complete these nine statements about yourself:

If I were a season/month, I'd be

If I were furniture, I'd be

If I were a bird/animal, I'd be

If I were a flower, I'd be

If I were a tree, I'd be

If I were a colour, I'd be

If I were a vehicle, I'd be

If I were something to eat, I'd be

If I were an element*, I'd be
* i.e. Earth, Air, Fire or Water

Step 2.
Pick the THREE you like best, and write them out in any order you prefer. Keep each separate and this will create three stanzas in your poem.

Step 3.
Turn each statement into a phrase that claims it as true.

Example
'If I were a season, I'd be summer' now becomes 'I am summer …'

Step 4.
Add two descriptive terms to each.

Example
I am summer
seasoned with salt and sand
and riding high

Be bold! Be free! Go for it.

Step 5.
Rewrite your three stanzas – you can change the order if you wish – changing the pronoun 'I' to ;he' or 'she', depending on your gender.

Example
She is summer
seasoned with salt and sand
and riding high

Step 6.
Take 5 minutes to read your poem to yourself, and make sure it is what you wanted it to be.

Step 7.
Read your poems aloud, one by one.

Poetry in Process
A poem begins life as the germ of an idea. Something catches your attention, either verbally, or visually. You decide you want to build a poem around, and the process is underway.

I like to walk and think about a poem before I write anything down. One poem made itself up in my head as I simply sat in a neighbourhood park and watched the world and his wife go by. Another developed a much pacier rhythm, probably because I was riding my bike as I pondered. I pedalled like mad to get home and get it down before it got away!

Such fallow periods are necessary in any kind of writing, but particularly helpful for poets. You need to get absolutely clear in your mind what it is that attracts you about this topic, and how you're going to share that with your readers. How will you make them understand what you saw, what you think, where you're coming from – and where the poem is going?

Ideas come to us all the time, and a notebook is handy to jot them down. I also carry a mini cassette recorder with me at all times – it's so much easier to use when you're driving! Not all of these ideas will turn into poems, but the mere act of recording them helps you with Becoming a Writer' – that consciousness which Brande outlines in her book of that name.

Don't talk about your ideas too much while they're raw. When we process something, we prepare it, we bring it to completion. That is what we must do with poetry, too. Sharing with other people too soon means your ideas may get changed. You wanted to write about a swan, and you ended up with an ugly duckling! Or you ran out of steam, because you've talked it out of your (writing) system without one word set down upon the page. Ideas aren't copyright, either – only the finished product. Someone else might think, "Aha! That *would* make a good poem!" – and tiptoe off to write it!

So it's not a good idea to release any poem while it's still half-baked. Thinking it out is Step 1. Step 2 is finding somewhere quiet that sustains you while you make a first draft, then another, then another … Now you're trying out different words and phrases, and experimenting with form. Now you're truly creating a new poem in your own individual style.

Only when you think it's OK should you begin to share it with others. And probably it's *not*

O.K. – yet! My advice is, forget about your poem for a day or two so you can look at it objectively. We're all in love with what we write when first we write it – but that's not True Love, it's just infatuation.

Please, don't rely on family and friends for constructive criticism - unless they know and like poetry as much as they know and like you. Mix and mingle with fellow-poets in person and on the page. This will help you to measure your own writing against that of others. Not to be like them, but to understand what poems of their work best – and fulfil the writer's potential – and so understand when your own poems are the best you can do. Join a writers' group, or go to open mike and other poetry readings.

A big help is to read as many poems as possible - both contemporary poems in magazines like *JAAM* or *Bravado* or *Takahe*, and poems from the past. Your local library will have many good anthologies for you to taste and test. My own preferred form of meditation is to read one poem in the morning to start the day and another at night to end it. At present, I'm reading and re-reading *Ten Poems to Change Your Life* by Roger Housden, such a wonderful book I've already bought five copies for friends.

Creating poetry and song, is both ancient art and ongoing tradition, common to all peoples. We can learn much from those who've gone before; more from those who are writing now, and something else from those who come from different lands, and a different culture.

When you find yourself responding positively to any poem, make a copy of it. I like to write such poems out by hand as if to 'own' them. Then I make a good copy on my PC, print it out, and file it in a folder as my own personal anthology of best-loved poems. In a dry season of writing, I can turn to these poems for comfort and inspiration. And they're not all by famous poets by any means. Sometimes poetry can be found in unexpected places, like this poem by my friend Laura Mason about her husband's death. It's the only poem she's ever written - Laura is a food writer - and yet how good it is.

Laura had something she wanted to say, and only poetry could do it. And this poem waited until some years after her husband's death before it was complete. We could all learn from that.

Left Over

Odd, how when abroad
We always slept the other way round.
You on my right
Or was it I on your left?
Me the southpaw,
And you the dexterous logician
Protecting each other.

And in our own bed, it was always
You on my left
Or was it I on your right?

An equal partnership of power
Secure at home.
Now I lie awake
And you sleep outside
Cold ashes under moon.

Reading your poems aloud
Yes, it can be scary. It can also be fun, and it's certainly a learning experience. If this is the first time for you, here are a few pointers.

Most writers think it's better not to share brand-new work. Like all writing, a poem needs to be put away for a few weeks and re-read 'cold'. That's when you can fine-tune it. Bring it to us then.

You only get five minutes. If your poem is an epic, choose a chunk. Short poems often work better. You can read two or three of them in five minutes.

You don't have to be serious all the time. People do like to think, and that's what poetry can be for. But we're here to enjoy ourselves, too.

Choose what you read with care. If it's deeply personal, it could be tough to share it with people you don't know. Keep it for family and friends, and choose something else.

We don't want to hear it at all if it's sexist, racist, ageist, homophobic or pornographic. And yes, we do know the difference between being witty and being rude.

Put your audience first. Pick a poem for their delight, not yours.

With this in mind, first do a read-through at home. If you stumble over any lines, they probably need fixing. Try a minor rewrite before you present it in public. Test it on family or friends. What do *they* think?

One practical point: is your copy legible? It does help. If your eyesight's not that good print it bigger.

Don't start your reading with apologies or long explanations. Let your poem stand or fall on its own merits. One or two sentences will do to introduce it.

Stand up straight and speak clearly, not too fast and not too slow. Don't be frightened to make eye contact or smile. It's your work. You took the time and trouble to write it well. Now take the time and trouble to read it well.

If you're reading more than one poem, pause between each. (Count ten in your head.)

Most of all, go with the flow. After all, the people listening must like poetry or they wouldn't

be here!

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Writing Poetry for Children

Poetry is about discovery, and in introducing a child to something new, poetry adds value to the description, as each chosen word adds value to the poem. Poetry is a means of providing children with a vocabulary to sort things out about the known and unknown world.

Poets make links between things that to the unobservant eye or inexperienced mind don't obviously connect - comparing and contrasting. Sometimes this chimes with the child's own individual or offbeat take on things. Sometimes it awakens a different kind of looking at what is 'ordinary'. Showing us that nothing ever is.

Writing such poetry isn't easy. Writing for children in any form is no soft option. They're an exacting audience and finding ways to please them is a challenge. Only write poetry for children if you've got something special to say to them.

Remember, children are born with an inbuilt lie-detector to sniff out what's false or inconsistent, and despise language that 'talks down' to them. Work hard to create words and phrases that work for your reader, who is more important you.

John Agard says an idea for a poem is 'like an electric switch. You fit together feelings, pictures, dreams, happenings, with words instead of wires to make the electricity, but it's the idea which switches on the poem.' Bright sparks don't borrow or repeat ideas; they create their own. Write about what matters to you, and make it matter to your reader.

When you write about your feelings, be specific about the thing that made you sad or happy. Share your amazement at what's in the world - and beyond it. Write 'play poetry' – nonsense rhymes and riddles. Write story poems about people and places. Write what you know, and what you want to discover. Write in your own words: the best words, in the best order. You'll know you've done that when the poem is finished so that no single word can be replaced without damaging the whole. Find the beat of your poem and keep to it – the music in the words.

Ideas come from anywhere, anytime. Keep a notebook with you., and write them down

however silly. Stay closely in touch with 'the child within'. (Child-like, not childish.) Come to everything as if for the first time. Bubble over with the desire to 'show and tell'. Explore the here and now – remember, all good writing is contemporary. Share the past, too. Michael Rosen says, "Writing a poem teaches us how to remember … it's a way of holding on to memories – a bit like a photo album."

Invite children you know to share the process and contribute to it. Involve your reader from the start with a 'bang' opening (the hook) then let them get on with it. Don't spoon-feed them. Within the progress of a poem, create problems and difficulties. Sort everything out before the end. Give readers enough to work with, and they'll come up with their own interpretations, sometimes better than your own! A poem is a shared work that needs both writer and reader.

The test of a good poem is that it works on the page and when spoken. Own any poem, your own or another's, by reading it silently then aloud. Start collecting children's poems that work for you in a folder or file, The more poetry you read, the better you will write – and, no, you won't lose your personal style in reading the work of others.

Words are the raw material of poetry, so work hard to expand your vocabulary. The sound of words is satisfying: globule, brouhaha, elbow, cumquat, splat … but words mean something, too. Make sound and sense work properly together.

Learn as much about poetic techniques and forms of poetry as you can. Borrow a few books from the library, and buy the ones you like best. Go online and find writing websites and exercises you can turn into poems. Share the company of poets in workshops and writers' group.

Be true to your own imagination. Only then can you share with your reader your own individual expression of things observed and experienced. That's the buzz, the thing that gets you going. You still need to think before you write, think while you're writing, and think about what you wrote. Redraft, revise, rewrite. Don't be satisfied until it says exactly what you wanted it to say.

Poetry is reaction and response: making you understand what you see, think and feel. What exactly does a rhododendron look like in the rain? What specifically do I know about Einstein? What precisely do I feel when I'm asked a question and I don't know the answer?

If you can't be exact, specific and precise, you've got no business writing anything - let alone something as wonderful as poetry for children.

Recommended reading

(2007) Poetry Pudding. Compiled by Jenny Argante & illustrated by Debbie Tipuna. Auckland, Reed Books.

Over 100 poems by 40 plus contributors written by Kiwi poets for Kiwi kids. Named a Notable Book of the Year 2007, and chosen as one of 25 'must reads' for children for New Zealand Book Month in 2008.

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About Haiku

A good haiku has depth; it can be mined and explored and yield more each time it is read. Cyril Childs

All bad poetry springs from genuine feeling. Oscar Wilde

Haiku

Haiku (hi-koo) is a form of poetry that originated in Japan, but has now spread worldwide. The practice of writing haiku is enormously popular in New Zealand, which is internationally recognised for the number of outstanding haijin (masters of haiku) presently living and working here.

Over the years, and with so many successful practitioners in other countries, haiku have now moved away from their original strict form of 17 syllables arranged in three lines of 5, 7 & 5 syllables each. After all, if you're not writing in Japanese, there's no perceived need to stay strictly within a form imposed by a different language, culture and time.

Be natural. Prefer real pictures.

Upasaka Shiki

Haiku don't tell a story - rather it is as if the poet has taken a still photograph of a flash of lightning, taken the time to notice a dead bird but doesn't speculate on cause and effect, or celebrates a smile by simply allowing it to have its moment, especially when least expected.

antique toy show
the baby's hand
reaches out
Dean Horo, Wellington College

When it comes to trying your hand at haiku, it's better not to talk about rules at all, but instead to work to the following guidelines that are universally accepted. When in doubt, simplify.

summer garden
the full stretch
of the hose
Connie Donleycott

Writing haiku

The instructions for writing good haiku are as follows:

• Haiku are between one and four lines long, but usually three.
• A haiku should contain about twenty syllables in all so you can recite it with a single breath.
• Write your haiku in the present tense about what is happening now.
• In your haiku, refer to at least one of the five senses - sight, sound, taste, touch, smell.
• Haiku should be real - and are usually about natureNote 1 or the external world.

- Haiku are not rhymed.
- You can contrast two images in a haiku.
- Don't employ simile or metaphor in your haiku.
- Keep adjectives and adverbs to a minimum, or, better still, don't use them at all.
- Prefer everyday language, and find the extraordinary in the ordinary.
- Don't use capitals or punctuation.
- Most importantly, write your haiku to capture a moment on the wing.
- Haiku knows when enough has been said.

It has been said that there is no symbolism or egotism in haiku,that haiku show us how to see into the life of things and gain a glimpse of enlightenment. Haiku is not zen, but zen is haiku.

a baby crab
climbs up my leg –
clear water

Note 1 Haiku about human nature are categorised as 'senryu' - often comic moments. Here's an example of a senryu:

a used teabag
in the cup I'm washing
Urghhh! Owen's home
JA

Haiku in print
For the high number of haiku writers, New Zealand has surprisingly few markets, basically only Kokako, which only comes out once a year. Bravado used to publish a page or two of haiku in each issue - and the new editor still likes haiku, and it now comes out three times a year in March, July and November. Australia has two magazines that are well-respected for haiku, Yellow Moon and Paper Wasp.

KiwiHaiku
'KiwiHaiku' is the name given to haiku chosen for inclusion in the New Zealand Poetry Society's monthly Newsletter. Until recently, these were selected by Owen Bullock as poetry editor of Spin. Bullock is himself an experienced writer of haiku as well as longer poems, including linked forms such as the tanka and renga, some written written co-operatively with another poet.

A highly praised book of Owen's work was published in 2004 by Hen Enterprises. summer, Hauraki Plains was described by a reviewer as 'full of haiku moments'. Here's a few lines for you to sample :

a magpie makes the evening
with its oblation

a flock of ducks write

something we can't read

on the sky
birds on a wire
wait for the day

That kind of simplicity is essential for the writer of haiku, and works in other contemporary poetry, too.

International Haiku Competition
The New Zealand Poetry Society (NZPS) runs an annual International Haiku Competition alongside its International Open Poetry Competition. Prizewinners are published in the competition anthology. You might like to consider joining the NZPS, if you're serious about poetry. If you'd like to find out more, go to their website at www.poetrysociety.org.nz

The Katikati Open Air Art Society runs the biennial Katikati International Haiku Contest. Watch out for announcements. Winners are announced in the NZPS Newsletter, and Bravado will include all the winning poems in its November issue. Some of the winning haiku are also inscribed on boulders or pavers.

Kokako
Kokako (formerly winterSPIN) is a magazine that publishes haiku only, once a year. The editor is Patricia Prime, an internationally recognised haijin. The deadline for submissions is mid-May. You can e-mail submissions throughout the year directly to Kokako's editor at pprime@ihug.co.nz.

rural dawn chorus -
chickens are holding
a hui
Tony Chad
Upper Hutt

Learning to write haiku is an ongoing process, and it is not as easy as the simplicity of the form would seem to suggest. However, it is excellent training for the writing of poetry in general, as it helps you to avoid over-writing.

The Haiku Pathway
If you live in the Bay of Plenty or are planning a holiday there, why not make a visit to the Katikati Haiku Pathway? Here haiku have been carved into river boulders and placed in a reserve that straddles the Uretara stream. The originator of this Millennium Project was Catherine Mair, herself a fine poet, and master of haiku and other Japanese forms.

Websites
There are many haiku sites on the Internet - a Google search will yield over one million hits. The following are particularly recommended. Follow the links to:

1. The Heron's Nest (USA)

2. Stylus (Australia)
3. Snapshots (UK)
4. TheWorld Haiku Review (information, essays, criticism & poetry.)

across the harbour
a waka, flashes of paddle
and plastic bucket
Sandra Simpson
Tauranga

Acknowledgement
Much of this discussion of haiku is based, with her permission, on an excellent handout produced by Sandra Simpson, a freelance writer and editor with the Bay of Plenty Times. Sandra has made this freely available to students of haiku, and is herself an acknowledged expert, a prizewinning writer of haiku and featured on the Katikati Haiku Pathway.