POETRY RELOADED

POETRY IN MOTION

WHAT DOES A POEM LOOK LIKE?
Learning about the structure of poems. Poems by Anonymous and Archibald MacLeish.

WHAT IS DIFFERENT ABOUT POETRY?
Learning about poetry and prose. Poems and prose extracts from various authors.

WHAT DO POETS SAY ABOUT POETRY?
Learning about definitions of poetry. Poem by John Hegley, plus quotes from various poets.

IMAGES AND SOUNDS
Learning about metaphors, similes, personification, rhyme, alliteration, assonance and onomatopoeia.

THE POET’S LIFE
William Shakespeare

SPOTLIGHT ON: ANNOTATING A POEM
"Sonnet 29" by William Shakespeare.

WORD PLAY
Poetry-writing exercise, writing your own poem that includes a simile.

SKILL BUILDING
Poem by Judith Wright, plus an activity.

READ MORE
William Shakespeare’s top ten sonnets.
Poetry Reloaded aims to take us on a journey through poetry. Before we set out on that journey, we should really work out what it is that we are talking about when we talk about poetry. I guess we could look in the dictionary. My dictionary mentions that poems express feelings and ideas and intensity, and that they have a distinctive style and rhythm. We’ll explore some of these suggestions as we make our way through the book.

Maybe there isn’t one definition of what poetry is. I’m sure it brings to mind a variety of meanings for different people, and that these meanings develop over time. What additional meanings does the word poetry carry for you? For American poet Robert Frost (1874–1963), poetry is all about ‘taking life by the throat’. But then Frost was a poet, so he would say something as poetic as that, wouldn’t he? You might think that poetry is difficult to understand or that it’s daggy and old-fashioned, and definitely not part of the world you live in. The aim of Poetry Reloaded is not to suggest that any of these responses to poetry are wrong. Quite frankly, poetry is hard to understand sometimes. I’ve written this book about poetry, but I don’t always understand everything that’s going on in a poem. Some poems are pretty old-fashioned too, which is hardly surprising, given that some of them were written a long time ago.

The title Poetry Reloaded suggests taking a new look at poetry, and perhaps new and surprising ideas about poetry will emerge for you as you make your way through the book – like the first rule of poetry: you should always read a poem aloud to fully appreciate it. Poetry can be simple as well as complex, but when it is more difficult to understand we can still have fun trying to work out what a poem means. There are old poems in this book, some written centuries ago, but there are also lots of new poems about the world we live in today.

WHAT DOES A POEM LOOK LIKE?

One definition of poetry is ‘writing that doesn’t reach the edge of the page’. It’s a good definition because it accurately describes what most poems look like when we see them. (There are some poets who write poems that do reach the edge of the page, but we won’t worry about them for now.)
Activity 1.1

The poem below was written by an anonymous author, and it is presented without any punctuation or line breaks. What you need to do is make it look like a poem again, writing it out as you do so. Think about the following:

- Where should each new line begin?
- Where should there be punctuation?
- Once you've done that, think about how you made your decisions. Were there clues that helped you work out where the line breaks and punctuation should be?

I love to do my homework
it makes me feel so good
I love to do exactly as my
teacher says I should I
love to do my homework
I never miss a day I even
love the men in white
who are taking me away

Here's another one to try. It's a poem called 'Ars Poetica' by Archibald MacLeish (1892–1982). This poem is a bit more difficult. Try to make sense of the sentences first, before you break it up into lines. As a hint, MacLeish does use rhyme (although there are a few lines that don't rhyme, or don't quite rhyme), and the poem is written in couplets or groups of two lines, but the lines are not of equal length. Appropriately enough, it's all about what a poem should be like:

A poem should be palpable and mute as a globed fruit dumb as old medallions to the thumb silent as the sleeve-worn stone of casement ledges where the moss has grown a poem should be wordless as the flight of birds a poem should be motionless in time as the moon climbs leaving as the moon releases twig by twig the night-entangled trees leaving as the moon behind the winter leaves memory by memory the mind a poem should be motionless in time as the moon climbs a poem should be equal to not true for all the history of grief an empty doorway and a maple leaf for love the leaning grasses and two lights above the sea a poem should not mean but be
CHAPTER 1: Poetry Gets Started

The original poems are at the end of this chapter.

- How close did you get to the original poems?
- What was difficult about trying to do this task?
- What did you learn about the structure of poems?

WORLD-WIDE POETRY
There are many good websites that you can access to find out more about poets, poems and poetic forms from all around the world. Here are three of the best: http://www.poets.org/index.php
http://www.poetryfoundation.org/index.html
http://www.poetryarchive.org/poetryarchive/home.do

WHAT IS DIFFERENT ABOUT POETRY?

Often we figure out what something is by comparing it to its opposite, so what is the opposite of poetry? It turns out that it's something called prose, which is written or spoken language in its ordinary form. The paragraph you are reading right now is prose. So if this is ordinary language, it must mean that there is something extra-ordinary about poetry.

Activity 1.2
Various extracts from different kinds of texts are printed below. Some of these are poems and some of them are not. All of the line breaks and punctuation have been removed, so there are no clues of that sort.

- Read all of the extracts. Which extracts would you describes as poetry? Justify your reasons.
- What would you say is ‘poetic’ about the extracts that you identify as poems?

Extracts

1. Let your fingers do the walking
2. You used to be my cup of tea but now you’re not so hot you couldn’t see enough of me but now you see the lot it used to be a mystery but now it’s only us once you were my cup of tea but now you’re more like pus
3. It was an icy day
we buried the cat
then took her box
and set fire to it
in the back yard
those fleas that
escaped earth
and fire died by
the cold

4. I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted every hill
and mountain shall be made low the rough places will be made plain
and the crooked places will be made straight and the glory of the
Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together this is our
hope this is the faith that I go back to the South with this faith we
will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope
with this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords
of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood with this
faith we will be able to work together to pray together to struggle
together to go to jail together to stand up for freedom together
knowing that we will be free one day

5. Ask not what your country can do for you ask what you can do for
your country

6. Fog everywhere fog up the river where it flows among green aits and
meadows fog down the river where it rolls defiled among the tiers of
shipping and the waterside pollutions of a great and dirty city fog
on the Essex marshes fog on the Kentish heights fog creeping into
the cabooses of collier-brigs fog lying out on the yards and hovering
in the rigging of great ships fog drooping on the gunwales of barges
and small boats fog in the eyes and throats of ancient Greenwich
pensioners wheezing by the firesides of their wards fog in the stem
and bowl of the afternoon pipe of the wrathful skipper down in his
close cabin fog cruelly pinching the toes and fingers of his shivering
little 'prentice boy on deck chance people on the bridges peeping
over the parapets into a nether sky of fog with fog all round them
as if they were up in a balloon and hanging in the misty clouds

7. I started early took my dog and visited the sea the mermaids in the
basement came out to look at me and frigates in the upper floor
extended hempen hands presuming me to be a mouse aground upon
the sands but no man moved me till the tide went past my simple
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shoe and past my apron
and my belt and past my
bodice too and made as he
would eat me up as wholly
as a dew upon a dandelion’s
sleeve and then I started
too and he followed close
behind I felt his silver heel
upon my ankle then my
shoes would overflow with
pearl until we met the solid
town no one he seemed to
know and bowing with a
mighty look at me the sea
withdrew

8. Earth has not anything to show more fair dull would he be of soul
who could pass by a sight so touching in its majesty this City now
doth like a garment wear the beauty of the morning silent bare ships
towers domes theatres, and temples lie open unto the fields and to
the sky all bright and glittering in the smokeless air never did sun
more beautifully steep in his first splendour valley rock or hill ne’er
saw I never felt a calm so deep the river glideth at his own sweet
will dear God the very houses seem asleep and all that mighty heart
is lying still

The original versions of these texts have been reproduced at the end of the
chapter. Take a look at them. Does seeing the original versions make you
want to change your mind? Does the fact that a text was not published as
a poem make the language any less ‘poetic’?

• Based on what you learned in Activity 1.1 and Activity 1.2, make a list
of all of the features that you think make poetry special, or different
from other types of writing.

WHAT DO POETS SAY ABOUT POETRY?

If anyone knows what poetry is, it must be poets, right? The chapter
started with a quote from Robert Frost about what he thought poetry
was, and Archibald MacLeish put forth some ideas about poetry in his poem
‘Ars Poetica’, which you tried to put back together for Activity 1.1. Let’s look
at some other ideas about poetry, starting with this poem by the British poet John Hegley (1953–).

POETRY

poetry don't have to be
living in a library
there's poetry that you can see
in the life of everybody,
a lick of paint's the kind of thing I mean
a lick of paint's a lovely piece of writing
the tongue of the paintbrush
giving something drab
a dab new sheen
a lick of paint's exciting.

there are folk who like to see
Latin in their poetry
and plenty of obscurity
me for instance
(only joking)
how I like to listen to the lingo
in bingo
legs eleven
clickety-click
a lick of paint
no – sorry that ain’t one

poetry – language on a spree
I want to be
a leaf on the poetree

John Hegley

John Hegley is excited by what he identifies as poetic features in everyday language. Phrases like ‘a lick of paint’ and the names attached to numbers by bingo callers such as ‘legs eleven’ stand out for him. He’s not so keen on ‘obscurity’ (despite his joke), and prefers words that everybody can understand but that have a special ring to them.
CHAPTER 1: Poetry Gets Started

Activity 1.3

The phrase ‘a lick of paint’ is a metaphor, or a phrase where one thing is described in terms of something else. As John Hegley goes on to say in his poem, the paintbrush is being compared to a tongue, and an image is conjured in our minds (not that the idea of licking a wall is a particularly nice one!).

- Can you think of other examples of metaphors in everyday life? See if you can come up with five.

Activity 1.4

Listed below are a number of comments made by poets about poetry.

- Read each comment carefully and consider what the poet is saying.
- Select the four comments that you think are the best, then list them.
- For each of the four comments you choose, see if you can find a short quotation from one of the poems listed in this chapter that supports the idea in the poet’s comment. (You will have to read ahead to find a suitable poem.)

1. ‘Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings.’
   William Wordsworth
2. ‘Poetry is life distilled.’ Gwendolyn Brooks
3. ‘A good poet is someone who manages, in a lifetime of standing out in thunderstorms, to be struck by lightning five or six times; a dozen or two dozen times and he is great.’ Randall Jarrell
4. ‘Poetry is the record of the best and happiest moments of the happiest and best minds.’ Percy Bysshe Shelley
5. ‘Most people ignore most poetry because most poetry ignores most people.’ Adrian Mitchell
6. ‘I wish our clever young poets would remember my homely definitions of prose and poetry; that is, prose = words in their best order; poetry = the best words in the best order.’ Samuel Taylor Coleridge
7. ‘Well, write poetry, for God’s sake, it’s the only thing that matters.’ EE Cummings
8. ‘Poetry is the journal of a sea animal living on land, wanting to fly in the air.’ Carl Sandburg
9. ‘Poetry is simply the most beautiful, impressive, and widely effective mode of saying things, and hence its importance.’ Matthew Arnold
10. ‘Poetry is what in a poem makes you laugh, cry, prickle, be silent, makes your toe nails twinkle, makes you want to do this or that or nothing, makes you know that you are alone in the unknown world, that your bliss and suffering is forever shared and forever all your own.’ Dylan Thomas

11. ‘I think a poet is anybody who wouldn’t call himself a poet.’ Bob Dylan

12. ‘I could no more define poetry than a terrier can define a rat.’ AE Housman

13. ‘If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry.’ Emily Dickinson

14. ‘Great poetry is always written by somebody straining to go beyond what he can do.’ Stephen Spender

15. ‘Poetry is just the evidence of life. If your life is burning well, poetry is just the ash.’ Leonard Cohen

16. ‘Poetry is kind of ingenious nonsense.’ Isaac Barrow

17. ‘Poetry is an orphan of silence. The words never quite equal the experience behind them.’ Charles Simic

Activity 1.5

Write a paragraph of your own explaining what you think poetry is. You can draw on some of the suggestions presented already, or explain why you disagree with some of the quoted writers and poets.

WORLD-WIDE POETRY

For information about modern Australian poetry and links to a variety of other related sites, explore this website: http://www.cultureandrecreation.gov.au/articles/poetry/

IMAGES AND SOUNDS

Hopefully, you are now starting to put together a general idea of what poetry is, so let’s try to get an idea of what a poem can do. As you make your way through this book you’ll encounter a whole lot of different ‘poetic techniques’. These are the kinds of things that a poet uses...
to help a poem become memorable, and stick in our heads. We can think of these techniques in two broad categories: **imagery** (visual ideas) and **sound devices** (things that we can hear).

**Imagery** refers to the pictures that we create in our heads when we read something. Sometimes we just do this on our own: when we read about a character in a novel we might come up with a mental image of what that character looks like, how their voice sounds, and how they move. Sometimes the writer helps us create the image by using descriptive language. So if a character is described as being ‘a short, crooked man whose face is encrusted with pimples’, we can get a fair idea of what that character looks like. It’s the same with poetry: the poet can guide us through the use of several different techniques. The main techniques are **metaphors, similes** and **personification**. Each of these devices helps to create an image in our heads when we read a poem.

Here’s a brief definition and example of each technique.

**METAPHOR**

A metaphor is a comparison of one thing to another, usually through the assertion that one thing simply is another.

Example: ‘Life’s but a walking shadow’.

(William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*)

**SIMILE**

Like a metaphor, a simile compares one thing to another, but specifically uses the words *like* or *as* in the comparison.

Example: ‘O my love is like a red, red rose.’

(Robert Burns, ‘A Red, Red Rose’)

**PERSONIFICATION**

Personification is a type of comparison, too. It is used to describe something non-human in human terms, helping to bring it to life.

Example:

‘And indeed there will be time
For the yellow smoke that slides along the street,
Rubbing its back upon the window panes.’

(TS Eliot, ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’)