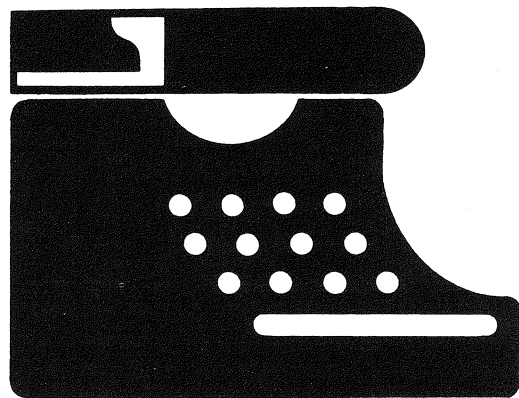


# Teachers & Writers



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## Why a Novel?

by Barbara Baracks

**M**Y GOAL AT HUNTER COLLEGE ELEMENTARY School was to have each one of the third and fourth graders I was working with write a novel. Why a novel? Because it's the monster under the bed for so many writers. Let's get it out from under there. A novel is the longest structure in fiction writing. Like aspirin, no one knows exactly how it works. It's a formless, shapeless mass unless infused with the writer's personality. It also lends itself to episodic form, arranging situations chronologically and/or situationally through chapters. A novel must generate its own internal structure, there are no outside absolute models. How can children approach this overwhelming task? One lesson I've learned as a writer is that there's no ideal structure. Kids (and adults too) can waste a lot of time straining over "perfect" frameworks for their feelings. There are no perfect frameworks, there are only makeshift ones that turn out to work just fine.

During my first few weeks I gave the children short writing assignments, as I usually do in each school. Through this routine I gained some idea of the strengths and weaknesses of individual students, and of classes as a whole. I found tremendous variance in sheer ability to write, a variance I had to take into account while helping kids with their individual long-term projects. Another reason for beginning with short, easy-to-handle writing assignments was to introduce slowly the sometimes painful solitariness that goes into writing.

Kids in classrooms are aware of each other first and delve into solitariness furtively (usually while the teacher is talking). Each classroom has its own collective mood supporting (or estranging) the class's individual personalities.

BARBARA BARACKS has written a novel, *Pleasure*. She also writes short fiction—a story, "Unmentionable Weather" is appearing in an upcoming issue of *MS*. She writes journalism and criticism for the *Village Voice* and other publications.

That's why the kids' verbal interplay at the beginning of a creative writing session can be so important: it focuses that collective personality on a train of ideas and by doing so gives permission to the individual kids in the class to be private for a few minutes and write, without feeling they're isolating themselves by doing so. The pre-writing discussion is working best if the kids are talking to each other as much as, if not more than, to me. They are watching themselves thinking and, if it's a good day, are about to enter what Joan Didion called "that room."

By the end of six weeks most (though not all) of the children had had some experience of entering into that privacy which engenders writing. But the question now was: could they begin to work on their own, without a preliminary public discussion of a group project? How do children provide their own direction for work? Can they generate their own structure without becoming overburdened—terrified—by all that weight? To what extent can

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# BOOKS

*The Power of Creative Writing: A Handbook of Insights, Activities, and Information to Get Your Students Involved.* By Bernard Percy. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1981. 182 pages. npl.

Review by Susan Mernit

ADDRESSED TO TEACHERS, BERNARD PERCY'S book is an inspirational pep talk on using creative writing in the classroom that could more aptly be subtitled 'How to Get Yourself Involved.' "It is up to us to create writing programs to allow students to say what needs saying," argues Percy, explaining why personal writing is a valuable learning device that fights intellectual passivity, boredom and poor motivation.

However, Percy is clear that for a creative writing program to succeed, it must have a skilled instructor. "Your personal belief of what creative writing is will obviously affect how you teach and involve students," Percy writes, "so it is vital you have clarity and certainty in your personal definition." His simple, straight talk about building a comfortable, supportive classroom atmosphere, personal anecdotes and sample lessons are all helpful and informative.

More than any non-writer I've read, Percy has a clear idea of the dynamics that go into structuring a creative writing program, prior to beginning to write, so that children will experience success and appreciation rather than anxiety and failure. Percy understands and can articulate how writing is both expressive and a learning experience which applies academic skills, and he shows how to strike a balance between the two. His suggestion on making the classroom into a safe, secure, learning environment could educate any teacher.

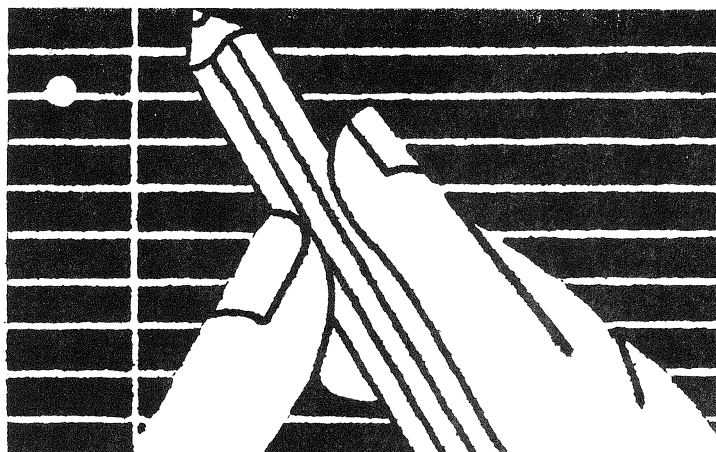
One of the best ways, Percy points out, to distinguish between gentle praise with correction, and overzealous editing, is to keep the required skills (grammar, use of metaphor or other techniques, etc.) separate from the student's creative effort. For harried teachers, cramming kids for tests, it may seem hard to justify not 'using' every piece of writing, but the added restraint is well worth it. I'll always remember how upset both the children and I were in one elementary school class where, during a week when I was away, the teacher went through the creative writing folders and corrected all the students' work in red pen—free-writing, drafts, notes, everything. Whether this was zeal, anxiety, or hostility, it made the students feel diminished.

Percy is at his best when discussing what motivates students, the teacher's role, and integrating writing into other curriculum areas. Many of his ideas are fresh and provoca-

tive: one of them, having students make a detailed guidebook of the neighborhood, I am thinking of using. However, when Percy presents specific literary forms and techniques, he is not as good.

In the chapters entitled The Essay (Composition), Poetry, and Fiction: The Short Story, too many of the ideas are corny or dated. The state of the art in creative writing instruction has passed far beyond the haiku and doggerel verse Percy relies on and has his students write. Often, what he praises as an outstanding example of student writing, I found to be cutesy, stereotyped and closer to what adults pressure children's verse to be than what, left to their own devices, children's verse is. There is also an uncomfortable vein of sexism—both boys and girls write, but all the *writers*, the professionals he mentions, are males. In fact, Percy quotes another author to the effect that "what no wife of a writer can understand. . ."

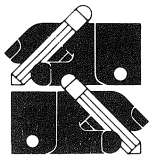
In a section entitled The Perfect Lesson, Percy talks about a rainy day in Brooklyn, New York. He puts Vivaldi



on the class record player, illuminates a beautiful fish tank, and asks the fifth graders to watch the wind blow the clouds across the sky. As the room grows quiet and thoughtful, Percy gives them an assignment—write about "What Peace Is." The students comply, and their dutifully recorded compositions, while pretty, sound forced and unspontaneous, suggesting this was an overly structured assignment.

Throughout *The Power of Creative Writing*, I sensed that Percy created the right kind of atmosphere to write and truly understood and cared about kids, but he wasn't quite sure how to fully utilize the environment he'd created. Like a boy who takes ten years of classical piano and only plays "Chopsticks," Percy has a gift, but this book doesn't show how to use it to its fullest extent. As an adjunct to a writing book such as Barbara Danish's *Writing As A Second Language* or *The Whole Word Catalog 2*, edited by Ron Padgett and Bill Zavatsky, this book would be helpful encouragement for a writing teacher, but by itself it could never suffice.

SUSAN MERNIT works for Teachers & Writers Collaborative in District 5, Harlem, and has just finished a screenplay, 'Girl of the Follies.'



# IDEA EXCHANGE

## Student Writers\*

by Alan Ziegler

**LENGTH AND SPEED. WHEN RESPONDING TO** assignments, some students equate “longer” with “better,” as in, “You only wrote *one* page? I’m up to five and still going.” Hopefully, those five pages will be wonderful, but chances are there’s a lot of filler. Even if the five pages were airtight, this story wouldn’t necessarily be superior to a one-page story.

An assignment handled admirably in eight lines by one student may evoke an epic poem or long story in another

\*This is the second of several articles to be excerpted from the recently published book *The Writing Workshop* by Alan Ziegler (Teachers & Writers Collaborative, 1981).

ALAN ZIEGLER is the author of *So Much to Do* (poems), *Planning Escape* (poems), *Sleeping Obsessions* (collaborative poems with Harry Greenberg and Larry Zirlin), and *The Writing Workshop*.

student. Knowing how far to take a piece of work is a quality that cannot be taught but which should be discussed.

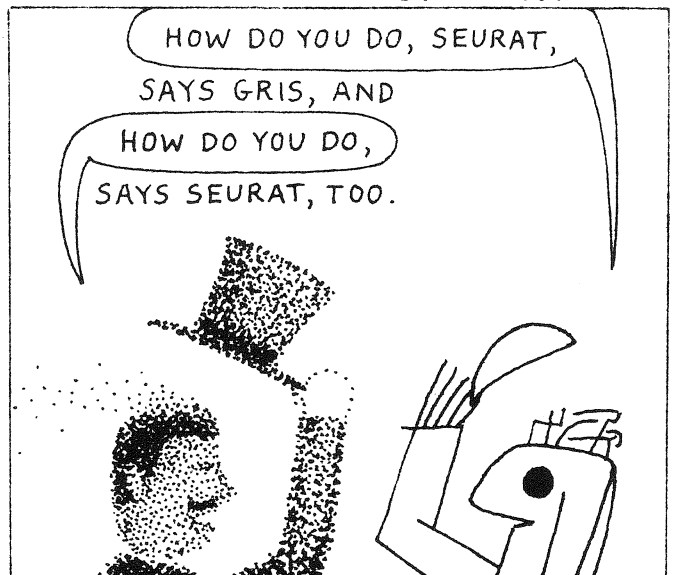
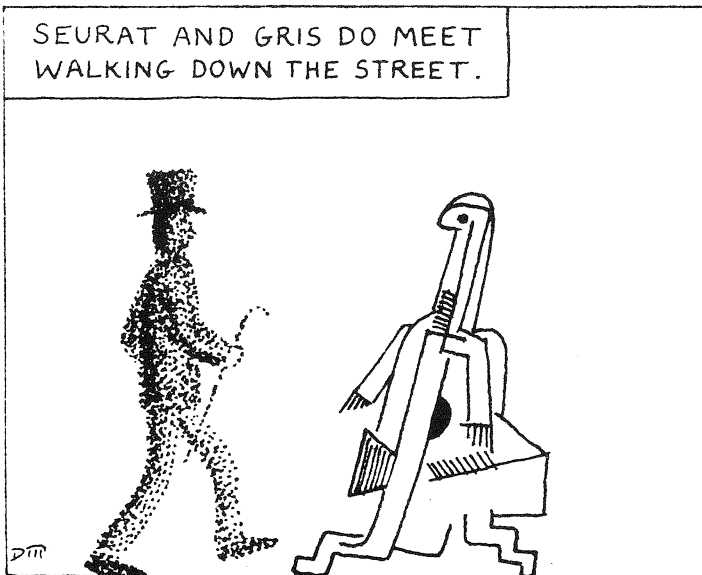
Unless they are writing under deadline, speed should not be a factor; students should not feel pressured to beat each other to the final punctuation mark. Many students feel a sense of accomplishment in being first to finish *anything* in class, as if each activity were a race in which the first hand shooting up signalled victory. I once heard an early finisher moan condescendingly, “Are you still working?” to a classmate who was agonizing over whether or not to eliminate the first line of her poem and whether to add a simile to the fourth line. “Yes, and proud of it,” was her reply.

Sometimes five minutes after I give a complicated assignment, a student will throw down his/her pencil with authoritative finality and announce, “I’m done.” My reply is usually, “Let’s see about that.” It is possible that a delightful, complete piece has been written, but more likely there has been an attempt to traverse conception to completion in two or three perfunctory steps.

**Spontaneity.** The rules of the game are different for creative writing than they are for many other classroom tasks—the writing workshop needs openness and flexibility by students and teacher alike. Most history questions and math

### EXCEPT AT NIGHT

BY RON PADGETT



problems are laid out so that the students know exactly what is expected of them, and there is usually a correct response. It doesn't work that way with good creative writing assignments, which invite trying individual approaches. Students have usually been taught to be concerned with following instructions, a necessary behavior in many endeavors. Being overly concerned with the instructions for a writing assignment, however, can interfere with the creative process.

Because of the large number of students in most classes, the pressures of the school day, and the convenience of having everyone work on the same thing at the same time and finish together, it is tempting to use a stimulus/response approach to teaching writing. This would consist of presenting a highly structured writing assignment, followed by execution of that assignment. Unfortunately, this kind of approach can also "execute" creative impulses. On the other hand, if you encourage your students not to give equal time to each assignment and to consider changes in direction, you help them learn to make artistic commitments based on internal needs instead of external demands.

Pity the creative writer whose mind doesn't wander! One fascinating aspect of artistic venture is that the work can change shape and direction right before your eyes. Students should be open to the possibility of turning off of the main boulevard of an assignment in order to explore the side streets. Changing horses in midstream might mean getting wet, but it also might result in finding an interesting place you hadn't considered visiting when you set out on your journey. Poet/teacher Richard Hugo makes the distinction between what triggers a piece of writing and what is generated during the course of writing: "A poem can be said to have two subjects, the initiating or triggering subject, which starts the poem or 'causes' the poem to be written, and the real or generated subject, which the poem comes to say or mean, and which is generated or discovered in the poem during the writing." The stimulus that gets a poem or story started might become less important as the piece progresses and might not even appear in the final version.

Some pieces of writing suffer because the author knew too much, too soon. Such writing can convey a feeling that the issues had been settled and the tension resolved before the pen even reached the paper. There was no confrontation, just a distanced recording. I am not saying that all writing experiences should be full of changes in direction and surprises, but that students are often better off being faithful to their own creative impulses than to an assignment or even to the first few lines of a piece. Before I started encouraging students to pursue opportunities suggested in the course of their writing and not worry so much about doing the assignment "correctly," there would often be one student who, after hearing others read their work out loud, would be reluctant to share his/her poem because, "I goofed up and did it wrong." Usually this student had actually done an interesting piece of writing, perhaps even suggesting a new twist on the assignment or a new topic entirely.

Here is an excerpt from a student who started responding to an assignment to link exaggerated physical actions with emotions and ended up on another planet:

I'm so mad at my brother that I could punch him out in-

to space. Now my idiotic brother is zooming in space getting nowhere but finally he lands on a weird planet named Lunatic. . . .

—Rachel Satyabhashak

Rachel didn't go too much further with this story. But, if days after the other students had finished their poems about their emotions, Rachel had been deep into a science fiction story, I wouldn't have admonished her for not following directions. On the contrary, I would have been glad that my assignment had enabled her to generate something truly her own.

Robin Snow, a sixth-grader whose name is a poem itself, described an experience with change of direction: "One time I started to write a composition and for some reason right then and there it turned into a poem. It seemed like the composition went the way *it* wanted, not the way I wanted. It was like some powerful force had taken over." This "powerful force" comes so rarely to writers that it would be a shame to resist, without at least giving the force a chance to "put up or shut up." Not every powerful force turns into a great piece of writing, but the least one can do is hear it out.

Distractions occur all the time: Sometimes while talking to a friend, watching a movie, or sitting in a writing workshop, we find ourselves "somewhere else." A phrase keeps turning around silently on our tongue; we picture someone we haven't thought about in years; a fantasy unfolds; or there is something so urgent going on in our life that it's difficult for anything else to command our attention. Distractions should be treated similarly to changes in direction. They are differentiated from changes in direction in that they don't emanate directly from the text. Students should be encouraged to track down these distractions and write about them, even if it means dropping an assignment in mid-sentence or not even starting it at all.

Now that I have extolled the virtues of spontaneity, let me pull back a little. While detours and distractions can be beneficial to follow, students should not become *too* fickle. Constant straying from the task at hand may be a symptom of an inability to sustain a writing idea.

**Discipline.** One of the traits necessary for success in any field—especially the arts—is the resolve to stick with something. Sometimes the path is lined with difficulties and exhaustion, common roadblocks in the writing process.

Students sometimes drop their work in mid-writing—or never get started—because of frustration aroused by trying to cope with disconcerting or unwieldy material or because of mental exhaustion. Although it can be helpful to put away a difficult piece for a time or to rest for a while and recharge their batteries, students should not become predisposed to avoidance or a pattern of laziness. It is important for them to learn when to "hang in there" and persist until they either succeed or are convinced that a poem or story cannot be realized, at least not now. This sense of whether to pause, persist, or desist comes from a self-awareness gleaned from experience.

My own method with a difficult piece is to work on it in spurts—sporadic "sneak attacks." But at some point I usually make a sustained effort during which I try not to let my mind or body wander away from the boundaries of

the paper in front of me. When the going gets tough, though, many students get going—to the garbage can. This is one reason why I ask them not to throw away anything they write. It is possible to botch something so badly that they are better off with a fresh start, but students are more likely to be running away from the disorder that has appeared on the paper. Sometimes, when the disorder is *only* in appearance—cross-outs and sloppy handwriting—students need to be reminded that neatness is not a virtue on a rough draft. Other times, the disorder goes deeper than appearance: the content is messy. Being creative involves trying to find an order in disorder, to shape it into something meaningful and/or beautiful. Psychologist Rollo May points out that “mathematicians and physicists talk about the ‘elegance’ of a theory.” Often this elegance emerges out of a jumble of numbers, signs, and ideas.

As for dealing with exhaustion, this is a matter of getting to know one’s writing self. Certainly, we need rest, but there are times when my best writing comes when I think I have nothing left but decide to plow ahead and see what happens.

Many people have the image of creative writers and other artists as freewheeling and spontaneous, working when they get the whim until the whim runs out. This, thankfully, is the way it is *sometimes*. But most serious artists are capable of great discipline and often devote long stretches of concentrated effort to their work. When working with students, we must be careful not to give them the impression that artistic expression is always natural and fun; otherwise, when they find out for themselves how much hard work is involved they will conclude either that *we* don’t know much about what it’s really like or that *they* must not be very good at it.

My students write mostly short pieces. I encourage them to try at least one long poem, extended short story, and/or play, for the experience of having an ongoing involvement with a writing project. Through this involvement, they will become familiar with and learn to cope with the inevitable roadblocks.

There is another reason for discussing the importance of discipline in writing, and I would be remiss not to deal with it both in my workshops and in this book. A writing workshop should encourage individualized written expression, but this approach conflicts with many writing tasks that confront students. Take the essay question on an exam (as Henny Youngman would add, “Please!”): The student has a time limit, perhaps as little as ten minutes, so there is insufficient time for prewriting; if the student stares out the window searching for inspiration for ten minutes, it’s all over. The time limit also eliminates the opportunity for much revision; there is hardly enough time for one draft. If the student does revise directly on the exam (crossing out and inserting), the paper will appear to be “messy,” which may have a negative effect on the teacher, for whom grading exam questions is tedious enough without having to decipher a tangle of cross-outs and arrows. Finally, if in the middle of an essay question on the causes of World War I, the student has a great insight about the League of Nations and pursues this change of direction, he/she will lose points for “not answering the question.”

Is this, then, an admission that if you follow the advice in this book your students will be ill-prepared to deal with other writing activities, that they will become spoiled and

temperamental “artistes”? No way. (Aren’t you relieved? I know I am.) The more someone’s confidence is built up and the more mastery they feel over language the more capable they become of handling *any* writing task. Much of what students do in the workshop can feed into other tasks: What teacher wouldn’t welcome a composition that had some life and a sense of voice? What college admissions officer wouldn’t be impressed by an application autobiography that used clear language and imagery and read like a short story?

Professional writers, especially journalists, often have to write under pressure and conform to someone else’s standards. We should help students to understand that there are certain times when they have to play by someone else’s rules and that they should work toward becoming confident, skillful writers who can deliver under any circumstances. This confidence is fostered by having successful experiences with open-ended writing and also by doing occasional “discipline drills”—assignments that must be completed, strictly following directions, within a given time period. A confident basketball player might say, “I’ll go one-on-one with anybody. Anywhere.” A confident writer would say, “I’ll write anything for anybody. Anytime.”

Students should come to feel like writers, not writing machines that need to be programmed before they can function. This means they must learn how to deal with making decisions about their writing, including when and how to be spontaneous and disciplined and to adapt to external factors.

## GOOD STUFF

We should not let students underestimate the difficulty of writing well, but neither should we dwell excessively on the difficulty. Writing is like a pet that sometimes sits around and mopes and sometimes growls and snaps, but which can be a great companion and, with care and patience, do some amazing tricks.

There are moments of pure writing, when you feel as if you are both the writer and the reader at the same time: when you find the phrase that expresses exactly what you have been trying to say or says something unexpected but appropriate that leads you to think “Wow! . . . but of course!”; when a character in a story says something so remarkable that you giggle with your own success; when a startling image jumps out of you and onto the page. Sometimes perfection comes in simplicity. Kafka wrote in his diary, “When I arbitrarily write a single sentence, for instance, ‘He looked out of the window,’ it already has perfection.”

Writing can function as merely a means to an end, but it can also be an end in itself. Sometimes it’s palatable at best, other times it’s downright delicious. Writing is an imprecise craft, erratic and sporadic; you pray for intervention in the form of inspiration, but you must contribute discipline and sweat. You may be in the midst of writing and feel exhausted. You don’t think it will ever come together. Then, a breakthrough, and it is finished. And it remains forever. I don’t always like writing, but I usually love having written.

Poet Frank O’Hara once said, “. . . at times when I would rather be dead the thought that I could never write another poem has so far stopped me.” ●

# The Fuss over Detail\*

by Barbara Danish

**A** DETAIL IS CONCRETE. IT IS A FACT. YOU can see it or smell it or touch it or taste it or hear it. We perceive details through our senses. We take these bits of information and collect them, categorize them, arrange them, analyze and evaluate them, and arrive at conclusions, points of view. The latter are generalizations and interpretations, and they are abstract. They are built on details.

We may say a sound is horrible, but we can't *hear* horrible. That is an evaluation of what we hear: fingernails scratching down a blackboard, a car alarm whining on and on.

We don't taste *food*. That is a collective word for specific things we eat: chilled cantaloupe, chocolate ice cream, a salted pretzel.

*Nature*, too, is a collection or category that we can't hear, smell, touch, or taste. What we can smell is cut grass, evergreens, roses, mildew.

Aristotle says, "There is nothing in the intellect that is not first in the senses." We continually receive sensory impressions, details, from which we build likes and dislikes, conclusions and ideas.

Since this is how we come to know things, writing tries to approximate the same process. But writing has a disadvantage. It is *not* the concrete experience. It is a series of words, marks on paper really, that tries to get a mind to start working: imagining, feeling things, reliving actual experiences.

The fuss over details compensates for the disadvantage of having no actual experience in the written word. When we fuss over details, we are giving the mind specific suggestions about how to get activated, how to fill out abstract words with concrete sensations. The more detailed our suggestions, the more actively we prod our minds or the minds of our readers to get busy reliving tastes, textures, sights,

\*This is the second of three articles to be excerpted from the recently published book *Writing as a Second Language* by Barbara Danish (Teachers & Writers Collaborative, 1981). The book is designed as a workbook for teachers with exercises to help improve writing fluency. It may be used to become comfortable with the writing process and learn specific techniques with which to write and revise, and at the same time, absorb a method of teaching that can be easily and successfully used in the classroom.

BARBARA DANISH, poet and writer, teaches writing with Teachers & Writers Collaborative in New York City and conducts teacher workshops through the Collaborative and in connection with the Hunter College Teacher Corps Program.

smells, and sounds. Our words take on concreteness and meaning.

In the following list, underline the word in each line that you can *more exactly* see, hear, taste, touch, or smell—the one that really activates your senses.

- |               |                 |
|---------------|-----------------|
| 1. loud       | clap of thunder |
| 2. chocolate  | sweet           |
| 3. elephant   | big             |
| 4. somberness | hushed voices   |
| 5. sharp      | razor blade     |
| 6. bungalow   | house           |
| 7. tree       | weeping willow  |
| 8. pungent    | rotten egg      |

Now look at this paragraph. Try to be aware of how many senses are activated by the writer.

## IN A GYM

*I am in a gym lifting weights. I smell the sweat of the men working out. I love the sound of weights and barbells hitting each other and clanging together. It looks like an entire army of people pushing things up and down, backwards, sideways, all around. It has pictures of body builders competing against each other. There are weights, weight lifting equipment all over the room which is very bright and noisy.*

—Scott Stein

The sound of barbells clanging, the smell of sweat (and even the implied salty taste of sweat), the picture of people moving energetically together—all are concrete details that conjure up the actual world of the gym and provide evidence for the writer's conclusion that the gym is a bright, noisy, wonderful place.

**Exercise.** What are the concrete details that you see, smell, hear, taste, or touch around you at this moment? For ten minutes direct your freewriting to collecting these details.

If you find yourself writing, "This apartment is really shabby. I hate it," pull yourself back to a specific part of the room—a wall, the ceiling, a particular chair or pile of papers—and see and record the precise details that cause the room to appear shabby.

If you find that a detail touches off a memory, look at the memory through concrete details.

If you have a distraction, don't censor it. See where it goes. If it leads you away from details, pull yourself back to where you are right now, to the sensory stimuli around you.

Don't worry about making sense or getting things in order or covering all the senses or making transitions.

Relax. Don't edit. Don't rush, but write steadily. Just talk to yourself and point out all the concrete details around you.

The following two articles are excerpted from an unpublished manuscript, *All Lives, All Dances, and All Is Loud*, edited by Emmett Jarrett. The book is a collaborative effort of several poets involved in the *Poets in the Schools Program* in New York State. It is intended to help teachers with students who are writing their own poems, and it presents the varied approaches of poets who have worked in many different situations in the schools.

## Questions Teachers Ask

by Emmett Jarrett

THE QUESTIONS TEACHERS ASK POETS OCCUR in a particular context. The poet has spent time in the school, teachers have seen students become excited about poetry and enthusiastic about writing. They have seen it work, participated in the process of poetry themselves, and their questions arise from their experience. Teachers want to know how to keep the excitement going. They want practical advice about how to continue what has been begun. Poets can give a great deal of such practical advice.

Yet there is another, more difficult sort of question, which is prior to all the practical advice. The question takes various forms—"Do poems have to rhyme?" "Do poems have to have meter?" "Do poems have to have form?" "What is the difference between poetry and prose?"—these are all aspects of the one basic question: *What makes something a poem?* There are no "answers" to this question, and I will not try to give any. There is no "definition" of poetry. But there are elements of poetry—sound values, rhythm, form, meaning—which contribute to making a piece of writing a poem.

### What makes something a poem?

There are two ways of knowing. One is the analytical, on which most modern technology is based. In this way of knowing a *house* is known in terms of the bricks it is made of and its function as shelter. The other way of knowing is more personal. Something is known by participating in the process of making or using it. A house can be known by experience, by actually building it, or living in it. I live in a house and find it, for example, a good place for writing.

These two ways of knowing are not mutually exclusive, but some areas of life seem to respond better to one than the other. I would not try to build an automobile by "getting the feel" of auto mechanics. Neither would I be able to write a poem by putting words and rules into a computer and asking it to spew forth the product. Poetry is

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participatory knowledge. You learn how to make a poem, and what makes something a poem, by doing it. Technical knowledge can be *imparted*—I tell you the formula and you solve the problem—but the knowledge of poetry can only be *shared*. My experience as a poet in the schools persuades me this is true. By working with students and teachers, making suggestions, having and sharing the "feel" of poetry, I have been able to share the experience with others, to help them make poems.

All of the misconceptions about poetry which are discussed below derive from the misapplication of one kind of knowledge, the technical, to a subject which requires participatory knowledge. Each mistake in the theory of poetry comes from confusing one aspect—rhyme and meter, for example—with a larger element—sound and rhythm. In these pages I am trying to show you the larger view, which avoids the errors of the analytical approach and takes into consideration a total experience of poetry.

### Do poems have to rhyme?

Rhyme is a regularly repeated pattern of sounds. The most familiar form is *exact* rhyme, and the most usual position is at the ends of lines, as in Shakespeare's couplet:

My words fly up, my thoughts remain below;  
Words without thoughts never to heaven go.  
*Hamlet*, Act III, Scene iii

However, not all poems follow this simple pattern. Rhyme does not have to be at the end of the line at all. When rhymes occur within a line they are called *internal* rhymes. And not all rhymes are exact; some are called *near rhymes*. Near rhymes involve a similarity of vowel sounds with differences among consonants (rope, note, broke) called *assonance*, as well as a similarity of consonant sounds with different vowels (lake, cook, peak), called *consonance*.

Rhyme is a much more subtle and varied thing than most people realize. But even with this broader understanding of rhyme, it is not necessary for every poem to rhyme. Every poem, however, will utilize the *sound values* of language, of which rhyme itself is one specific variety. Putting words together on a page in a poem involves having the sounds of the words rub shoulders with one another. Words are not abstract signs that merely stand for ideas; they are physical things—they *sound* when we speak them—and they have a "feel" that is important to the quality of a poem. Words can be rough or smooth, harsh or mellifluous. The word mellifluous illustrates the point: it

sounds “sweet,” perhaps because it comes from the Greek word *meli*, which means “honey”; and it “flows,” it is fluent on the tongue.

Rhyme, then, is only one of many ways of using the sound values of language. It appeals to the analytical mind because it is systematic. But the physical sounds of our language are too many and too varied to submit to a single system such as the repetition of final sounds at the ends of lines. Poems have to have sound values, because they are made with words; and the more skillful the poet, the better use will be made of sound in the poem. But poems do not have to have rhyme.

The poet whose ear is sensitive to the sound values of language may choose one word and reject another with the same meaning because of differences in sound. In a poem about marriage, for example, the poet may prefer the term *wedlock* for its suggestion of the binding nature of the relationship and the “interlocking” both of human bodies in physical love and of the emotions in human relationships. Sound influences the poet’s choice as much as the meaning of the two words.

Rhyming can be fun, and it can be funny, as readers of Ogden Nash’s light verse will affirm. It need not be used rigidly. There is no reason why a poem can’t have two or three lines which rhyme and two or three which don’t. The pattern, or rhyme scheme, is the tyrant for the beginning poet, much more than rhyme itself. If I have to rhyme this line with that one, I may be tempted to find a word which rhymes instead of the word which fits in every way that I intend. But if we learn to *play* with the sound values in language, one form of which is rhyme, it can again become an ornament for our poetry instead of a form of bondage for the poet.

### Do poems have to have meter?

Meter is any system for regulating the rhythm of language. There are many different systems of meter, but the one most familiar to us is the *accentual-syllabic* system. Often referred to as “conventional English meter,” this system counts the number of syllables in the line as well as the relative accent of syllables to one another. In Wordsworth’s line

The world is too much with us, late and soon,

there are ten syllables altogether. If we divide the line into five equal groups of two syllables each (called *feet*), the second syllable will be seen to be more strongly accented than the first, thus:

The world / is too / much with / us, late / and soon.

Such units, or feet, are called iambs. When there are five iambs to a line, the meter is known as *iambic pentameter*. This is the most common of conventional English meters.

It is important to remember however, that this is only one possible metrical system. The other possibilities include counting only syllables, as the French poets do, or counting only accents, as did the Anglo-Saxon ancestors of our English language. In Chinese, meter in poetry is visual because the written language is pictographic.

Any *meter* is only a particular system for describing the *rhythm* of poetry. Rhythm is the larger category, of which meter is but one example. It is to this larger entity that we must now turn our attention.

Everything in the universe has rhythm. The succession of waves on the seashore, the alternation of day and night and the seasons in nature, are large examples. The heart-beat of a human being is rhythmical, our breathing is rhythmical. Therefore language is rhythmical. The rhythm of our language probably derives from the way we breathe. Any rhythm has some regularity—which is what meter emphasizes—but natural rhythm, in language and in life, is not regular in the way the ticking of a clock is regular. Rhythm is fluid, not rigid. Compare the following stanzas:

Hickory, dickory, dock,  
The mouse ran up the clock;  
The clock struck one  
And down he run,  
Hickory, dickory, dock.  
—Nursery Rhyme

As the cat  
climbed over  
the top of  
the jamcloset  
first the right  
forefoot  
carefully  
then the hind  
stepped down  
into the pit of  
the empty  
flowerpot

—William Carlos Williams

The first poem is not more rhythmical than the second but more *regular* in the rhythmical repetitions it employs. By any aesthetic standard, the Williams poem is far more interesting rhythmically because of the variations in rhythmic patterns in the lines. The rhythm in Williams’s poem is especially charming here because it imitates the movements of a cat. We may conclude then that poems have to have rhythm, because language does, but they don’t have to have any particular metrical system.

### What is the difference between poetry and prose?

This question comes up all the time because it is absolutely crucial. The misconceptions involved are legion, and they are not restricted to the public. Writers share these misconceptions, and the dictionary enshrines them in its definitions. Think of how often you’ve heard someone say of a piece of writing they didn’t like, “That’s not poetry, that’s prose!” What this person is doing is not classifying types of literature but expressing a personal dislike. In a poetry class, something someone doesn’t like becomes “prose,” which means “not-poetry.”

It is easy to see through this error. Imagine James Joyce or Saul Bellow referring to their novels as “prose” in this sense! A fiction writer didn’t intend to write a poem in the first place, and isn’t willing to agree that prose is “failed poetry.”

Let’s introduce a distinction. We can refer to a difference between prose and *verse*. Verse is defined as “metrical language . . . distinguished from ordinary language by . . . its more pronounced or elaborate rhythm.” (Webster’s *Third*



*International Dictionary*, 1961). If you think back to the two preceding questions, it becomes clear that *verse* is what is produced by the use of rhyme and meter according to particular patterns. Poetry, we already agreed, need not use rhyme and meter, but does use sound and rhythm. So poetry is a larger term, which may or may not include verse, as you please.

What then of prose? Prose is defined by Webster's as "ordinary language . . . intended primarily to give information . . . a literary medium distinguished from poetry [read verse] by its greater irregularity and variety of rhythm. . . ." It is clear by now that prose is a catchall term that is not very useful for literary classification. It means either "something I don't like," as in the example of the poem that "wasn't poetry"; or "not verse." Since poetry is more than verse, we are no further along here either. Newspaper articles are "prose," personal letters are "prose," and *War and Peace* is "prose." The category is simply too large to be meaningful.

I propose that we dispense with the term in favor of *imaginative writing*. Poems are shorter pieces of imaginative language; fiction—short stories, novels, plays, and some philosophical writing—is larger pieces of imaginative language. Of course, poems can be long too. Remember Homer's *Odyssey* and William Carlos Williams's *Paterson*! But for a workaday definition in the classroom, short and long is very helpful.

One of the ways people distinguish so-called prose from poetry is by typography. These paragraphs are "prose" because the sentences are not broken up into "lines." A second grade teacher once showed me a lovely piece of writing a child had dictated to her. She had written it out in "prose," and wanted to know if it was a "poem"? I rearranged the lines for her, according to the rhythms I heard in the language the child had spoken, so that the lines were broken up. The teacher now recognized the child's writing as a poem. But it was a poem all along! Sometimes these line breaks are important, as in the following poem of my own:

The first  
cold day of  
the year  
I fumble  
for gloves  
in the pockets  
of my winter  
coat and  
find yellow  
pieces of  
paper wrinkled  
like the faces  
of old  
people folded  
in chairs and  
hidden away  
in a corner

Would it make any difference if this poem were written out as a single sentence and set in type as "prose"? Yes, for two reasons. The most important reason is that this is the way the poem *came to me*, in these lines. It came in this fashion because the poem "wanted" to be in these lines. I

"felt" the poem this way. The poem wants to be read slowly, deliberately, with the reader lingering over each line. But a second reason is that this form of line break emphasizes certain details in the poem: the similarity between the pieces of wrinkled yellow paper and old people's faces for example. The arrangement of the lines heightens this emphasis. The line breaks also emphasize the sound values in *cold, folded, old*, the near rhymes of *people* and *pieces, fumble* and *folded*.

On the other hand, the lines do not have to be broken at all for a poem to be a poem. This beautiful poem by Russell Edson makes the point conclusively:

#### A JOURNEY THROUGH THE MOONLIGHT

In sleep when an old man's body is no longer aware of its boundaries, and lies flattened by gravity like a mere of wax in its bed. . . . It drips down to the floor and moves there like a tear down a cheek. . . . Under the back door into the silver meadow, like a pool of sperm, frosty under the moon, as if in his first nature, boneless and absurd.

The moon lifts him up into its white field, a cloud shaped like an old man, porous with stars.

He floats through high dark branches, a corpse tangled in a tree on a river.

Neither Russell Edson's poem nor mine is verse, because the special rhyme-and-meter patterns of verse are not observed in them. Neither Edson's poem nor mine is prose in the sense that a sportswriter's column is, or a personal letter. Both, however, are imaginative writing. Both are poems.

#### Do poems have to have form?

Most of the time, when people speak of "form" in poetry they mean something else. They mean a particular pattern of rhyme and meter, which I am going to call *format*. Format is the rhyme-and-meter scheme of a poem, decided upon in advance by the poet. The poet then puts the poem into the chosen format. The term "sonnet form," for example, means the specific pattern that is attached to that format: fourteen lines of iambic pentameter, rhymed in a particular repetitive fashion.

Format, however, says nothing of many other formal elements in a poem. *Form*, as opposed to format, includes such things as the images in the poem, and their relation to one another, the tone, or attitude of the poet or speaker in the poem to his subject matter—in a word, to the *totality of the poem as felt* by poet and reader. The same format can be used with a poem that is satirical or sincere, happy or sad, angry or melancholy. The form would be different with each new poem.

There are, of course, reasons of temperament why some poets prefer to decide on a format in advance of writing the poem and others prefer to seek the form of the poem in the experience that gives rise to it. Denise Levertov sums up this temperamental difference in terms of a basic difference of approach to the world:

On the one hand is the idea that content, reality, experience, is essentially fluid and must be *given* form; on the other, this sense of seeking out *inherent*, though not immediately apparent, form.

Form in this sense has virtually nothing to do with a given format. This sense of form finds meaning in experience, the poet's job being to faithfully express it in the poem. Form in the sense of format reflects an attitude that finds the world basically meaningless, and assumes that human beings "impose" meaning (and form) on experience in the poem. I agree with Levertov that the world, and experience, is meaningful before I arrive on the scene. It "gives" itself to me in experience, and I try to follow it in a poem. An experience may give itself in a poem of three lines or three hundred, but I cannot decide that in advance.

When form is understood in this larger sense, everything that exists has form. An oak tree is different from an elephant. It is form that enables us to distinguish them. And every oak tree is different from every other. So it is with poems.

Consider the following poem by Walt Whitman:

A noiseless patient spider,  
I mark'd where on a little promontory it stood isolated,  
Mark'd how to explore the vacant vase surrounding,  
It launch'd forth filament, filament, filament out of itself,  
Ever unreeling them, ever tirelessly speeding them.

And you O my soul where you stand,  
Surrounded, detached, in measureless oceans of space,  
Ceaselessly musing, venturing, throwing, seeking the spheres  
to connect them,  
Till the bridge you will need be form'd, till the ductile anchor  
hold,  
Till the gossamer thread you fling catch somewhere, O my  
soul.

There is not much in the way of format to this poem. There is no rhyme scheme because there are no end rhymes, and the number of accents and syllables to each line is not important because they are not repeated. But certainly there is form.

The form of the poem has something to do with Whitman's experience of observing the spider spinning out its web. The spider spins thread after thread, in all directions, until one of them catches somewhere. Now the spider can move to the place where the thread has caught hold. The spider is looking for contact, trying by blind instinct to move out of itself, away from where it is, to somewhere new. People are like that too. We are surrounded by emptiness, alone until we make contact with someone else. We spin out of ourselves our needs, our feelings, our thoughts, in an effort to contact someone else. And we never stop until we build a bridge from self to some other, whether a person or God. Did Whitman think of himself in this way before he noticed the spider and perceived the similarity of his spiritual condition to the spider's physical life? We do not know. But precisely there, in the interaction of the poet's mind and the world around him, is the form of the poem.

### Do poems have to mean something?

Like form, meaning exists in the totality of the poem, not in some special aspect of it. You cannot isolate meaning from the rest of the poem. It is not a quantity which

the poet adds to the poem, like salt to the soup. As with the other elements of poetry, there is a partial, or mistaken understanding of meaning which sees it as the poem's *message*, something the poet is trying to *tell us*. *Message* refers to one of two things: an abstract statement of the *ideas* in the poem, or its theme; or a *moral*, some good advice which is being given by the poet through the medium of poetry. Both of these types of messages tend to lead the reader away from the poem, rather than deeper into it.

The *meaning* of a poem is in its totality, like form. It is what the whole poem is, not only ideas but images, tone, the words themselves, as well as the unstated parts that are left by the poet for the reader who will go deeply into the poem for enjoyment. The *message*, even when a poem has one, is far less important—and most poets nowadays don't send messages in code.

This mistaken idea of the poem as a message in code is the basis of the notion that poems have hidden meanings. If you think about it for a moment, the idea of a hidden meaning in a poem is absurd. The poet, who is trying to communicate with the reader, does not disguise or hide what is being said. That would be self-defeating. Where does this absurd notion of hidden meanings come from? I'm sorry to say that it usually comes from college English classes. There the eager student (who will someday be an English teacher) is assigned to read a poem and often to write an essay on what it means. The entire situation encourages the prose summary of ideas, or the *message* approach to meaning in poetry. The student does the assignment, then returns to class to hear the professor lecture on the poem. This line refers to something the professor knows from the poet's biography, that line refers to somebody else's poem on the same subject, and another line contains "a death-symbol." The embarrassed student, who had seen none of these things, resolves never to say anything about a poem that can't be found in the footnotes, or perhaps never to read another poem again. But the student has been conned. What was intimidating was not the poem itself but the professor's knowledge about matters which are peripheral to the poem. Thus are born hidden meanings.

Finally, a word about complexity in poetry. Poems come out of experience, and while some of life's experiences are apparently simple, many of them are not. Poems are complex because life is complex. Those of us who are married know that the sentimental love story or film—boy and girl meet and fall in love, complications are overcome, they get married and live happily ever after—does not adequately express the reality of life. Complex experiences engender complex emotions, and the poem that expresses these emotions will also be complex. But it will not necessarily be *complicated*. We poets try every way we can to express the complex meanings of our life in a straightforward manner. Just as a good film leaves you thinking and talking with friends about it for days or weeks, so a good poem leaves you thinking. You reread the poem, sometimes year after year. And each new reading brings new insight into the poem. It's not so much that you missed some hidden meaning the first time, but you have grown in maturity and experience. The more we are able to bring to a poem the more we will see what was there all along. This is very different from hidden meanings. Because there is not one message to a poem, we can experience the meaning of the poem growing throughout our lives.

Continued from page 1.

eight- and nine-year-old minds plan ahead?

I introduced the planning of the novel's structure by presenting a "what if" situation. If you were going to write a novel, what would its title be? Keeping this title in mind, what would the names and personalities of the major characters be? And so on: names of five chapters, first and last sentences for the book, one significant conversation—for example, an argument. Can a novel be outlined in fifteen minutes? I think it can, because often in writing it's overplanning, misused sincerity, that's the killer. (Over the next week or so a few children did write alternative outlines, which was fine with me.) Virginia Woolf spent seven years writing *The Waves*; Dostoevsky took ten days to write *The Gambler*. Woolf had time and Dostoevsky had gambling debts. All good writing is animated by urgency, compounded with playfulness. Over the next few weeks I watched the writing that developed from my announcement: "Ok, now you've got the outline for the novel you're going to write. For the next few weeks you'll be working on it in class and talking to me about it."

Every writer deserves a good editor (replacing the depleted supply of patrons); one of the luxuries of this long-term assignment was that I was able to schedule individual conferences with each student. As advisor, I read each novel-in-progress and spoke in a "private" corner of the room with each child. Without using jargon, we talked about plot development, characterization, vocabulary, pac-

ing. How did the child feel about the book? Over and over I found that some kids needed to get specific permission to make changes. The ideal reader is another writer, and I tried to speak with them as writer-to-writer. I pointed out that language's power lies in its use of specifics, that when in doubt, take what you know from your own life (personal experience works just as well on Mars). I tried to make extra time for kids who were having trouble writing—I didn't want them to slip between the cracks. Some of these children's chapters were only a few paragraphs long, but I focused on their developing the stamina to continue a project from one week to the next. With each child, when we finished discussing their creative process, I pointed out a few patterns I noticed, such as problems with grammar, spelling, etc. When the classes finished their books each child bound her or his own book. Many donated their novels to the school library—to be checked out by other kids.

"It is not necessary for a writer to be crazy, but it is useful," goes the old saying. Most of these children will not grow up to be writers. But whatever profession and idea of themselves they do eventually plot out, I think that learning the art of writing fiction—that most intimate connection between ability and fantasy—is to learn the art of articulating themselves. At the brink of beginning a long piece of writing, any reasonable individual, child or adult, feels an intense desire to flee. But once one begins, as Voltaire noted to Frederick the Great: "What a devil of a profession! But it has its charms."

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