



University of Essex



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Poetry in literature and creative writing

A resource for teaching A-level English

About these resources

At the University of Essex we want to invest in the next generation of students to better prepare them for future university study. We recognise that the teaching they receive in school and college is a centrally important part of this preparation, and therefore we are committed to investing in this teaching process wherever we can. We hope that these teaching resources will help to get students thinking at a more in-depth level about their chosen subject, and will aid teachers in encouraging this level of engagement.

The resources are deliberately designed to be flexible so that teachers can choose the sections and exercises that they feel are most relevant and beneficial to their students and insert them into their own teaching plans as they see fit. Throughout the resources we have tried to include elements of the teaching carried out at the University of Essex whilst staying closely linked to A-level syllabi.

About the authors

These resources are based on the notes of Dr Chris McCully, who lectures in creative writing and literature at the University of Essex as well as being a freelance writer. Chris has thirty years of experience in academic writing and research spanning linguistics, philosophy, stylistics and literature. His current research interests surround the origins and development of poetic forms in English. The notes also owe a great deal to Chris's mentor and colleague at Essex, Mike Harwood.

Dr McCully's work has been adapted for these resources by Mona Becker, a PhD student in the Department of Literature, Film and Theatre Studies at the University of Essex

You can find out more about the Department of Literature, Film and Theatre Studies and the courses they run at www.essex.ac.uk/lifts



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1. FREE VERSE AND FORMAL VERSE

Formal verse doesn't just mean 'rhymed' verse. In formal verse, something is **counted** (number of syllables per line, number of feet per line, number of rhythmic measure per line) and something is **closed** (lines end on stressed syllables, for example). An example of formal verse is the Shakespearean sonnet:

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
 Thou art more lovely and more temperate:
 Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
 And summer's lease hath all too short a date:
 Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,
 And often is his gold complexion dimmed;
 And every fair from fair sometime declines,
 By chance or nature's changing course untrimmed:
 But thy eternal summer shall not fade
 Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st;
 Nor shall Death brag thou wander'st in his shade,
 When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st:
 So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,
 So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

William Shakespeare, "Sonnet 18", ca. 1609

Class activity

Work out what is counted and how the lines are closed and annotate the count in the text. What patterns emerge from the combination of counting and closure? **Highlight** any patterns you find.

Note that formal verse doesn't have to rhyme. Many of Shakespeare's plays are written in **blank verse** (unrhymed iambic pentameter), and of course Milton wrote *Paradise Lost* – first published in ten books in 1667 - in blank verse. Take care, incidentally, not to confuse **freed verse** with **blank verse**.

Free (a better term is **freed** **verse**) is often neither counted nor closed, though there are many variants. Some freed verse is counted but not closed – see Example 1, the **haiku**.

A **haiku** consists of three lines; syllable count per line 5 – 7 – 5 (COUNTED but not CLOSED). **Note** that there's no constraint that says 'the final syllable of the line must be stressed' – lines can end of any kind of syllable provided the basic 5-7-5 framework is kept.

Other forms of freed verse are closed but not counted – the form called the **pantoun** is a good example. The **pantoun** (also spelt **pantoum**) has a fixed pattern of repeated lines but the lines can in principle be of any length (CLOSED but not COUNTED). See Example 2.

Example 1 - Haiku:

Evening lasts all day.
Dipped beams on Christmas traffic
Make rain beautiful.

Chris McCully, "Haiku" in: *The Country of Perhaps*, 2003

Example 2 - Pantoun

The Gravy People

Cheap cuts of meat after the war – tripe and lights
And eking out. Making do. It was almost a style.
And we were gravy people.
Without the gravy nothing was a meal.

And eking out? Making do, that was the style:
Half a pound of butter and a sewing kit.
But without gravy nothing was a meal.
After a while you made the best of it.

Half a pound of butter and a sewing kit.
You'd never think we'd won a war.
After a while you made the best of it.
There was so much you just learned to ignore.

You'd never think we'd won the war.
For years we queued for stamps to feed the ration book.
There was so much you just learned to ignore.
If you complained you got a funny look.

For years we kept those stamps up in the ration book.
The best was cod and chips.
No one complained. You'd get a funny look.
There were no pretty clothes. And as for foreign trips....

The best was once a month, those cod and chips.
Apart from that.... Cigarettes, and lard.
You wanted pretty clothes, or sea-side trips,
But soon forgot them, and it wasn't hard.

We won the war on tea and cigarettes and lard,
On patience, mending, knowing not to feel.

And lights, or tripe? They make a lovely meal.
It wasn't hard. We were gravy people.

Chris McCully, "The Gravy People" in: *Polder*, 2009.



Class activity

Try to work out what the pattern of the **pantoun** is by using Example 2. **Highlight** and **annotate**.

The effect of freed verse is that the poetry seems much closer to ‘ordinary speech’. If you’re beginning to write poetry then if you stick to formal verse you’re likely to fill the lines with archaic diction, cliché and over-obvious rhymes; if, on the other hand, you begin to write in freer forms then you run the risk of writing sloppily, patternlessly and without understanding. It’s interesting to note that the greatest practitioners of freed verse – Pound and Eliot – began their poetic careers in writing formal verse.

1.2 Counting, closure and writing

We can do more with counting and closure, and construct a cline of structure, which in principle includes prose, like this:

Clines: poetry and prose – an example of Formalist method

Essentially, Formalist theorists drew a distinction between ‘poetic language’ – which drew attention to (*foregrounded*) its own techniques – and ‘prose language’ – which was ‘flatter’ [to use a metaphor] or more *referential*. This allows the construction of, among other things, **clines** of structure, e.g. for distinguishing metrical verse from free(d) verse and free(d) verse from prose:

Least metrical Most prose-like	More metrical Less prose-like	More metrical Less prose-like	Fully metrical Least prose-like
No COUNT	COUNT	No COUNT	COUNT
No CLOSE	No CLOSE	CLOSE	CLOSE
prose	haiku	pantoun	sonnet

Class activity

Revisit the texts you have read so far in this class and put them in the **cline**. How do you decide in which column you file the text? Are there any texts that are more difficult to file than others? Why is that? How useful do you find this approach to literature?

This writing doesn’t sort itself into boxes neatly labelled ‘This is poetry’ and ‘This is prose’. Poetry and prose lie on a continuum – a cline. Significantly, we might want to use this concept to explain the rise of freed verse in many languages: In a provocative history of English free verse (*Missing Measures*, published in 1990), the American poet and critic Timothy Steele argues that as prose has developed from the 18th century onwards, poetry has aspired to mimic the condition of prose – that’s an interesting line of enquiry.

2. GETTING STARTED

When writing poetry, it is important to remain attentive to *how things sound* and to latent possibilities in the syntax of what you write. A very good example here is an apparently slight poem by the 20th century American poet William Carlos Williams:

so much depends
upon
a red wheel
barrow
glazed with rain
water
beside the white
chickens

William Carlos Williams, "The red wheelbarrow", 1962.

Class activity

What patterns and symmetries can you find in this poem? Where would you situate it in the cline?

The main thing is to **play**. Play with sounds, metaphors, meanings, alignments.

Writing Exercise:

Try to write a short freed verse piece in the form of a list. *Hint: if you set your list in groups of three lines and keep the items in the list equivalent in terms of their grammar, then that will automatically help to build a feeling of climax.*

Example:

Today I will X
Today I will Y
Today I will Z
(the climax of a pattern of cumulation)

Today I will learn the French for good luck
Today I will learn to ski
Today I will break a leg and cry



3. POETRY, IMAGE, METAPHOR

A poem such as 'Red wheelbarrow' works by obliging the reader to concentrate on (and find significance in) the presentation of a set of images. It's a commonplace that 'poetry is full of imagery'... of course it is. But poetry isn't merely 'word-painting' (what 'word-painting' was involved in e.g. Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*? Or Milton's *Paradise Lost*?) More importantly, the presentation of the image or images in a poem is interpreted **metaphorically**. The fact that a sign or symbol 'stands for' something else is vitally important both to the writer and his/her co-creators, the readers of his/her work. Sometimes metaphors are quite explicit, as in Ted Hughes's poem 'Thistles':

[thistles]....grow grey, like men.
Mown down, it is a feud. Their sons appear.
Stiff with weapons, fighting back over the same ground.

Metaphors, however, often wear out, and if you employ 'dead metaphors' (the phrase is itself a metaphor, meaning metaphors that are so familiar that they have basically stopped being metaphors) in your work then the result will be stale and unpersuasive.

Class activity

Read the examples given in the table and write down in the second column what these 'dead metaphors' actually mean ("He spent hours deconstructing Freud." – Hours/time = money, a commodity. **Add another five examples** of 'dead metaphors' that you know and note down what they mean. Then, find new, more inventive, vivid ways of expressing the thought of the examples and write them down in the third column.

Writing Exercise

Choose one of the examples of 'dead metaphors' that you particularly like (or dislike) and write a short poem in which you use this expression *literally*. (For example, what is an infant cognitive psychology like?)



Example	What does it stand for.	Find your own, more vivid way of expressing the thought
He spent hours deconstructing Freud	<i>TIME IS</i> a commodity (money)	
He attacked every weak point in the argument	<i>ARGUMENT IS</i>	
I demolished his argument	<i>ARGUMENT IS</i>	
What he said left a bad taste in my mouth	<i>IDEAS ARE</i>	
These are half-baked ideas	<i>IDEAS ARE</i>	
The theory of relativity spawned an enormous numbers of ideas	<i>IDEAS ARE</i>	
His ideas have come to fruition	<i>IDEAS ARE</i>	
Cognitive psychology is still in its infancy	<i>PSYCHOLOGY IS</i>	

While we have looked at 'dead metaphors', well-used poetic metaphors or imagery, on the other hand, often have a thrilling freshness and contain an element of surprise: they **defamiliarise** the language and the world. Here's a four-line poem by Margaret Atwood:

you fit into me
like a hook into an eye

a fish hook
an open eye

Margaret Atwood, "you fit into me", 1971.

Class activity

Why is the image used by Atwood so surprising? What does she express through it? What is the subject of this very short poem? Is the simile she uses one that you have encountered before (in this context)?



4. DENSITY AND COMPACTNESS

Many poems are dense with meaning and compact in presentation. Much can be achieved even in two lines:

In a station of the metro

The apparition of these faces in the crowd:
Petals on a wet, black bough

(Ezra Pound)

That said, many longer poems (*Beowulf*, *The Canterbury Tales*, *Paradise Lost*, Wordsworth's *Prelude*) aren't on the face of it particularly 'compact'. Yet parts of them may be, and certainly poetry is at least partly an art of subtraction (like e.g. sculpture): in the drafting of a poem, much is jettisoned (thrown away, discarded) so that the finished result is *compact*.

4.1 Poetic action

In many poems, something *happens*. There's dramatic tension. The 'something happening' may be a process of self-realisation, but it's a psychological happening nevertheless. A good example is Housman's poem 'Loveliest of trees' (where the speaker looks at a cherry tree in bloom and realizes his own mortality).

4.2 Poetry and sound

Poets have always (in every language and period) played with sound patterns to reinforce patterns of imagery and thought:

Alliteration: initial sounds of stressed syllables are repeated

Examples: pale prince; Kit Kat Club

Assonance: 'vowel music'

Vowel shapes occurring between similar consonants – aka 'half-rhyme'

Examples: lives/ leaves; lean/lawn etc.

Vowel shapes in succeeding stressed syllables – long vowels/diphthongs

Examples: If aught of oaten stop or pastoral song may soothe, chaste
Eve....

Full rhyme: lean-mean-green

Slant rhyme: lean-mine-tone

Poetry is at least in some senses an exploration of the possibilities of sound – deep down, verse has never quite forgotten that it's a spoken/sung medium: it lives in sound as well as on the page.



Writing Exercise

- a) Try writing a verse letter in ten lines saying goodbye (to something or someone). You may use any form you choose; you may use rhyme or non-rhymed verse; but the exercise must result in **verse** and not merely 'chopped-up prose'. Aim for density, memorability, compactness. Do NOT waste time in poeticizing (i.e. no 'tis-ery, 'twas-ery or indulged and mere sentiment) or in messing about with abstract diction; be as *concrete* as possible. Include

Something – an image, a person, a pattern – that's foregrounded (parallelistic, repeated...)

A piece of alliteration and a piece of assonance

Three or more well-justified metaphors supporting a pattern of action

- b) Now cut what you've written in to six lines, keeping the structure and sense

