IN THIS CHAPTER

- Knowing what sets poetry apart from other kinds of writing
- Creating your own poetry

Chapter 1
Knowing Poetry When You See It

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To like poetry, you don't have to join some secret club, wear a moose hat with antlers, stand on one leg, and recite secret ritual formulas in Greek . . . although that would be fascinating, and we'd be happy to watch if you volunteer.

Poetry is something human beings have always done and always loved. Lots of people love it. A 2017 survey by the National Endowment of the Arts (not that we need a survey to say this) estimated that in the United States, about 22.4 million people had read poetry at least once in the preceding year.

Interested in the poetry world? Come along. In this chapter, we give you a working definition of poetry itself; discuss why people have been writing it for thousands of years; focus on reading poetry — especially, reading it aloud; list some great places to find more poetry; and if all this talk about poetry has inspired you (and we hope it has!), we invite you to dive right in and write a poem of your own.

Poetry as Art and Exploration

Poetry is the practice of creating artworks using language. Sculptors use marble, steel, cardboard, goose liver pâté, or whatever material they choose. Musicians use sound. Painters use paint. Furniture-makers use woods and fabrics. And poets use language.

Poetry differs from other uses of language, however. Here are five things almost all poetry has *more of*:

- **Attentiveness:** Poets are extremely careful with the way they use language. They pay extremely close, constant attention to everything from spelling to the way the words sound, what they mean, even how many letters they have. They think — and think *hard* — about punctuation and the spaces between and around words. Most people simply don't pay as much attention to these details, but paying attention is the poet's job. And poets want *you* to pay that sort of attention, too — to the language you read and the life you live.
- **Concentration:** Poetry has more meaning, music, and emotion per word, syllable, and letter than other kinds of writing.
- **Experiment:** Poets try to use language in as many new, surprising, and challenging ways as they can to startle, awaken, or challenge you.
- **Originality:** Poetry says or does something new to make something new happen in the reader's mind. Here are some examples:
  - Totally fresh observations about life
  - Neat ways of saying something many other people have thought or said
  - Refreshing flourishes of sheer sound or rhythm

  You can tell something is original when it doesn't do or say things you've seen elsewhere. Poetry finds its own way.



REMEMBER

- **Form:** Poetry very often involves *form* — the very shape or structure a particular group of words takes. And all forms carry their own worlds of meaning.



REMEMBER

Short stories and novels are language-based works of art, too. But poetry usually has a greater degree of attentiveness, concentration, experimentation, and form than you find in most other uses of language.

Poets explore the universe through the written word. That includes any experience you can have. Here are some poems that explore very particular things. *Look up one or a few of these and read them. Feel what the poet is trying to do.* Find. Read. Re-read. Ponder. Love:

- The world of dreams and fantasies, as in "dream where every black person is standing by the ocean" by Danez Smith (`https://poets.org/poem/dream-where-every-black-person-standing-ocean`)
- The taste of a cold plum, as in "This Is Just to Say" by William Carlos Williams (`www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/56159/this-is-just-to-say`)
- Leaving someone you love, as in "Leave-Taking" by Louise Bogan (`www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/15668/leave-taking`)
- Imaginary worlds with imaginary inhabitants, as in "The Man He Imagined" by Nicanor Parra (`www.nicanorparra.uchile.cl/english/antipoems/manimagined.html`)
- All the things the moon means, as in "Moon Ghazal" by Dorianne Laux (`www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/159041/moon-ghazal`)
- The relationship between human beings and God, as in "I Asked God for the Moon" by Natasha Oladokun (`https://artlitlab.org/all-review/i-asked-god-for-the-moon`)

You can find out more about these poets with a tap of your keyboard or an afternoon at the bookstore or library. If some of these poems take you unexpected places, consider how you felt when you got there. Poetry involves exploration. Happy exploring!

Why Do People Write Poetry?



TIP

No one could cover all the motivations for writing poetry. But most poets are trying to do one or both of the following:

- Create an intense emotional experience.
- Draw attention to something true, revealing, enlightening, or entertaining.

Poets often have other important motivations, too — such as telling a story or exploring language itself (read "Silent Poem" by Robert Francis, Chapter 2, or "Vermont Apollinaire" by William Corbett, Chapter 14).

Figure 1-1 shows Ada Limón, then Poet Laureate of the United States, take the mic at Great Smoky Mountains National Park in Gatlin, Tennessee, on July 20, 2024. The event was part of her signature project, You Are Here: Poetry in Parks (`https://go.nps.gov/poetryinparks`).

But to get started, let's stay with our two main, sweeping goals.



FIGURE 1-1: Ada Limón, then-Poet Laureate of the United States, takes the mic at Great Smoky Mountains National Park, Gatlinburg, Tennessee, on July 20, 2024.

Photo: NPS/Camille Bennett. Public domain

Creating an intense emotional experience

Poetry constantly presents its readers with bursts of concentrated emotion. Some poems celebrate days of joy or triumph. Others praise God, mourn the dead, or exult in the universe. The more attention you pay to poetry, the more you'll savor such surges of passion and understanding.

Ben Jonson lived at the same time as Shakespeare. Here, he writes a poem of farewell to his son Ben, who has died at just 7 years old. The poem contains a little Renaissance English (words that you may trip over initially), but only a little. Read the poem silently, and then read it aloud:



READ ALOUD

On My First Son

Farewell, thou child of my right hand, and joy;
My sin was too much hope of thee, loved boy:
Seven years thou wert leant to me, and I thee pay,
Exacted by thy fate, on the just day.
O could I lose all father now! For why,
Will man lament the state he should envy,
To have so soon 'scaped world's and flesh's rage,
And if no other misery, yet age?
Rest in soft peace, and asked, say, "Here doth lie
Ben Jonson his best piece of poetry."
For whose sake henceforth all his vows be such.
As what he loves may never like too much.



TIP

Here are some words and phrases that may be unfamiliar:

- **child of my right hand:** The name *Benjamin* means "son of the right hand" in Hebrew, so this phrase both means "son of whom I'm especially proud" and puns on the name of both father and son.
- **thou wert:** You were.
- **The just day:** The day on which payment is due on a debt. The boy was "lent" to the speaker for seven years, and then "fate" (the lender) "exacted" (required) repayment on the due date.
- **O could I lose all father now!** This passage could mean, "Now I am no longer a father," or "After such pain, I never want to be a father again."
- **'scaped:** Escaped.
- **And if no other misery, yet age:** Even if his son escaped no other misery, at least he escaped getting old.
- **Ben Jonson his:** "Ben Jonson's."
- **Whose/his:** The *whose* refers to little Ben; the *his* refers to his father, the speaker of the poem.

"On My First Son" is a quiet, dignified poem, but its concentrated emotion is unmistakable. Notice that Jonson never refers directly to his own pain. The line "O could I lose all father now!" is the closest the poem comes. But great suffering lies within the poem's tender restraint. "Rest in soft peace" is one of the saddest,

most fatherly leave-takings in all poetry. The pun on the name *Benjamin* and in "best piece of poetry" (the son is the best "poem" Ben Jonson ever created) suggest, without outright statement, the father's fondness for his son. So does that closing vow — to love things in this world, but never again to become attached to them. You may be asking: "But can he, can anyone, really do that?" Well, what do you think? This Ben Jonson is good, right? He does what poets everywhere try to do: Lead you into intense encounters with reality and feeling.

Drawing attention to something real

Let's admit it: most of us are so busy living our lives that we don't pay attention to what's around us. Poets, in the meantime, are constantly inviting readers to stay alert to the things of this world — both familiar things that become invisible to you through habit, and miraculous things, right in front of you, that you're too busy to notice.

Japanese master-poet Issa captures an exquisite moment:



READ ALOUD

morning:
one deer licks
snow from the other's
coat

This delicate image suggests it's a cold morning and the deer have spent the night out in the snow. Issa doesn't have to comment; he simply lets the truth show and lets you marvel. You may find the words meaningful, or you may find no meaning beyond their beauty. Either way, making the moment into a poem was worth it.

Li Bai, a Chinese poet from the T'ang Dynasty (618-907), mistakes one thing for another and gives you a vivid experience that ends on a meditative note:



READ ALOUD

Moonlight pools at the head of my bed —
I mistook it for frost blanketing the earth!
I look up: see the moon on the mountain;
I look down: think long thoughts of home.

Imagination is led from *moonlight* to *frost* and back again. After realizing it *is* moonlight, the speaker follows it up to the source of the light itself. Neat, right? A call to be sensitive, just like the Issa poem earlier in this section — but then the speaker looks down and becomes nostalgic. Maybe it was something about seeing the moon on the mountain. Sometimes that happens: An image out of nature unlocks old memories, unexpected feelings.

Ben Jonson, Issa, and Li Bai lead us to unspoken yet still powerful emotions and meanings. They beckon us to *speculate*, make connections for ourselves.



REMEMBER

Poetry invites you to pay attention. It's a way to expand your awareness, your understanding, your store of experience.

Bringing Poetry into Your Life

Poetry is all around us. It's in the subways in London, Chicago, New York, and elsewhere; it's also in urban graffiti. Many of us post poems on the refrigerator, next to the bed, or on office walls, just to have inspiration near. A friend of ours has Robert Frost's "A Swinger of Birches" on the fridge. Another has "Wild Geese" by Mary Oliver. (Look these up and read them. If you like them, share them on social media!)

Online, you can connect to poetry from all over the world, sampling the best of all time for the cost of logging on. Oh, yes, and of course there are books and magazines. Part 4 of this book contains twenty poems to get you started.

In the following sections, we glance at a few ways you can inject some more poetry into your life.

Online is just fine

Thousands of websites feature poetry, and they're yours for the reading. In Chapter 11, we state the monumental, obvious truth: The Digital Age just blew the roof off the poetry world. Reading poetry, writing it, getting it published, reading in public — it's all changed in a very cool way.

Consider Emily Dickinson. We asked Google Gemini (an AI chatbot) how many websites mention her. Gemini immediately rolled over on its back, belly up: a "specific count of web pages mentioning Emily Dickinson is unattainable." Gosh, thanks! So, we typed *Emily Dickinson* into a search field, and the fun began. We get a photo, birth and death dates. We get a link — this is just delicious, really — to no less than *Forbes* magazine, "10 Famous Emily Dickinson Poems Worth the Read" (`www.forbes.com/sites/entertainment/article/emily-dickinson-poems`).

Everyone wants in on the Emily thing. Wikipedia and Brittanica want to tell you all about her. The Poetry Foundation has a huge selection of Emily. Project

Gutenberg (https://gutenberg.org) offers Emily e-books. If you need a physical Emily book in your home, as we do, Amazon, Barnes & Noble, and myriad other outlets will sell you good collections costing not much. And, we know, we know, Emily is now a star of film and TV.

You can find lots and lots of Emily-adorers reading her aloud online. The Library of Congress has posted an entire Emily Dickinson Marathon Reading (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gtH6LU_THE0)! In Figure 1-2, Elizabeth Robinson takes the mic during the Emily Dickinson Marathon Reading at the Library of Congress, December 8, 2014.



FIGURE 1-2: Elizabeth Robinson takes the mic during the Emily Dickinson Marathon Reading at the Library of Congress, December 8, 2014.

Library of Congress. Public domain.

So how to handle all this Emily? You *could* just dive in . . . or perhaps you might follow a more patient course:

- **Start** with just a handful of poems.
- **Book up:** Learn about her fascinating, idiosyncratic poems and life. She is a personality, we'll say that.
- **Download or purchase a collection** and keep it around the house, to pick up and read when the impulse hits.
- **Listen to a podcast or watch an online discussion:** The BBC podcast *In Our Time* has a good one (www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b08p51bp). As for video, check out *Trailblazing Women: Emily Dickinson and Poetry in America*, a PBS Books panel discussion (www.youtube.com/watch?v=pHyJayP9pac&t=1s).

» **Do the bounce-bounce:** Poems-Wiki-poems-experts-podcasts-videos-poems! Whenever you want to know more, return to your online or analog reference sources and book up. And always, back to the poems!

Emily Dickinson is only one of many poets, including Walt Whitman, C.P. Cavafy, Rainer Maria Rilke, Federico García Lorca, Lucille Clifton, and Anne Sexton, whose work has a big online presence. Online is definitely the most immediate pathway to poetry. Start with moderate steps, as we suggest in the preceding list. You're building your personal tastes: No one is looking over your shoulder (least of all *us*).

Checking out libraries

Your local library is a great source for poetry — and best of all, it's free. Libraries are wonderful, supportive places where reading (silently) is celebrated and encouraged. Ask the reference librarian where the poetry section is (or look up a favorite poet), go there, and read. You could also pull a book out at random. We did, and we came upon these lines:

> Summer swallows spring and goes into September
> Like long division it is always there
> Autumn, fall we say, fruit releases itself
> You are new enough so the old catches up
> Cross this bridge come to that one
> You grow up and ancient history snaps back
> Rubber band and rake handle

The poem turns out to be "Vermont Apollinaire" by William Corbett. Not bad for a stab in the dark at a random shelf in a library.

That first line tells you about the subject is autumn. Corbett writes about summer "go[ing] into" September, an echo of long division, in which things "go into" other things. The poem explores how the past comes back to you, snapping back like a rubber band, or a handle when you step on a rake.

Note: Corbett compares the past with the rubber band and rake handle in an implicit, unspoken way. That's a *metaphor.* Had Corbett said, "ancient history snaps back *like* a rubber band or a rake handle," he would have been using a *simile.* Welcome, metaphors and similes! Our first glimpse of two of the most important techniques in a poet's repertoire! (To read more about metaphor and simile, see Chapter 4.)



TIP

Try selecting a poetry book off a library shelf yourself, and if you like what you read, check out the book and sample more. Note that libraries often host poetry readings or reading circles. Get online, see what's up, take part.

In Figure 1-3, Joseph Chelius (back, center) discusses his new poetry book, *Playing Fields,* at a July 2025 reading at the Indian Valley Public Library, Telford, Pennsylvania.



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FIGURE 1-3: Joseph Chelius (back, center) discusses his new poetry book, *Playing Fields,* at a July 2025 reading at the Indian Valley Public Library, Telford, Pennsylvania.

Browsing through bookstores

Maybe checking out library books terrifies you, or you'd rather own your own. Well, then, go to your local bookstores, or their online catalogues, or just call them up and order a book.

Peruse the following list of inexpensive books of poetry. Select two or three and see what you think. All these are paperbacks. (You can buy e-books, but they tend not to be as easy or as good to read with poetry. Decide for yourself, though.)

COLLECTING FLOWERS: ANTHOLOGIES

Anthologies are collections of work by a number of poets. (The word *anthology* is descended from a Greek word for "collection of flowers.") Anthologies are fine starting-points for anyone interested in poetry. Check online or browse in your local library or bookstore(s).

Thousands of poetry anthologies are in existence — many with specific themes — and many display the best a particular culture or group has to offer. Start your personal flower collection today!



TIP

- *Inferno,* by Dante Alighieri. Translation: Mary Jo Bang. Drawings: Henrik Drescher. (Graywolf Press, 2013).

  If you like *Inferno*, keep going with Bang's translations of *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*!
- *The Kingdom of Surfaces,* by Sally Wen Mao (Graywolf Press, 2023).
- *The Penguin Book of Modern African Poetry* (Penguin, 2007).
- *With My Back to the World*, by Victoria Chang. (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2024).
- *Twenty Love Poems: And a Song of Despair,* by Pablo Neruda. Translated by W.S. Merwin. (Penguin, 2006).
- *When the Light of the World Was Subdued, Our Songs Came Through: A Norton Anthology of Native Nations Poetry.* Edited by Joy Harjo. (W.W. Norton, 2020).
- *In the Lateness of the World,* by Carolyn Forché. (Penguin, 2021).

Attending readings

It's likely you can find a number of places near you where poetry readings, like the one shown in Figure 1-4, happen. Try local colleges, universities, libraries, coffee shops, and bookstores. There may even be poetry-reading groups in your town. (If not, you could always start one.)

You can find these events on the device of your choice. Tell your browser to find either *poetry readings near me* or *poetry readings near* [local town or Zip Code]. You can also check EventBrite (`www.eventbrite.com`) or AllEvents (`https://allevents.in/`[*input your town's name*]), sites that often list poetry readings or related gatherings. Also hit the websites of your local bookstores, coffee shops, colleges, or universities.



TIP

Most papers — local weeklies, especially — have entertainment sections that list things to do; poetry readings often make such lists. Also, if your town has its own website, check to see what's available.

However you find it, poetry is often a pleasant surprise.



FIGURE 1-4: A 1995 poetry reading at City Lights Bookstore in San Francisco, California, featuring poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti.

© Christopher Felver

Writing Poetry

Millions of people have tried. And you could be one of them. Many turn to writing verse at times of great emotion, insight, or need. And many who always loved poetry have thought about writing it.

The nice thing is this: *There's no one to ask for permission!* We could never cover everything about writing poetry in just one chapter (we devote a all of Part 3 to it). But here are some guidelines to consider right now, if you just can't wait.

Becoming a poet

Writing poetry involves more than scribbling in a notebook; it involves undertaking a way of life, one in which you value being creative and sensitive. Poets often do the following:

- **Discover as much as you can about the poetic craft.** Read lots of poetry. Meet other poets. Become part of a poetic community. Find a mentor. Attend readings and workshops. Take writing classes.
- **Become as sensitive as you can to life and to language.** Figure out your personal sense of what is beautiful, emotionally moving, startling, worthwhile — in life *and* in poetry.
- **Think *divergently* (that is, keep your mind open and nimble, and be willing to think in different ways and new directions).** You never know when, where, or how the creative urge will come to you, but you can prepare the way for it.
- **Make time for write.** After all, if you don't write, you're not a writer.
- **Be disciplined. Revise. Revise again.** Don't settle for clichés or what others say. Find out what kind of poetry only *you* can write.

Keeping a poetry journal

Many poets keep journals: repositories of ideas, images, topics, drafts of poems, other people's poetry, *found objects* (things you pick up that inspire you or that could become the basis for poems, such as someone else's grocery list). You can keep a journal in a notebook or on a laptop, tablet, smartphone, or micro recorder of your choice.



TIP

Many poets commit to writing in their journals each day. Their journals are, essentially, the "office" where their poetry work takes place. Keeping a daily journal is a good idea, so we heartily recommend you go out and get a journal for your own use.

What do you put in your journal? It's blissfully, beautifully up to you. Some poets keep a diary. Some write down dreams, meals, scraps of personal or overheard conversation. Only you can decide the exact way in which you'll fill your journal. Chapter 15 provides some journal exercises you may want to try.