

Contemporary Poetic Forms

Models, Process, Statistics, and a Practical Guide to the New Forms

Prepared for

James F. Mulhern

Art of Telling — Unit II Companion Booklet

2601 Literary Salon · Philadelphia · art-of-telling.com

Contents

1. How to Use This Booklet
2. Is Poetry Harder Than Prose? (And Why)
3. The Average Contemporary Poem — By the Numbers
4. The Most Popular Forms Published Today
5. Instagram Poetry, Fully Explained
6. New Forms of the Twenty-First Century
7. How Prominent Poets Are Motivated and How They Work
8. Specific Outlines for Eight Different Kinds of Poem
9. How to Write the New Forms (Step by Step)
10. How to Publish New-Form Poetry
11. Sources & Further Reading

1. How to Use This Booklet

This booklet is a companion to *The Story of Poetry*. Where that booklet sweeps the long arc, this one zooms in on the present: what poetry actually looks like in 2026, what forms are flourishing, how the best contemporary poets describe their own process, and how a student of poetry can begin to write — and publish — in the forms most read today.

Read it in three passes. First, skim the statistics in Chapter 3 to calibrate expectations of length, line, and stanza. Second, read Chapters 4 through 6 to learn the dominant living forms (free-verse lyric, Instagram poetry, the duplex, the golden shovel, erasure, the prose poem). Third, choose one form and use the matching guide in Chapter 9 to draft your own poem this week. Use Chapter 7 — the prominent poets on process — for company while you work.

Have your students read it the same way. Each Chapter 8 outline can be photocopied as a single page and given as a writing exercise. Each Chapter 9 guide is self-contained and assumes no prior knowledge.

2. Is Poetry Harder Than Prose? (And Why)

The honest answer is: yes, line-for-line, poetry is harder than prose to write well. It is also faster to fail at. Five reasons.

1. The unit of meaning is smaller.

In prose, the working unit is the sentence and, above the sentence, the paragraph. A reader will forgive a clumsy sentence if the paragraph carries them forward. In poetry, the working unit is the word and, above the word, the line. There is nowhere to hide a weak word; the reader sees every one. A novel can survive a hundred mediocre sentences. A fourteen-line poem cannot survive a single one.

2. Every line break is a decision.

Prose breaks lines only when the margin runs out. A poet breaks lines on purpose, every time, and each break is a tiny silence the reader has to feel. A poem of twenty lines therefore makes twenty deliberate formal decisions that prose does not have to make at all.

3. Compression is the genre.

Prose can be long. Poetry, by convention and by tradition, compresses. A poem the length of a paragraph (Williams's "The Red Wheelbarrow," sixteen words) is expected to do the work a short story does in two thousand words. The pressure on every choice is correspondingly higher.

4. The mistakes are louder.

A weak metaphor in a novel passes; the reader is moving fast. A weak metaphor in a six-line poem is the whole poem. The high-craft demand of poetry is, in part, the absence of carry-over real estate. There is no next paragraph to recover in.

5. The publication market is smaller and more selective.

A first-rate American literary magazine accepts roughly 1 to 3 percent of the poems submitted. Major journals like *Poetry* (Chicago) and *The New Yorker* accept far less than 1 percent. Prose magazines accept a higher percentage, partly because they publish fewer pieces per issue and partly because the formal demands are more diffuse. To publish poetry today is to be measured against many more peers per available slot than prose writers face.

The compensating gift

Poetry is harder than prose *per line*. But a poem can also be drafted in a single sitting and revised in a week, whereas a novel takes years. The hours-per-finished-piece ratio is comparable. What you are

paying for the higher difficulty is also the higher density of finished work the form lets you produce. A serious poet can write three to ten publishable poems a year. A serious novelist writes one book in three to seven.

3. The Average Contemporary Poem — By the Numbers

Drawn from contemporary submission guidelines, free-verse craft handbooks, and analyses of major literary magazines published in the past decade.

Lines per poem

The single most common length cap stated by American literary magazines is 40 lines. Most journals accept poems up to this length, with 100 lines as a frequently encountered upper limit at the most expansive journals. Inside those caps, most published contemporary poems cluster in three bands:

- **Short.** Fewer than 10 lines, or fewer than 60 words. The Instagram-poetry register, the haiku, the Williams-style miniature.
- **Mid-length (the typical published poem).** Between 10 and 40 lines. Long enough to develop an image, a turn, and a landing. This is the band most submissions and most acceptances live in.
- **Long.** More than 40 lines, up to (rarely) 100 or more. Reserved for sustained meditation, formal experiment, or sequence work.

Words per line

Most contemporary free-verse lines contain 6 to 14 syllables, which works out to roughly 5 to 10 words per line for everyday English. The technical ceiling is the reader's breath: a line of more than about 12 syllables begins to require a mid-line pause, and a line of more than about 17 syllables (the haiku's total) overruns most readers' working memory. Iambic pentameter — Shakespeare's and Frost's line — is ten syllables, roughly 7 to 8 words. Most published contemporary free verse hovers around this same length without naming the meter.

Stanzas per poem

The most common contemporary patterns:

- **Single stanza** — common for poems under 14 lines.
- **Couplets** — two-line stanzas. The dominant stanza form in published free verse since the late 1990s.
- **Tercets** — three-line stanzas. Beloved by Sharon Olds, Carolyn Forché, Mark Doty.
- **Quatrains** — four-line stanzas. The default in formal verse (sonnets, ballads, hymn meter).
- **Sectioned poems** — longer poems broken into numbered or titled sections, each one its own stanza.

A working profile of "the average published poem"

Free verse. Twenty-two lines. Seven to nine words per line. Eight to ten stanzas, mostly couplets or tercets. One specific image carried through. One turn around the two-thirds mark. A landed final line that does not paraphrase what came before. That is the median acceptance in *Poetry*, *Kenyon Review*, *The New Yorker*, *Rattle*, and most of the journals likely to be looking at a serious submission from the Art of Telling cohort.

4. The Most Popular Forms Published Today

Six forms account for the majority of the poems published in respected English-language journals and trade collections in the 2020s. Each is treated below with a working description and an indicative living poet.

1. The free-verse lyric

The dominant form, by a wide margin. A poem of 14 to 40 lines, no regular meter, no rhyme scheme, organized around an image or a moment, built in couplets or tercets, ending on a turn. Roughly 80 percent of poems published in mainstream American literary magazines are in this register. **Indicative poets:** Ada Limón (*The Carrying*, 2018; *The Hurting Kind*, 2022), Ross Gay (*Catalog of Unabashed Gratitude*), Tracy K. Smith.

2. The prose poem

A single justified block of prose, between 50 and 400 words, with the compression and image-density of verse but the syntax of prose. No line breaks. Has surged in popularity since the 1990s. Charles Simic won the Pulitzer for prose poems in 1990 (*The World Doesn't End*); Claudia Rankine's *Citizen* (2014) used prose-poem structure as its dominant unit. **Indicative poets:** Claudia Rankine, Carolyn Forché (*The Country Between Us*), Anne Carson, Jamaal May.

3. The Instagram lyric (more on this in Chapter 5)

Very short — typically 2 to 12 lines — plainspoken, often confessional, designed to be readable in a single screen swipe and shareable as an image. Form dominates the *sales* side of the market: Rupi Kaur's *Milk and Honey* (2014) has sold more than four million copies. **Indicative poets:** Rupi Kaur, Atticus, r.h. Sin, Amanda Lovelace, Lang Leav, Nikita Gill.

4. The new sonnet

The 14-line form, revived. Often stripped of strict iambic pentameter and strict rhyme but keeping the line count, the structural pressure, and the volta. The breakout case: Terrance Hayes, *American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin* (2018) — 70 sonnets composed during the first 70 days of the Trump presidency. Hayes called them sonnets "to keep the music tight"; the form gave him a way to write fast and tight under public pressure. **Indicative poets:** Terrance Hayes, Diane Seuss (*frank: sonnets*, 2021 Pulitzer), Wanda Coleman, Lucille Clifton.

5. The duplex (Jericho Brown, 2019)

A brand-new form: 14 lines arranged in seven couplets of 9 to 11 syllables each. The second line of each couplet is echoed (with variation) in the first line of the next. The poem's final line returns to its first line. Brown calls it a "guttet sonnet" that merges the sonnet, the ghazal, and the blues into one structure that is, in his words, "Black *and* queer *and* Southern." See Chapter 6 for full anatomy and an example with analysis.

6. The golden shovel (Terrance Hayes, 2010)

Another twenty-first-century invention: a poem whose end-words, read down the right margin, reproduce a line — or whole poem — from a poet the new poet wants to honor. Hayes invented the form in homage to Gwendolyn Brooks; his "The Golden Shovel" uses every word of Brooks's "We Real Cool" as line-endings. The form has spread widely; the 2017 anthology *The Golden Shovel Anthology* includes golden shovels by Billy Collins, Rita Dove, Joy Harjo, Jericho Brown, Maxine Kumin, and many others.

7. Erasure / found poetry

A poem made by erasing (blacking out, whiting out, or selectively removing) words from an existing text until what remains is the new poem. Tracy K. Smith's "Declaration" (in *Wade in the Water*, 2018) erases the U.S. Declaration of Independence until only the grievances against the King remain — and the result, by reframing, becomes a Black American grievance against the very government founded by that document. Erasure has become a major contemporary form, with practitioners including Robin Coste Lewis, M. NourbeSe Philip, Solmaz Sharif.

5. Instagram Poetry, Fully Explained

What it is

Instagram poetry — sometimes called "instapoetry" — is short, plainspoken verse distributed primarily through social-media image posts. A typical Instagram poem is two to twelve lines long, fits inside a single 1080-by-1080-pixel square, is centered or left-aligned on a clean background, and is often presented in a soft sans-serif or a handwritten-looking font. The poem is meant to be read in fewer than ten seconds and shared instantly.

The form's commercial breakthrough was the Canadian poet Rupi Kaur, who in 2014 self-published a 200-page collection called *Milk and Honey* drawn largely from poems she had been posting on Instagram. The book has since sold more than four million copies in dozens of languages and reshaped what mass-market poetry looks like. The most-followed Instagram poets — Kaur, Atticus, r.h. Sin, Lang Leav, Amanda Lovelace, Nikita Gill — each have millions of followers and routinely chart on *New York Times* bestseller lists.

An example, with analysis

A characteristic Instagram poem by Rupi Kaur, from

Milk and Honey (2014):

you do not just wake up and become the butterfly —
growth is a process.

Analysis.

Two lines, fourteen words, no capitalization, no punctuation except the em-dash. The poem leans on a single conventional image (the butterfly as transformation) and gives it a single conventional rebuttal (the process is hard). It is read and understood in roughly three seconds. The reader's emotional response — small recognition, faint relief, mild encouragement — is achieved almost entirely through what **the form** implies: **I have stripped this thought of all its decoration so that it can reach you directly.**

Critics of Instagram poetry note that the underlying observation is generic; defenders note that the directness is what reaches a reader who would never open *The Waste Land*. Both are true. The form does not pretend to do what a Bishop villanelle does. It does something else — circulate consolation widely, quickly, and with low barriers to entry — and it does that something else extremely well by the only measure social-media platforms reward: sharing.

Why it works as a form

1. **Visual containment.** The image-post forces compression. Anything longer than twelve lines no longer fits a phone screen. The form is, in effect, a column constraint as strict as a sonnet's 14 lines.
2. **Plainness as access.** Most readers come to Instagram poetry without literary training. Plain diction is the precondition of reaching them at all.
3. **Sharing as completion.** A traditional poem ends with the reader closing the book. An Instagram poem ends when the reader *shares* it to her own feed, signaling something to her own audience. The form is not finished until it has been forwarded. The poem is also a small object of identity-display.
4. **Image-first design.** The poem lives inside an image. Background, font, line spacing, accompanying photograph or illustration are part of the work. This is a multimedia form, not a text form that happens to be online.

Tips for writing publishable Instagram poetry

- **Compress ruthlessly.** If a thought needs more than twelve lines, it is not an Instagram poem. Make it a free-verse lyric and submit it elsewhere.
- **Lead with an image or a turn.** "You do not just wake up and become the butterfly" opens with the metaphor; "growth is a process" lands the turn. Open with the resonance; close with the takeaway.
- **Avoid abstraction.** The poems that share well have a concrete image at the center (butterfly, salt, sun, rain). Abstract Instagram poems disappear in the feed.
- **Design the post like a book cover.** Choose a consistent font, alignment, color palette, and background. Consistency is what builds an Instagram feed into a recognizable brand. Most successful instapoets have a visual identity as strong as their verbal one.
- **Be honest.** The form rewards small, accurate observations from your actual life. It punishes poses. A reader can tell.

A reasonable critique, fairly stated

The most serious literary criticism of Instagram poetry is not that it is short — Williams's "The Red Wheelbarrow" is shorter — but that it is *predictable*. The structure (image → moral reversal) repeats across thousands of poems. The vocabulary is small. The reader's recognition is shallow because the discovery is shallow. A poet who works only in this form will, over time, write the same poem with different nouns.

The cure (if a writer wants to grow beyond the form) is to *also* write in the longer free-verse lyric, the duplex, the prose poem. The Instagram lyric can be a working entry point, not a permanent home. The poets who began on Instagram and have moved into more rigorous work — Hala Alyan, Safia Elhillo, Fatimah Asghar — are the model for the path forward.

6. New Forms of the Twenty-First Century

Three forms in this chapter have been invented within the past sixteen years and are now widely taught and practiced. A fourth (erasure) was practiced before but has become a defining contemporary mode.

6.1 The duplex — Jericho Brown, 2019

Anatomy

- 14 lines.
- Seven couplets, no stanza breaks between them on the page.
- Each line is 9 to 11 syllables (so the whole poem is roughly the syllable count of a sonnet, but unrhymed).
- The second line of each couplet is echoed — with variation — in the first line of the next couplet. The repetition is approximate, not exact.
- The last line of the poem returns to the first line, completing a ring.
- No required meter and no required end-rhyme. The music is repetition and juxtaposition.

Example, with analysis

From Jericho Brown's *The Tradition* (Copper Canyon Press, 2019), the poem "Duplex" opens:

A poem is a gesture toward home.
It makes dark demands I call my own.

Memory makes demands darker than my own:
My last love drove a burgundy car.

Analysis.

Line 1 ("A poem is a gesture toward home") is also, by the form's rule, the poem's last line. Line 2 ("It makes dark demands I call my own") is then echoed in line 3 ("Memory makes demands darker than my own") — the second couplet picks up the previous line's ending and twists it. Brown calls this "the gutted sonnet": the fourteen-line scaffolding remains, but where the sonnet's argument turns at the volta, the duplex turns at every couplet, because each new couplet must accept and modify the line before it. The result is a poem that thinks the way obsessive memory thinks — circling, restating, never quite landing until it lands exactly where it started.

Why Brown invented it

Brown explained in a 2020 essay on the Poetry Foundation's *Harriet* blog: "If the presumed content of a sonnet is that it's a love poem, how do I — a believer in love — subvert that...I wanted a form that in my head was Black *and* queer *and* Southern." He combined the sonnet's 14-line shape, the ghazal's

repeating couplet refrain, and the blues's a-a'-b call-and-response. The duplex is, in this sense, a deliberate triple inheritance. ([Britannica on the duplex](#); [Academy of American Poets glossary](#).)

6.2 The golden shovel — Terrance Hayes, 2010

Anatomy

- Choose a line (or sometimes a whole poem) from a poet you want to honor — the "source line."
- Each word of the source line becomes the **end word** of one line in your new poem, in order.
- Read down the right-hand margin of your poem and you will see the source line embedded in it.
- No required meter, rhyme, or length beyond the count of the source line.

Origin

Terrance Hayes invented the form in 2010 after reciting Gwendolyn Brooks's "We Real Cool" with his five-year-old son to help the boy memorize it. The Brooks poem's words "kept ringing in Hayes's head"; he wrote a new poem in which Brooks's 24 words appeared, in order, as the end words of his 24 lines. He called the new form the "golden shovel" after a phrase in Brooks's epigraph. The original Hayes poem appears in his 2010 collection *Lighthouse*. ([Academy of American Poets](#); [Britannica](#).)

How it sounds in practice

Hayes's original poem opens (the end words of his lines, set in bold, spell out Brooks's line "We real cool. We"):

When I am so small Da's sock covers my arm, we
cruise at twilight until we find the place the real
men lean, bloodshot and translucent with cool.
His smile is a gold-plated incantation as we

Analysis. Hayes embeds Brooks's 1959 poem about Black urban boys ("We real cool. We / left school. We...") inside his own narrative about his father — and uses Brooks's exact words to do it. The new poem is at once a tribute, a conversation, and a personal memoir; the older poem is structurally present in every line ending. This is the form's deepest gift: it lets a poet *inhabit* a predecessor while making something new.

6.3 Erasure / found poetry

What it is

Erasure poetry is created by selectively removing words from an existing text until the words that remain make a new poem. The original text may be a historical document, a newspaper, a legal brief, a previous poem. The erasure may be visible (words crossed out with the originals still showing through)

or invisible (only the remaining words appear). The form was practiced occasionally in the twentieth century (Tom Phillips's

A Humument, 1966–) but has become a major contemporary mode in the past fifteen years.

Tracy K. Smith's "Declaration" (2018) — the example, with analysis

U.S. Poet Laureate Tracy K. Smith's "Declaration," published in *Wade in the Water* (2018), is an erasure of the United States Declaration of Independence. Smith reduces the document's 1,337 words to roughly 250. What remains is, almost entirely, the section of the Declaration in which Thomas Jefferson lists the colonists' grievances against King George III — passages beginning "He has plundered our —" and "He has refused our —" and "He has taken away —."

Analysis.

Smith's erasure transforms the Declaration of Independence into a Black American grievance against the United States itself — without writing a single new word. The reader is forced to hear the founding document's rhetoric of complaint re-aimed at the country that wrote it. Smith calls the result "an erasure poem drawn from the text of the Declaration of Independence" ([Tracy K. Smith — Artefacts of Writing](#)). The form's power is that *every word in Smith's poem is a word the United States itself wrote in 1776*. The political force comes from the framing alone. Erasure makes the original text confess.

Other major contemporary erasure works

- **Robin Coste Lewis**, *Voyage of the Sailor Boy* and *Voyage of the Sable Venus* (2015) — National Book Award winner. Composed entirely from museum catalogue descriptions of Black female figures in Western art across two thousand years.
- **M. NourbeSe Philip**, *Zong!* (2008) — an erasure of the 1783 legal case *Gregson v. Gilbert*, about the murder of 142 enslaved Africans thrown overboard the slave ship *Zong* for insurance money.
- **Solmaz Sharif**, *Look* (2016) — uses redacted military terminology from U.S. Department of Defense documents to make poems about American drone warfare.

6.4 The prose poem (a renewed form)

Not new in 2026 — the prose poem has roots in nineteenth-century France (Baudelaire, Rimbaud) — but it has surged in contemporary American practice since the 1990s. The form is a single justified block of prose, between 50 and 400 words, that uses the compression and image-density of verse without line breaks. **Why it matters now:** it gives the poet a way to break the conventional line altogether while still operating in the poetic register. Claudia Rankine's *Citizen* (2014) — a book-length prose-poem sequence on race and microaggression — won the National Book Critics Circle Award in poetry *and* criticism (the first book ever to do so in two categories), reshaping what an American poetry book could even look like.

6.5 Other new forms worth knowing about

- **The contrapuntal.** A two-column poem whose columns can be read separately (left column as one poem, right column as another) and together (left to right, ignoring the column break). Tyehimba Jess's *Olio* (2017 Pulitzer) made the form famous.
- **The cento.** A poem composed entirely of lines borrowed from other poets. Jericho Brown's "Duplex: Cento" combines the cento with his own duplex form.
- **The bop.** A new form invented by Afaa Michael Weaver around 2005 at Cave Canem: three stanzas (six lines, eight lines, six lines), each followed by a single-line refrain. Three stanzas to argue a problem, develop it, and arrive at either a resolution or a deeper failure.
- **The screenshot poem / tweet poem.** A poem whose visual form is a screenshot of a phone interface — a Notes app, a text exchange, a tweet. Whether this counts as a "form" or a "presentation" is contested. It is widely practiced on social media.

7. How Prominent Poets Are Motivated and How They Work

Selected from interviews and essays. Read these for company while you work. No two of them describe the same process.

Mary Oliver — daily walking, scribbled lines, hand on the page

Oliver kept the same routine for sixty years. She walked the dunes of Provincetown every morning with a small notebook in her back pocket. "Most mornings I'm up to see the sun, and that rising of the light moves me very much," she said, "and I'm used to thinking and feeling in words, so it sort of just happens." She scribbled fragments while walking and worked them into poems later. To students she gave a practical, almost severe instruction:

"Write first with a pen. It's too easy on the computer to change a word, then forget what it was. Also, don't get too social. Write for whatever holy thing you believe in, not for your poetry workshop fellows. And dare once in a while to throw a poem away."

— Mary Oliver, interview with *The Writer's Almanac*

Oliver's underlying motivation is summarized in her three-line dictum from the poem "Sometimes": "Pay attention. / Be astonished. / Tell about it." For Oliver, the poet's work is fundamentally a discipline of attention, sustained over a lifetime, with the writing as the natural outflow.

Ocean Vuong — months of listening, then a single feverish draft

Vuong's method is the opposite of Oliver's daily-scribble approach. He carries a poem inside him for months before writing anything down. "I spend most of my time listening instead of writing," he has said. "A shard of language might come: a phrase, a word, an anagram, and I'll just keep it in my pocket, like a little seed, warming in my fist." Then, when the time is right, he sits down and writes 10 to 25 drafts in a single sitting that may last hours; within three days, the poem is complete. He estimates that in a good year he completes "six to eight" poems this way, of which "four or five" are worth keeping. ([Connotation Press interview.](#))

"The work gets done when my terror is outpaced by my sense of urgency to speak."

— Ocean Vuong

Vuong also points to a craft idea from Bashō: that every poem has a color, "the mood or tone you're writing towards." That mood, he says, takes "weeks, months — years, really — to develop before language comes to fruition."

Ada Limón — listening for breath, following the music

Limón, current U.S. Poet Laureate, describes her process as listening more than designing. "I rarely start out knowing where I'm going," she has said in interviews. "Instead it begins with a curiosity, a question, a need, an image, a pulse, a sound, and I start to tug at it and see where it goes." For Limón, the form of a poem follows its breath:

"Breath, for me, determines how the poem is read... line breaks, caesuras in the middle of the line, stanza breaks, all of that, where the white space is, is always allowing for breath. In some ways, they operate like stage directions."

— Ada Limón, Willow Springs Magazine

Limón writes most of her drafts "poem by poem" without a thematic plan; only after she has 40 or 50 poems does she start to see what a book might become. She also notes that the hardest poem to write is "a joyful poem or a contented poem" — a useful caution for any writer who has assumed misery is the only reliable subject.

Tracy K. Smith — research, then risk

Smith, the former U.S. Poet Laureate whose erasure of the Declaration of Independence is discussed in Chapter 6, has described her process as one of long research followed by a moment of risk. She reads widely on a subject — astrophysics for

Life on Mars (2011 Pulitzer); American slavery and its legacy for *Wade in the Water* — until the language of the source material begins to fuse with her own. The result is poems whose surface is plain but whose informational depth is enormous. Smith's implicit lesson: research is not the enemy of feeling; for some poets, it is the precondition.

Jericho Brown — write everything down, then arrange

Brown's method when inventing the duplex was unusually physical. He printed out hundreds of unused lines from earlier drafts, cut them up, spread them across the floor of his living room, and rearranged them into couplets. "I can now make a duplex without cutting up any paper," he told an audience at Washington College, "although I still make them on cut paper because cutting up paper puts you in a position where you can make different kinds of discoveries that you won't make if you're just trying to generate." His underlying belief: *juxtaposition* — putting two things next to each other that did not arrive together — is the source of most new poems.

Common threads across all five

1. **Daily contact with language, even when not writing.** Oliver scribbles, Vuong listens, Limón reads aloud, Brown rearranges, Smith researches. None of them sits down to a blank page from a blank life.
2. **Patience with what is not yet ready.** Vuong waits months. Limón waits until she has 40 poems before naming a book. Oliver throws poems away. None of them rushes a draft into the world.
3. **A trusted physical practice.** Pen on paper for Oliver. Walking for Vuong. Cut paper on the floor for Brown. The bodily ritual matters as much as the intellectual one.
4. **Revision as the real writing.** Vuong's 10–25 drafts in a sitting. Bishop's 16 drafts of "One Art" in two weeks. The first draft is the raw material; the poem is what survives revision.

8. Specific Outlines for Eight Different Kinds of Poem

Each outline is one page of instruction, designed to be lifted into a writing exercise for your students. Each lists the form's key features, the constraints, the recommended length, and a step-by-step path to a first draft.

1. The Free-Verse Lyric

Length: 14 to 30 lines.

Shape: Free verse. Stanzas of your choice (couplets and tercets work especially well).

Constraints: No regular meter. No rhyme required. Every word earns its place.

Model to study: Ada Limón, "Instructions on Not Giving Up" (a 14-line free-verse poem about a flowering tree after winter).

Step by step

1. Choose a single concrete image from your actual life this week — a specific tree, a particular conversation, an object on your kitchen counter.
2. Write a prose paragraph of 80 to 120 words describing the image with at least four specific sensory details.
3. Break that paragraph into 14 to 30 lines. Break wherever your voice naturally pauses. Aim for 6 to 10 words per line on average.
4. Identify the poem's turn — the moment where the description shifts into meaning. If there is no turn, you have description, not a poem. Add one.
5. Rewrite the last two lines until they land like a small door closing. Do not paraphrase the body of the poem.
6. Read aloud three times. Adjust line breaks until the breathing matches the meaning.

2. The Instagram Lyric

Length: 2 to 10 lines, fewer than 50 words.

Shape: Single stanza, centered or left-aligned.

Constraints: No capitalization unless meaningful. Minimal punctuation. One concrete image.

Model to study: Rupi Kaur, any short piece from *Milk and Honey* or *The Sun and Her Flowers*.

Step by step

1. Write down one small, specific observation from the past 24 hours. Not a feeling — an observation. ("The bread had a crust on top.")
2. Find the metaphor or analogy hiding in the observation. ("The bread had a crust on top — / so does grief.")
3. Trim every unnecessary word. Aim for the shortest possible version that still carries the analogy.
4. Strip capitals and most punctuation. Keep periods only if they change meaning.
5. Design the visual presentation: choose a font, alignment, and background. The visual is part of the poem.

3. The Sonnet (Modern Variant)

Length: 14 lines.

Shape: Three quatrains plus a closing couplet (English) or octave plus sestet (Italian). May be unrhymed.

Constraints: A clear volta — a turn — at line 9, 13, or 14. The closing two lines land hardest.

Model to study: Terrance Hayes, any poem from *American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin* (2018); Diane Seuss, any sonnet from *frank: sonnets* (2021).

Step by step

1. Choose a subject of paradox or argument — two true things in tension. ("I love my city. I cannot afford to live in it.")
2. Write three quatrains, each one developing a different facet of the argument.
3. Identify where you will place the volta — usually at line 9 (Italian) or line 13 (English).
4. Compose the closing two lines (English form) so they either resolve the argument or sharpen the paradox.
5. Optional: count syllables to approximate iambic pentameter (10 syllables per line). Do not force exact meter — the music matters more than the count.

4. The Duplex (Jericho Brown form)

Length: 14 lines, seven couplets.

Shape: Couplets, 9 to 11 syllables per line. The poem's last line returns to the first.

Constraints: The second line of each couplet is echoed (with variation) in the first line of the next couplet.

Model to study: Jericho Brown, any "Duplex" poem from *The Tradition* (2019).

Step by step

1. Brainstorm 14 standalone lines — fragments, single sentences, observations, lines from old drafts. Each must be 9 to 11 syllables.
2. Choose the strongest line. This will be both your opening line and (echoed) your closing line.
3. Choose a second line that, paired with the first, creates a meaningful or surprising juxtaposition.
4. Compose the next couplet. Its first line must echo the second line of the previous couplet — same idea or image, slightly altered wording.
5. Repeat for five more couplets. By couplet 7, the second line of couplet 6 has been echoed, and you write a final line that returns to your opening.
6. Read aloud. The repetition is the music. If a repetition feels mechanical, rewrite the variation.

5. The Golden Shovel (Terrance Hayes form)

Length: Determined by the length of your source line (one line in your poem per word in the source).

Shape: Free verse, governed by the end-word constraint.

Constraints: Each word of a borrowed line, in order, must appear as the last word of one of your lines.

Model to study: Terrance Hayes, "The Golden Shovel" (2010), using Gwendolyn Brooks's "We Real Cool" (1959).

Step by step

1. Choose a poet you want to honor. Pick a line you love from one of their poems. (Start with a 10–15-word line to keep the exercise manageable.)
2. Write the words of that line vertically down the right margin of a piece of paper, in order.
3. For each word, compose one line of your own poem that ends with that word.
4. Try to make your poem be about something different from the source poem. The new poem should stand on its own.
5. After the draft, read down the right margin to confirm the source line reappears intact.
6. Acknowledge the source in a dedication or epigraph. Cite the poet and the borrowed line.

6. The Erasure Poem

Length: Determined by what survives the erasure.

Shape: Visual; depends on whether you preserve the original layout or extract only the surviving words.

Constraints: You may not add any words to the source text. You may only remove or keep.

Model to study: Tracy K. Smith, "Declaration" (in *Wade in the Water*, 2018).

Step by step

1. Choose a source text. Best candidates are public-domain documents with strong stakes: a Supreme Court decision, a historical letter, a newspaper article, a contract.
2. Read the source carefully and decide what you want the erasure to say. The erasure must have its own argument, not be random word-extraction.
3. Mark the words you want to keep. Cross out everything else. (For a visual erasure, black out the rejected words with a marker, leaving them legible underneath.)
4. Read what remains aloud. Adjust until the surviving language has its own rhythm and turn.
5. Title the poem so the reader knows what is being erased. The source's identity is part of the meaning.

7. The Prose Poem

Length: 50 to 400 words.

Shape: A single justified block of prose. No line breaks.

Constraints: Uses the compression and image-density of verse with the syntax of prose. Must contain a turn or revelation.

Model to study: Claudia Rankine, any section of *Citizen* (2014); Charles Simic, *The World Doesn't End* (1990).

Step by step

1. Forget about line breaks. Write a single paragraph between 50 and 400 words.
2. Use one specific scene, image, or moment as the spine. Do not summarize a feeling.
3. Compress: cut every word that does not earn its place. A prose poem of 200 words should feel as dense as a sonnet.
4. Build to a turn — a single sentence, ideally near the end, that pivots the meaning.
5. Read aloud. If the result feels like a paragraph of a short story, add density. If it feels like a poem missing its line breaks, you have it.

8. The Contrapuntal (Two-Column Poem)

Length: 14 to 30 lines per column.

Shape: Two columns of poetry, side by side, that can be read three ways: left column alone, right column alone, or left-to-right across both.

Constraints: All three reading paths must produce a coherent poem.

Model to study: Tyehimba Jess, *Olio* (2017 Pulitzer Prize).

Step by step

1. Choose two related but distinct subjects — two characters, two times of day, two voices.
2. Write the left-column poem first. Keep it short and self-contained.
3. Write the right-column poem so that each of its lines can also be appended to the corresponding left-column line and still make grammatical sense.
4. Read all three ways. Revise until each reading path produces a poem you would want to read.
5. Format with a clear vertical break between the columns. Most word processors handle this with a two-column page section.

9. How to Write the New Forms — Working Notes

These are not the step-by-step outlines (those are in Chapter 8). These are the small craft principles a writer must internalize to make the contemporary forms work.

On the Instagram lyric

1. **Write the poem for the page first.** Draft as if it will appear in a book. Only after the language is right do you design the post.
2. **Treat the title and the post caption as separate small poems.** A great Instagram poem often has a one-line caption that completes the work.
3. **Build a recognizable visual identity.** Choose one font, one alignment, one background color, one signature element. The visual consistency is what turns a series of posts into a body of work.
4. **Post on a schedule.** Daily or three times a week. The Instagram algorithm rewards consistency. The audience builds slowly.
5. **Engage with other poets.** Comment on their work. Follow. Be present. A community of 200 active readers is worth more than 20,000 silent ones.

On the duplex

1. **Generate first, arrange second.** Brown's method works because the lines come from many drafts and many moods. Pull from your notebook, not from a single afternoon.
2. **Count syllables.** 9 to 11 per line is the rule. The unevenness inside that range is the poem's pulse.
3. **Vary the echoes.** "Memory makes demands" → "Memory makes demands darker than my own" — change one word, add a clause, twist the syntax. The variation is where the thinking happens.
4. **End where you began.** Line 14 must return to line 1. The ring is the whole point.

On the golden shovel

1. **Choose a source line you already know by heart.** Hayes wrote his after reciting Brooks with his son for weeks. Familiarity is the source of permission.
2. **Pick a source line whose words are mostly content words.** A line that is mostly articles and prepositions ("of the to and") will be miserable to use as line-endings. A line whose nouns and verbs do the work is generative.
3. **Let your poem be about something else.** The point is not to retell the source poem. The point is to honor it by carrying its words into a new context.

4. **Acknowledge the source.** Subtitle or epigraph. The form is built on credit.

On erasure

1. **Choose a source with stakes.** A grocery list is not the right source. A Supreme Court decision, a corporate apology, a historical treaty, your own old journal — these have stakes the reader will feel.
2. **Read the source three times before erasing.** You are looking for the hidden poem already inside it. Erasure is not random; it is discovery.
3. **Preserve grammar.** What remains must still read as English. The reader should not have to translate.
4. **Let the visual form be part of the poem.** A printed page with crossed-out words shows the act of reduction. A clean transcription of what remains argues that the new poem has its own life. Either choice is valid; both are statements.

On the prose poem

1. **Compress like a poet, sentence like a fiction writer.** The prose poem is the place these two practices marry.
2. **One scene, one turn.** A prose poem that is only description is an unfinished sketch. The turn is what makes it a poem.
3. **Watch the rhythm of your sentences.** Without line breaks, sentence-music is the only music. Vary sentence length. Read aloud.

10. How to Publish New-Form Poetry

Publishing Instagram poetry

The Instagram poetry market has a counterintuitive feature: you publish it yourself. There is no submissions process, no acceptance, no rejection. You are the editor, the publisher, the marketer, and the audience-builder.

Step-by-step

1. **Create a dedicated account.** Not your personal profile. The account is for the work.
2. **Develop your visual identity.** Pick a font, a background color or texture, an alignment style. Use it consistently for at least 30 posts.
3. **Post on a schedule.** Daily or three times a week, minimum. Six months of consistent posting is the typical timeline to a noticeable readership.
4. **Cross-post strategically.** Instagram, TikTok (poetry videos), Twitter/X, and threads. Each platform rewards a slightly different format.
5. **Engage.** Read other poets' work. Comment. Follow. Community is the multiplier.
6. **After 50 to 100 strong poems, consider a print collection.** Self-publishing through KDP (Kindle Direct Publishing) or IngramSpark is how virtually every successful Instagram poet started, including Rupi Kaur. The print book becomes both the merchandise and the credential.

Publishing the duplex, golden shovel, and other new literary forms

These forms are at home in mainstream literary magazines. Submission guidelines for the major American journals —

Poetry, The New Yorker, Kenyon Review, Ploughshares, AGNI, Rattle — explicitly welcome contemporary formal innovation. A duplex or golden shovel does not need a special venue; it goes where any other poem of comparable quality would go.

A working submission plan

1. **Build a portfolio of 5 to 10 strong poems.** Mix forms — at least one free-verse lyric, one short piece, one experimental piece.
2. **Identify 10 target journals.** Three at the entry tier (*Rattle, Frontier Poetry, Cider Press Review*). Four at the mid-tier (*Kenyon Review, Ploughshares, AGNI, The Threepenny Review*). Three at the top tier (*Poetry, The New Yorker, The Atlantic*).
3. **Submit 3 to 5 poems per magazine.** Most journals welcome multi-poem submissions. Always read the journal's submission guidelines first.

4. **Use Submittable.** Most reputable journals manage submissions through it. Track every submission, every response, every revision.
5. **Expect a long timeline.** Most journals respond in 3 to 12 months. Withdraw a piece if it is accepted elsewhere first.
6. **Submit constantly.** A working poet maintains 20–40 simultaneous submissions at any given moment. Acceptance rates of 1–3 percent mean you submit broadly to be published occasionally.

Publishing erasure poetry

Erasure has a unique consideration: copyright. If your source text is in the public domain (anything published before 1929 in the United States, plus most U.S. government documents, plus most works whose copyright has lapsed), you can erase freely and publish without permission. If the source is in copyright, you must obtain written permission from the rights holder or rely on a fair-use argument — which is strongest when the erasure is clearly transformative and short relative to the original.

Friendly venues for erasure poetry: *Poetry*, *Conjunctions*, *Black Warrior Review*, *Asymptote*, *Wave Books* (publishes erasure-focused chapbooks).

Publishing book-length work

After 30 to 50 magazine publications, most poets begin to assemble a book manuscript. The standard paths are: **first-book contests** (the Yale Younger Poets Prize, the Walt Whitman Award, the Cave Canem Prize for African-American poets, the Kundiman Prize for Asian-American poets); **open submissions to literary publishers** (Copper Canyon Press, Graywolf Press, Sarabande Books, Tupelo Press, BOA Editions, Four Way Books); and, after two or three small-press books, **the major trade houses** (Knopf, FSG, Penguin, W. W. Norton, HarperCollins), typically with agent representation.

A realistic timeline

From "I want to publish poetry" to first individual-poem acceptance: 6–18 months of consistent submission. From first acceptance to a strong publication record: 2–5 years. From the first published poems to a first book: another 3–7 years. The whole arc, beginner to first book, is typically a decade. This is normal; this is the standard arc; the poets you admire all walked it.

11. Sources & Further Reading

On the duplex

[Academy of American Poets — Duplex](#) (definitive description and a Jericho Brown example).

[Britannica — Jericho Brown](#) (origin of the form).

[Jericho Brown, "Invention" — Poetry Foundation Harriet blog](#) (Brown's own essay on why he made the form).

On the golden shovel

[Academy of American Poets — Golden Shovel](#).

[Britannica — Golden Shovel](#).

[Poetry Society UK — The Golden Shovel \(teaching PDF\)](#).

On erasure poetry

[Poetry Foundation — Erasure Poetry glossary](#).

[Tracy K. Smith — Artefacts of Writing](#) (on "Declaration").

On contemporary poet process

[Ocean Vuong — Connotation Press interview](#).

[Mary Oliver — The Writer's Almanac interview](#).

[Ada Limón — Willow Springs interview](#).

On the contemporary market and statistics

[NEA — Survey of Public Participation in the Arts](#).

[WordsRated — Poetry Book Sales Statistics](#).

On Instagram poetry

[Bookmundo — How to Publish Poetry in 2025](#) (practical Instagram-poetry publishing guide).

[Poetry Foundation — Instagram Poetry and Our Poetry Worlds](#).

"Write for whatever holy thing you believe in, not for your poetry workshop fellows. And dare once in a while to throw a poem away."

— Mary Oliver

