

C D F G

N O P Q

V W X Y

4 5 6 7

The ABC's of Poetry

Teaching the Abecedarian and the Anagram

JASON SCHNEIDERMAN

I. Introducing the Abecedarian

Most of us use the alphabet to find books in libraries, to file documents, or to look things up. But the alphabet can also be used to order poems. We tend to think of letters as representing sounds, even though our alphabet is famously inconsistent when it comes to phonetics. Dr. Seuss' book title *The Tough Coughs as He Ploughs the Dough* calls attention to the absurdity of "ough" being called upon to make so many different sounds. But we can also use the alphabet as a kind of poetic order. We can let letters, in concert with the sounds they make, structure poems in multiple ways.

For most younger students, the simple acrostic is the most familiar abecedarian, though I have to admit that I think it's the least interesting. While there are fascinating acrostics—Edgar Allen Poe once wrote out the name of his beloved in the first letter of the first line, the second letter of the second line, etc—the acrostic in English seems more about deciphering code than displaying mastery. Faced with the task (yet

again) of writing an acrostic for "Jason," my younger self cringed at the task. Even as a second-grader, I understood that poetry had to involve restriction and challenge. Fortunately there are other ways of structuring poems using the alphabet that are more interesting, challenging, and fun.

Any poem that relies on the alphabet for its order is called an "Abecedarian." Robert Pinsky's "ABC" exemplifies the simplest version of the form¹:

ABC

Any body can die, evidently. Few
Go happily, irradiating joy,

Knowledge, love. Most
Need oblivion, painkillers,
Quickest respite.

Sweet time unafflicted,
Various world:

X = your zenith.

I often use this poem as the starting point for an exercise. I give my students a sheet of paper with Pinsky's poem, alongside the alphabet written out with spaces next to each word (see the worksheet at

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¹"ABC" from *Jersey Rain* by Robert Pinsky. Copyright ©2000 by Robert Pinsky. Reprinted by permission of Farrar, Straus and Giroux, LLC.

the end of the article). Their assignment is to write a poem using the abecedarian form. The letters are already in order, so the student doesn't have to consider the alphabet. Sometimes students will miss the point of the exercise, and simply list words in alphabetical order, without any effort to make the words into a coherent set of sentences. You may want to stress that Pinsky's poem means something, and that the fun is having the challenge of the order alongside the need to tell a story or make a point. Remind them you assigned the order, but they have to pick the subject matter. On the worksheet, I leave enough room after each letter so that the student can try out three or four words before settling on the right version, and make sure to have extra copies of the worksheet on hand, since many students go through more than one.

This is particularly effective as a first exercise for a class—especially when you know that students will be arriving at different times, and you want to keep everyone focused and busy. The form is simple enough to explain as each student arrives, but challenging enough to keep students engaged for upwards of an hour.

I try to give the students a few helpful hints as they work:

1) Start with the end. If you can solve the problem of what to do with XYZ, everything else will be easier. I often recommend playing with the "X," so that it might become "X-ceed" or "X-plore." Could "X" become the roman numeral for "10"?

2) Use a subject that will let you use names. For example, if you write about animals, you can also assign an animal to difficult letters. I wrote an abecedarian about film directors, so I could end on "Zeffirelli." In solving the problem of the "x," I advise that a poem about the elements would offer "xenon," a poem about

dictators could give you "Xerxes," and a poem about places might yield "Xanadu."

3) Decide how far you can bend the rules. Pinsky allows himself a symbol to get through a particularly rough patch. If you heard the poem out loud, you might be surprised that "e" (since you would say "equals") shows up at the end, but visually (orthographically), the rules are obeyed. Would "X-chromosome" be an acceptable "x" word? My own rule of thumb is that I let myself out of one formal constraint in every formal poem. So I might skip one rhyme in a sonnet, or allow a sestina to have one open space instead of an end-word.

4) It's usually easier not to tell a story, but if you are going to use a story, use unnamed characters. If you start with "Andrew bought Carla diamonds," neither name can come back into the poem. Though you could wait for "h" to get to "he" and "s" for she, if you really wanted to use that beginning.

The abecedarian is also an excellent opening for a workshop because it expands students' notions of what poetic form can be. It shows students that poems can find form in unexpected places. This particular version of the abecedarian demands a compression that is challenging but satisfying. It emphasizes technique and revision. It also tends to equalize the students. Whether you have five students or thirty students, you will have time to hear all of the student efforts. Even if a particularly fast student writes two or three complete abecedarians while a slower student only gets as far as "H," the distribution of time in hearing the results is not terribly skewed. Shy students can usually manage to read twenty-six words, and eager students are limited to the same number. This exercise also begins to create cohesion in the group. As they listen to each others' exercises, they listen for the same

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thing—the unfolding of the alphabet against a coherent set of ideas. At least for this exercise, they perfectly understand each others' vision for their poems. Also, since they share the same challenge of writing their way through “XYZ,” the poems all build to the most anticipated moment. The suspense can be very exciting, as they wait to see how they each met the same challenge.

II.

The word “abecedarian” simply means “arranged in alphabetical order” (OED), and can describe any poem that has any sort of alphabetical arrangement. The most common form of the abecedarian is the “abecedarius,” or an “alphabet acrostic” in which the first letter of each line spells out the alphabet (Turco 121). The earliest recorded use of the abecedarius is in Hebrew (Preminger and Brogan 3), where psalms and prayers were often composed as poems running from *aleph* to *tav*. I was taught in Hebrew school that the abecedarius was a way to limit the endless desire for praising God. If a poem weren't composed with some system for bringing about an ending, the poet might never stop writing and get back to plowing his fields.

In teaching the abecedarian one sees the microcosms of order and chaos that structure every poem. Most of us are taught our numbers and our letters at roughly the same time. It may be that the tendency toward alphabet acrostics in Hebrew is related to the fact that the letters have numeric values. While numbers proceed in a fairly straightforward fashion (each number is one more than the last), the order of the alphabet has to be brought into sense through song. I know many people who still sing the alphabet song in their head when they need to put things in alphabetical order. To bring that order in all of its history and arbitrariness to a poem is a challenge.

The other major advantage of this exercise is that while students are often familiar with rhyme and rhythm as ways to structure poems, the abecedarian offers students another method of order. It also takes something that becomes invisible as we learn to write—the letters themselves—and returns them

to centrality. And the more students focus on every aspect of composition, the wider their horizons become.

III.

If the class has enjoyed the abecedarian, I often introduce the anagram poem. Once they are excited about letters, it seems to follow quite naturally—though now they go from using the alphabet as a spine to rearranging letters. I usually start with Henri Cole's “Anagram,” from his 1998 book *The Visible Man*. In this poem, he finds anagrams for “Henri Cole” and capitalizes the results, one anagram per stanza. The poem begins

Scrawling the letters of my name,
I found and changed what I became:

first, HERON LICE emerged,
like shame usurping dignity.

Then LION CHEER assembled,
as if proof I was palimpsest. (1-6)

Cole goes on to find charming anagrams like “I NO LECHER,” “IRON LEECH,” and “I CLONE HER.” Students can start with their own names, seeing if they can find anagrams there. This works best if they write out their names, and then cut the paper into individual letters so that they can move them around. I once revealed to a class that I had spent hours trying to find anagrams for my own name to no avail. One of my students, a particularly gifted anagrammatist, e-mailed me a few days later to let me know that while “Jason Schneiderman” indeed yields nothing, “Jason Schneiderman Poet” results in “Nascent hope joins dream.” I found that rather pleasing.

It is not unusual for poets to call attention to their use of the anagram. Craig Arnold's poem “Uncouplings” begins

There is no I in *teamwork*
but there is a *two maker*

there is no I in *together*

but there is a *got three*

a *get to her*. (1-5)

The poem concludes, “there is an I in *family* / also *my fail*” (16-17). Peter Pereira’s “Anagrammer” plays with the fun of anagrams, while giving them increasing weight. “If you believe in the magic of language, / then *Elvis* really *Lives* / and *Princess Diana* foretold *I end as car spin*” (1-3).

A more ambitious kind of anagram poem actually makes each line an anagram of every other line. Kevin McFadden is a master of this kind of poem. His anagram poems feature an italicized last line from which all the other lines are derived. In his poem, “Art,” the last line “The poem is a self-portrait always” (20), yields such masterful moments as

The poem is pi, a software astrally
lawless. The poem is a patriot fray,
a wry separatist. Lo, the poem fails. (4-6)

McFadden’s mastery of anagrams is virtuosic, and all of my classes have been awestruck by his facility within his chosen restriction.

IV

With the abecedarian, you can hear the alphabet playing out as surely as you can hear the rhyme in a sonnet or the repetition in a sestina. With both the abecedarian and the anagram poem, letters become visible in the act of listening. The excitement of the abecedarian and the anagram is not only the demand for compression, but also the thrill of orthography (writing!) making itself heard. This is also a great way to show students how following a form can give them new things to say. Often students think of form as a restriction—but when their hand is forced, the results can surprise them, allowing them to find expression for a previously unexpressed thought.

The possibilities for adding and combining are endless. One of the examples I like to show my students is John Deming’s “Quadruple Abecedarian: His First Solo Vacation” which has two acrostic features.

The first letters of each line spell out the alphabet from A–Z; the last letters of each line spell out the alphabet in reverse order, from Z–A. Each line has eight words, and the first letter of the fourth word in each line is its own acrostic, running from Z–A. The last letter of the fifth word of each line then runs from A–Z. The full poem is available on the Best American Poetry Blog, and I would only give it to students who have spent enough time on abecedarians to really appreciate the challenge. Students who have been struggling with these forms always have a new respect for formally accomplished abecedarians. I will close with the first four lines of Deming’s poem. I have bolded the relevant letters.

Ancient, it seemed, **Z**ach’s mama listening to **D**iz’
blow his horn; **y**ams, **c**ob corn, and **s**avory
chicken cooking to **x**antho-brown; stoic **Z**ach on
coccyx
down in that wonderful yard, smelling deeply. **N**ow
everything was different. **V**iciously labyrinthine,
the age **X**XXV.
Formerly wed, now **u**ncommitted, **o**ff alone to
Honolulu. 🍷

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Abecdarian

Write a poem using the abecedarian form, where the first word starts with the letter "A," the second word with the letter "B," continuing on to the last line, which will start with the letter "Z."

Try to make your poem express a coherent idea or story, rather than simply listing words in alphabetical order.

The order is fixed, but the subject matter is up to you.

A _____

B _____

C _____

D _____

E _____

F _____

G _____

H _____

I _____

J _____

K _____

L _____

M _____

N _____

O _____

P _____

Q _____

R _____

S _____

T _____

U _____

V _____

W _____

X _____

Y _____

Z _____