

STUDENT HANDOUT · UNIT II · POETRY



Session 7

Compression — How a Poem Holds a Whole World

Sunday, June 28, 2026 · 4:00–5:30 PM · The Community Room

Readings · main points · in-class practice · discussion questions · homework · worksheet

The Art of Telling

A free creative-writing salon for residents of 2601

Led by James F. Mulhern · Silver Current Press

Welcome

This handout gathers everything from today's Session 7 page in one place: the readings, the main points of the lesson, the in-class practice, the discussion questions for our conversation, this week's homework, and the Compression Worksheet for your own private notebook. Keep it with you during the session and take it home afterward — and if you would like to revisit any of it, the companion site, companion.art-of-telling.com, holds the same materials for you to review after each Sunday.

Main Points

Main points of the lesson

Compression is not shortness. A short poem can be diffuse; a long poem can be compressed.

Compression is density of meaning per unit of language.

Compression comes from three things: precision of image, economy of line, and trust in the reader.

The poem leaves space for the reader to do the rest.

In your own drafts, look for places where you are explaining what the image already says. Cut them. The poem will gain force.

Readings for Class

- William Carlos Williams, *The Red Wheelbarrow* (revisited) — [Poetry Foundation](#)
- Mary Oliver, *The Summer Day* — [Library of Congress · Poetry 180](#)
- Lucille Clifton, *won't you celebrate with me* — [Poetry Foundation](#)

Critical Reception (after our discussion)

- [Seamus Heaney — Poet Page \(Poetry Foundation\)](#) — biography and craft notes on the Nobel laureate.
- [Jane Kenyon — Poet Page \(Poetry Foundation\)](#) — background on Kenyon's plainspoken, lyrical poems.

In-Class Practice

From the live site

Take any short poem — a fresh draft you write here in your notebook, the three-line lineated piece you made in Session 5, or one of our readings — and look for places where the language is explaining what the image already says. Cross them out. Read the cut version aloud.

What happens with this: stays in your notebook. Two or three volunteers may read the before-and-after aloud. Nothing collected.

Discussion Questions

The three questions below are exactly as they appear on the Session 7 page. Use the space beneath each one to jot down your own thoughts before or during our conversation.

1. What does The Red Wheelbarrow do in sixteen words that a paragraph of prose could not?

2. Look at a short piece you have written — or, if you do not have one to hand, look at the Williams or the Oliver. Where is the language explaining what the image already says?

3. What does compression ask of the reader? What does it offer in return?

Homework

The read

Read the opening chapter of Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845). Read the first chapter only, unless you want to read further. Full text: [Project Gutenberg](#).

The optional exercise

Take one short poem you have written and cut every line that explains what the image already says. Read the cut version aloud, alone, before Sunday. Nothing collected.

Before Next Sunday — Session 8 · Unit III opens

Memory & the Memoir Impulse. We turn to memoir — the most personal of the three forms. We will read the opening pages of Douglass and ask why memoir is not the same as autobiography. We will free-write a moment from our own lives we have never written about.

Compression Worksheet — for your private notebook

From the live site

Copy into a Word document. Apply to any poem of your own. This stays in your private notebook — never collected, never read aloud unless you choose.

1. Paste a draft of your own — or any short poem — here. Cross out every line that explains what the image already says.

2. List every concrete noun, one per line. Are there enough?

3. What can you trust the reader to bring? _____

4. Read the cut version aloud. Did it gain force or lose it? _____

Closing Note

Because there wasn't time to tell everything, the companion site — companion.art-of-telling.com — gathers session materials, reading companions, and course updates so residents can follow along and review after each Sunday.