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

**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.

### 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**
- Notice that this poem has no capitalization or end punctuation.
- Note the lack of rhyme and the use of an ampersand (&).
- Think about why this structure suits the “seize the day” 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;

5 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  
5 less certain than i seem  
more certain than i was  
a changed changer  
i continue to continue  
where i have been  
10 most of my lives is  
where i’m going

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**Close Read**

1. How is the form of the first stanza similar to that of the second? Consider the number and length of the lines, the pattern of the rhyme, and the rhythm.

2. Summarize the different ideas expressed in each stanza.

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**Close Read**

1. Using the chart on the preceding page, identify two characteristics that make this poem organic in form.

2. Read the poem aloud. The short lines and the rhythm help to emphasize the ideas expressed in each line. Choose two lines and explain what the speaker is saying.
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:

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Rough wind, / that moan / est loud
Grief / too sad / for song;
Wild wind / when sul / len cloud
Knells / all the night / long.
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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

**CONSONANCE**
the repetition of consonant sounds within and at the ends of words
And black are the waters that sparkle so green.
—from “Seal Lullaby” by Rudyard Kipling

**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

**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

**REPETITION**
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.

**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, tinges, teases,  
Taunts them, hovers like an ecstatic bird,  
He's only flirting, crowd him, crowd him,  
Delicate, delicate, delicate, delicate—now!

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.

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.
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 callèd 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.  
A bridge,  
5 **scorched yellow palms**  
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.  
From my window, I could see a deserted arena,  
5 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,  
they stepped like ten gods on broad, clean hooves.
Part 3: Analyze the Literature

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  
Is on the corner facing west, and there,  
Most days, you’ll find Flick Webb, who helps Berth out.

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.
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

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.