

# Want to be the next David Harsent? A guide on how to write a poem

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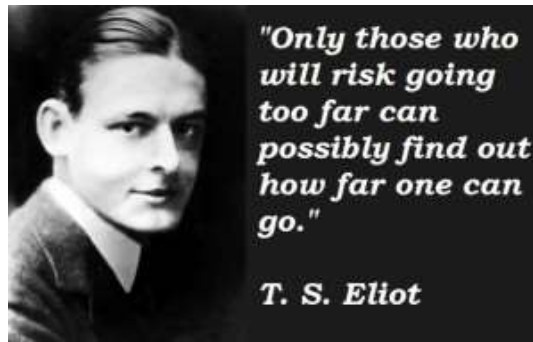
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## Why write poetry?



*On the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of T.S. Eliot's death, Tim Kelly reflects on why we write poetry and how to set students going.*

### **Poetry is fundamentally useless**

We must acknowledge this at the start. But we should add William Carlos Williams' rider:

yet men die miserably every day  
for lack  
of what is found there.

If you forgive the unconscious sexism, there's truth at the core: humans have written and recited verse *without reason* since ancient times. So despite the superficial instrumentality of our culture, despite what economists might have you believe, the old Biblical pronouncement needs reaffirming: 'man does not live by bread alone'.

So why write poetry? For me, writing poetry is a form of emotional excreta; it's something that at times of intense feeling I can't help doing – it spills out, unrestrained. The craft of poetry, of course, is going back to that pavement pizza of pain, love, heartbreak, fury, desire, and reworking it into shape: altering each line, replacing words, manipulating the rhythm until you get a perfect balance and maximum power to the poem; but reworked so as not to lose that intense emotional kernel, without which the words, no matter how well-crafted, would be an empty shell.

So asking why we write poetry is no different from asking why we laugh, love or sing: it's a redundant question; perhaps, better ask, why *don't* people write poetry? And this is where *creative writing teaching* comes in.

### **The shit filter**

The first job of the teacher is to help remove what is vulgarly known in the trade as *the shit filter* – that disabling self-critical anxiety that tells us what we write is utterly worthless. So the writer's primary task is to annihilate the empty page: it's only once the page is full should we utilise the critical, analytical, judgemental

part of the brain (apply the shit filter if you like) and begin crafting the rough clay into something beautiful.

### **Annihilating the empty page**

There are many ways of destroying the empty page. A recent article in *Wired* explored the use of computer games as a conduit to writing poetry. My colleague, Alyson Morris and I, apply a number of strategies.

Firstly we ensure the workshops are fun, the atmosphere light-hearted so the classroom becomes a developmental womb or cocoon. To frame this structure students form writers' groups in which members read and comment on each other's work. So before students start reading openly to the class, they are practising on three or four poetic brothers and sisters in arms. Beyond this face-to-face interaction, each writers' group creates an online blog as a forum for poetry and feedback.

But how exactly do we get students writing? Alyson Morris starts with 'found poetry' – taking newspaper articles and having students turn them into poems by reworking the spacing and lines. I use a similar process, though this self-generated by students, in which they write prose rants and then forge them into 'angry poems'. And teaching creative writing is not the same as teaching literature, so we can cross the boundaries of time and genre to provide a variety of poetic models, from Shakespeare to Shelley to Duffy, from Bashō to Byron to Brecht, from Keats to Yeats to Plath, Neruda, Dylan, Tony Harrison, Joe Strummer and Lemn Sissay.

### **The Community**

One thing we do is involve students in the wider community. We have the [Coventry Words](#) magazine in which students publish their poems; we have visiting poets running workshops; we have open mic. events - one recently headlined by the Middlesbrough poet laureate Andy Willoughby; we organise projects in the locality – last year students published their poems alongside artworks in the Herbert Museum. Students also enter competitions and one, Raef Boylan, picked up a £1000 check as winner of the Fred Holland Prize.

### **Poetry's for girls**

I have colleagues who have taught groups of men, including prisoners, who think it's weak and effeminate to write poetry. And this is because poetry is linked to *expression of feeling*, which (young) men traditionally avoid at all costs. When I encounter such resistance I bring Gil Scott-Heron to my aid:

When I was a teenager, man, we didn't want to hear nothin' about poetry...

Then Scott-Heron goes on to tell how he came to find a revolutionary voice through using his own words, those of the street and the ghetto. By the time I've

shown these surly, suspicious young men Hegley performing 'My Glasses', Zephaniah reciting 'No Problem', Linton Kwesi Johnson singing 'Sonny's Lettah' and John Cooper Clarke reading 'Twat', you can't hold them back. These are tough, powerful, clever, revolutionary and funny role models: writing poetry quickly becomes more gratifying than watching football.

I'll end these reflections with an extract from Byron's satirical poem Don Juan:

But words are things, and a small drop of ink,  
Falling like dew, upon a thought, produces  
That which makes thousands, perhaps millions, think..