

The Story of Poetry

A Comprehensive History, Craft, and Field Guide

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From the Origins of Speech
to the Poets of the Twenty-First Century

Prepared for

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Art of Telling — Unit II Companion Booklet

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"Genuine poetry can communicate before it is understood."

— T. S. Eliot

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How to Use This Booklet

This booklet has three uses, and you may move through it in whichever order serves you. Read it cover to cover as a lecture in slow motion: that path takes about two evenings and gives you the full sweep of how poetry came to be. Or pick a chapter the way you would pick a chapter of a reference book — the section on Philadelphia events when you want to find an open mic, the section on writing prompts when you sit down to draft, the glossary when a term has slipped your grasp. Or, if you are preparing to teach, lift the parts of Part One you want to read aloud, give your students a copy of the relevant prompts in Part Two, and use Part Three as a roadmap for what to do next.

Read aloud where you can. Many sentences in this booklet are quoting poets — Sappho, Du Fu, Shakespeare, Dickinson, Whitman, Bishop, Oliver. When you encounter a poem, slow down and read the line aloud, even if you are alone in the room. Poetry was an oral art for at least three thousand years before it was a written one. It returns to itself in the mouth.

A note on the front matter. The Roman numerals on the first pages of front matter follow standard book design: the front matter is paginated separately from the body of the booklet. The body begins at page 1.

A note on the back matter. The glossary is alphabetical. The index lists key concepts, named poets, named works, and named events with the chapter where each first appears. If you are looking for a specific term you remember but cannot place, start there.

An Invitation

In every century since human beings learned to speak, somewhere in the world someone has been making lines of language that lift, repeat, and lodge in the listener's memory. We call that act poetry. It is older than any of our books, older than our religions, older than every form of writing that records it. It existed in the mouth before the page; the page is, in a real sense, a transcription of the mouth.

This booklet is about that long act. It tells the story of where poetry came from and why; how its purposes shifted as civilizations rose and fell; how it changed when it learned to rhyme, and then when it stopped rhyming; who the great makers were and what they did to push the art forward; whether the form is still alive in 2026 (it is); how many books are published; how many readers remain; how a person in Philadelphia could begin to write, publish, and join the company of poets; and what we ought to read and re-read while we do.

It is also a practical book. Part Two is a working poet's manual: prompts, easy-to-follow guides for writing in specific forms, model poets to study, and the books I would press into the hand of anyone serious about the craft. Part Three is a guide to the field as it actually exists today, with a particular focus on Philadelphia.

The story begins, as all our stories do, before writing.

1. Before Writing: The Origins of Poetry

Why poetry exists at all

Poetry began for a profoundly practical reason: memory. Before writing, every story a culture wanted to keep — its origin myth, its laws, its genealogies, its medical knowledge, its weather lore, the names of its kings, the routes of its trade — had to be held in human minds and passed from one generation to the next. Plain prose does not survive that passage. A paragraph spoken aloud and re-spoken across decades drifts, blurs, and finally evaporates. A line of poetry, with its meter, rhyme, alliteration, and rhythmic stress, does not drift. The very features we now call "poetic" — repetition, rhythm, sound-patterning, vivid image — are mnemonic devices first. Poetry began as the technology that made human memory possible at scale.

This is why, in every recorded culture, the earliest literature is not prose but verse. The Rgveda of the Indian subcontinent (c. 1500 BCE) is composed in verse and was held in human memory for over a thousand years before being written down. The Epic of Gilgamesh in Mesopotamia exists in poetic form as far back as we can trace literary texts. The Iliad and the Odyssey, set down around 725 BCE, had already been performed by oral bards for centuries. The Vedic Brahmin who, even today, recites a thousand hymns from memory is not doing something exotic. He is doing what every literate culture once did before the page replaced the mouth.

Poetry was the first technology for the storage and retrieval of human knowledge.

Did humans invent poetry because we love sound?

Yes, but the love came second to the use. Children play with sound — "fee, fie, fo, fum," "ring around the rosie" — before they understand what the words mean. The pleasure of sound is older than language itself; humans cooed and chanted before we spoke. When we did begin to speak, the patterns of stress, the pulse of breath, and the small thrill of a repeated sound gave language a music that the brain caught on. Poetry made that music available to memory.

The neurological reason is now reasonably well established. The brain encodes patterned material — meter, rhyme, alliteration — into long-term memory through different pathways than it uses for unpatterned material. A patterned line is, in effect, pre-compressed for storage. When you read a Mother Goose rhyme to a child once a week for two months, the child can recite it. When you read the

child a paragraph of prose the same way, they remember the gist, not the words. Multiply that effect by a culture, by a thousand years, by an entire population of priests and bards trained to carry the lines, and you have the survival mechanism of human knowledge.

The practical reasons for poetry's beginnings

Across the ancient world, poetry served at least seven specific practical functions:

1. **Religious ritual.** Hymns to deities, temple chants, funeral songs. The earliest poems we can name — Enheduanna's Sumerian temple hymns, c. 2300 BCE — are religious.
2. **Historical memory.** Epics that recorded the deeds of kings, the founding of cities, the migrations of peoples. The Iliad records the late Bronze Age war over Troy across centuries of oral retelling.
3. **Law and ethics.** Early law codes — the Twelve Tables of Rome, certain Anglo-Saxon legal formulas — were composed in rhythmic verse for memorization by judges and elders.
4. **Practical instruction.** Farming calendars (Hesiod's Works and Days, c. 700 BCE), navigation poems, medical mnemonics. The Salernitan school in medieval Italy taught medicine in verse.
5. **Genealogy and identity.** Who is descended from whom. Tribal poetry across Africa, the Pacific, and pre-colonial North America preserved family lines and clan loyalties.
6. **War.** Battle songs, victory songs, dirges. Poetry was how soldiers were rallied and how the dead were honored.
7. **Love and courtship.** The lyric poem — a short, personal, often-musical poem about feeling — emerges everywhere by 600 BCE. Sappho on Lesbos, the Tamil Sangam poets in southern India, the early Chinese Book of Songs.

Did you know?

The word *verse* comes from the Latin *versus*, "a turning" — the moment when the plowman turns the ox at the end of a furrow and starts a new row. A line of poetry, like a furrow, is a unit of measured work. When the line ends, you turn back. The English word for plowing your way through a poem is built into the very name of the art.

2. The First Named Poets and the Ancient World

Enheduanna (c. 2285–2250 BCE)

Poetry has a known beginning in the sense that it has a first named author. She was a Mesopotamian princess and high priestess named Enheduanna — "Ornament of Heaven" in Sumerian — the daughter of Sargon of Akkad. She composed forty-two temple hymns and at least three longer poems, including the celebrated "Exaltation of Inanna." She is the first writer of any kind whose name we can record, four thousand three hundred years before the present. She predates Homer by more than fifteen hundred years and Sappho by more than seventeen hundred. The world's first known author was a woman, a priestess, and a poet, working in cuneiform script on clay tablets in what is now southern Iraq.

Almost no one outside the field of Assyriology has heard of her. That fact alone should reshape the way we think about the lineage of poetry.

The Epic of Gilgamesh (c. 2100–1200 BCE)

The oldest substantial surviving narrative poem in the world is the Epic of Gilgamesh, composed in Sumerian fragments before 2000 BCE and assembled by a scribe named Sîn-lēqi-unninni into the Standard Babylonian version we read today sometime between 1300 and 1000 BCE. It tells the story of Gilgamesh, semi-historical king of Uruk, his friendship with the wild man Enkidu, Enkidu's death, and Gilgamesh's subsequent search for immortality. The poem ends with the acceptance that the only immortality available to a human being is the building of a city and the leaving of a name behind. The themes are friendship, grief, mortality, and the limits of power. The Iliad would take up similar material a thousand years later.

The Book of Songs (Shijing) — China, c. 1000–600 BCE

In China, the foundational poetry collection is the Shijing, the Book of Songs — three hundred and five poems compiled in the early Zhou Dynasty, ranging from folk lyrics to court hymns. Confucius is said to have edited the collection; for two and a half thousand years, no educated Chinese person could be considered cultivated without having memorized it. The Book of Songs established the Chinese poetic tradition's deep love of brevity, image, and seasonal observation — traits that flow forward through Tang Dynasty poetry, Japanese waka and haiku, and into the modernist American Imagism of Pound and Williams in the early twentieth century.

The Vedas — India, c. 1500–500 BCE

The Rgveda is composed of 1,028 hymns in Vedic Sanskrit, organized into ten books, addressing the gods of the early Indo-Aryan pantheon. It was held in living human memory for at least a thousand years

before being written down. The technical precision of Vedic transmission is one of the wonders of human cultural history: priestly families developed eleven different recitation styles (samhita-patha, pada-patha, krama-patha, jata-patha, ghana-patha, and others) that cross-checked every syllable. The result is that the Rgveda has been transmitted across three millennia with effectively zero textual drift. Memory, properly trained, is more durable than parchment.

Sappho of Lesbos (c. 630–570 BCE)

The first great Western lyric poet was a woman writing on the Greek island of Lesbos in the late seventh century BCE. Sappho wrote in the Aeolic dialect, composed poems to be sung to the lyre, and treated personal feeling — desire, jealousy, longing for an absent lover — as a fit subject for serious art. Her work survives almost entirely in fragments: of nine books in the Alexandrian edition only one complete poem and pieces of others remain. And yet from those fragments has come a lineage that runs unbroken through Catullus, the Provençal troubadours, the Renaissance sonnet, and every confessional poet since. The lyric "I" of personal feeling was Sappho's invention, or her perfection.

*"Some say a host of cavalry, others of infantry, / and others, of ships, is the
most beautiful / thing on the dark earth: but I say it is / what you love."*

— Sappho, Fragment 16 (c. 600 BCE), translated by Anne Carson

3. The Greek and Roman Foundation

Homer and the epic line

The two poems attributed to Homer — the Iliad and the Odyssey, set down around 725 BCE — are the foundation of Western literary culture. Whether "Homer" was one poet or a tradition of poets, the poems themselves are products of a long oral tradition that the new technology of Greek alphabetic writing finally captured. The Iliad runs 15,693 lines; the Odyssey 12,109. Both are composed in dactylic hexameter — six metrical feet per line, each foot a long syllable followed by two short ones — a line built for chanting to the lyre. This line dominated epic poetry for the next thousand years and shaped how Western culture imagined what a "great poem" should sound like.

Greek lyric and Greek drama

Alongside epic, the Greeks developed lyric poetry (sung to the lyre, hence the name) and choral poetry. Pindar wrote victory odes for the winners of athletic games. Anacreon wrote drinking songs. Theognis wrote political verse. Greek tragedy — Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides — was sung and chanted poetry as much as it was drama; the actors spoke in iambic trimeter, while the chorus chanted in more elaborate metrical patterns.

Roman inheritors

Roman poets took the Greek forms and made them their own in Latin. Virgil composed the Aeneid (c. 29–19 BCE) in deliberate response to Homer, founding a national epic for Augustus's new empire. Horace wrote odes and satires that became the model for Renaissance and eighteenth-century English verse. Ovid wrote the Metamorphoses, a fifteen-book poem that became the single most influential source of mythological imagery in Western art. Catullus, working a generation before, wrote love poems so direct and so intimate that they read as if they were drafted yesterday.

A poem to read aloud

Catullus 5, written around 60 BCE, begins *Vivamus, mea Lesbia, atque amemus* — "Let us live, my Lesbia, and let us love" — and continues into a tally of kisses ("give me a thousand kisses, then a hundred, / then another thousand, then a second hundred"). The poem is two thousand and eighty-six years old. Read it in any decent translation and try to identify what makes it feel younger than most of the writing on the internet.

4. The Medieval World: Sacred and Secular

The Christian centuries (c. 400–1100)

After the fall of the Western Roman Empire, the surviving institution that preserved literary culture in Europe was the Church. Monastic poetry — Latin hymns, sequences for the liturgy, devotional lyrics — flourished in scriptoria from Ireland to Sicily. Meanwhile, in Anglo-Saxon England, the alliterative line of *Beowulf* (composed orally before 800, written down around 1000) carried forward the Germanic tradition of unrhymed accentual verse: four strong beats per line, the line halved by a caesura, with consonants linking the two halves. The Old English ear loved alliteration the way the Greek ear loved meter.

The troubadours and the invention of love poetry as we know it

Beginning around 1100 in the Occitan-speaking south of France, a remarkable literary movement called troubadour poetry produced the first sustained body of European love lyric in a vernacular language. The troubadours — Guilhem IX, Bernart de Ventadorn, Beatritz de Dia, and roughly four hundred and fifty named others, including some twenty named women — created the conventions of courtly love that would shape European poetry for the next eight centuries: the inaccessible beloved, the suffering lover, the secret pledge, the song offered as proof of devotion. Without the troubadours, no Dante; without Dante, no Petrarch; without Petrarch, no Shakespeare's sonnets; without Shakespeare's sonnets, much of what we mean by Western love poetry would not exist.

Dante and the Divine Comedy

Dante Alighieri composed the *Divine Comedy* in the Tuscan vernacular between 1308 and his death in 1321 — three canticles (*Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, *Paradiso*), one hundred cantos, fourteen thousand two hundred and thirty-three lines in *terza rima* (a three-line interlocking rhyme scheme of his own invention: aba bcb cdc ded). The *Comedy* is the supreme achievement of medieval European poetry and, by general agreement, one of the three or four greatest poems in any language. Dante elevated the vernacular — the everyday Italian people spoke in the street, not the Latin of the Church — to a vehicle for the most serious imaginable subject: the structure of the moral universe. This act gave permission to every subsequent European poet to write in their own spoken language. Chaucer, working in English a generation later, was Dante's direct heir.

Chaucer and the English vernacular

Geoffrey Chaucer (c. 1340–1400) made English a literary language. The *Canterbury Tales* (c. 1387–1400) is composed in iambic pentameter — the five-beat line that, by way of Wyatt, Surrey, Shakespeare,

Milton, Wordsworth, Tennyson, Frost, and a thousand others, would become the most important line in English-language poetry for the next six centuries. When Frost writes "When I see birches bend to left and right" in 1915, he is writing in a line that was already six hundred years old in English.

5. The Renaissance and the Birth of the Sonnet

Petrarch and the sonnet form

The sonnet was invented in thirteenth-century Sicily but perfected by Francesco Petrarca (Petrarch, 1304–1374), an Italian humanist whose *Canzoniere* — three hundred sixty-six poems addressed mostly to a woman named Laura — established the form that would dominate European lyric for the next four centuries. The Petrarchan sonnet is fourteen lines: an octave of eight lines (rhymed abbaabba) that poses the problem, followed by a sestet of six lines (cdecde or cdcdcd) that turns and resolves it. The volta — the turn between octave and sestet — is the poem's engine.

Wyatt, Surrey, and the English sonnet

Sir Thomas Wyatt (1503–1542) imported the sonnet into England, translating Petrarch into Henry VIII's English court. The Earl of Surrey (1517–1547) adapted the rhyme scheme: instead of Petrarch's octave-sestet, Surrey gave England three quatrains plus a closing couplet — abab cdcd efef gg. This is the English (sometimes Shakespearean) sonnet. The closing couplet, often epigrammatic, gives the form a different center of gravity from the Italian version.

Shakespeare's sonnets

William Shakespeare (1564–1616) wrote 154 sonnets, published in 1609. They are, by common consent, the supreme English achievement in the form. The first 126 are addressed to a young man, the so-called "Fair Youth"; sonnets 127–152 to a "Dark Lady"; the last two are conventional Cupid pieces. The variety of voice across the sequence — meditative, jealous, philosophical, erotic, weary, ecstatic — sets the high-water mark for what fourteen lines can do. Every English-language poet since has had to reckon with Shakespeare's sonnets, whether by imitation, departure, or refusal.

*"That time of year thou mayst in me behold / When yellow leaves, or none,
or few, do hang / Upon those boughs which shake against the cold, / Bare
ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang."*

— Shakespeare, Sonnet 73 (1609)

Milton and the epic in English

John Milton (1608–1674) composed *Paradise Lost* (1667), the supreme English epic, in blank verse — unrhymed iambic pentameter — at a time when virtually all serious English poetry rhymed. Milton's choice opened the long line to philosophical and theological meditation; without Milton there is no Wordsworth, no Coleridge, no Tennyson, no Frost.

6. The Romantic Revolution

The 1798 watershed: Lyrical Ballads

In 1798, two young English poets — William Wordsworth (1770–1850) and Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772–1834) — published anonymously a small volume called *Lyrical Ballads*. In its preface (added to the 1800 edition), Wordsworth made the manifesto that broke poetry open: poetry should be written in "a selection of language really used by men," should take "incidents and situations from common life" as its subject, and should issue from "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity."

This single book ended the eighteenth-century tradition of polished, witty, formal verse and inaugurated what we now call Romanticism: an emphasis on individual feeling, on nature as the source of moral truth, on imagination as a power equal to reason, and on the everyday speech of ordinary people as the proper medium of serious art. Every subsequent revolution in English-language poetry, including the modernist break of 1912–22 and the free-verse explosion that followed, descends from the assumptions Wordsworth made in this preface.

The major Romantics

- **William Wordsworth (1770–1850).** The *Prelude*, the great autobiographical poem of childhood and consciousness. Imagine modern memoir without him: you cannot.
- **Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772–1834).** "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," "Kubla Khan," "Frost at Midnight." The dreamer-philosopher of the first generation.
- **Lord Byron (1788–1824).** *Don Juan*, a satirical epic in ottava rima; the celebrity poet who died fighting for Greek independence at thirty-six.
- **Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792–1822).** "Ode to the West Wind," *Prometheus Unbound*; political revolutionary in verse; drowned at twenty-nine.
- **John Keats (1795–1821).** The great odes ("To a Nightingale," "On a Grecian Urn," "To Autumn") composed in a single year; dead of tuberculosis at twenty-five.

The first-generation Romantics were philosophers in verse; the second generation died young, beautiful, and political. Together they redefined what an English poet could be.

American Romanticism: Emerson, Whitman, Dickinson

In America, Romanticism arrived a generation later and produced its two greatest national poets at almost the same moment. Walt Whitman (1819–1892) published *Leaves of Grass* in 1855 — long, unrhymed, cataloguing, prophetic, ecstatic — and gave American poetry the free-verse line that

Williams, Ginsberg, Oliver, and every Instagram poet of 2026 still uses. Emily Dickinson (1830–1886) worked privately in Amherst, Massachusetts, writing nearly eighteen hundred short lyrics that compressed metaphysics into the meter of a hymn. She published almost nothing in her lifetime. Together, Whitman and Dickinson — one open-armed, one withdrawn; one declaring, one whispering — are the twin sources of all later American poetry.

7. The Victorian Inheritance

The Victorian period (c. 1837–1901) is sometimes dismissed as a long afternoon between the Romantic dawn and the Modernist storm. It is not. Three of the most enduring English poets of the nineteenth century — Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809–1892), Robert Browning (1812–1889), and Christina Rossetti (1830–1894) — worked in the period, and so did the half-secret Jesuit revolutionary Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844–1889), whose "sprung rhythm" anticipated modernism by half a generation.

Tennyson and the public role

Tennyson became Poet Laureate in 1850 and held the position for forty-two years. He wrote *In Memoriam A.H.H.*, the great Victorian elegy for his friend Arthur Hallam; the *Idylls of the King*, a Victorian retelling of Arthurian legend; and "The Charge of the Light Brigade," the most-quoted English war poem of the nineteenth century. Tennyson made the case that a poet could be a public voice and a national figure.

Browning and the dramatic monologue

Robert Browning perfected the dramatic monologue — a poem in which a single speaker (often a historical figure) addresses an unseen listener and, in the course of speaking, reveals more than they intend. "My Last Duchess" (1842) and "Porphyria's Lover" remain the textbook cases. The dramatic monologue gave poets a way to write fiction in verse: persona work that would feed directly into T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (1915), Ezra Pound's personae, and Robert Browning's entire twentieth-century lineage.

Hopkins and the secret revolution

Gerard Manley Hopkins, a Jesuit priest who barely published in his lifetime, developed what he called "sprung rhythm" — a metrical system based on stressed syllables alone, ignoring the count of unstressed syllables. The result is a line that gallops, lurches, and packs density into a small space. "Pied Beauty," "The Windhover," "God's Grandeur": these poems read as if they were written in 1920, not 1880. When his work was finally published in 1918, it landed inside modernism like a fellow traveler.

8. Modernism and the Break

The break of 1910–1922

Around 1910, a number of English-language poets — Ezra Pound, H. D., T. S. Eliot, William Carlos Williams, Marianne Moore, Wallace Stevens — decided that the inherited Victorian forms had become exhausted. They turned, variously, to the Chinese classical poets, the troubadours, French Symbolism, classical Greek lyric, and folk speech for new resources. In 1912, Pound, H. D., and Richard Aldington formed the Imagist movement and issued a three-rule manifesto: direct treatment of the thing; absolute economy of words; and composition in the sequence of the musical phrase, not the metronome.

In 1922, three works appeared within months of each other: James Joyce's *Ulysses*, T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, and the first installment of William Carlos Williams's *Spring and All*. The English-language literary year of 1922 is sometimes called *annus mirabilis* — "the wonder year" — because Modernism arrived in full force in a single twelve-month span. Poetry would not be the same again.

What the Modernists broke (and what they kept)

They broke: the assumption that a poem must rhyme; the assumption that a poem must scan in regular meter; the assumption that a poem's speaker is identical to its author; the assumption that a poem must have a single clear meaning; and the assumption that poetic diction is different from spoken diction.

They kept: the line as the basic unit; the image as the basic atom of meaning; the conviction that compression matters; and the inherited tradition itself, often by way of allusion (Eliot's notes to *The Waste Land* list more than thirty other works the poem quotes or evokes).

Major Modernist works to know

- **T. S. Eliot**, *The Waste Land* (1922). The poem that announced Modernism in English. 434 lines, five sections, multiple languages, polyphonic voices, no plot. Read with the notes.
- **Ezra Pound**, *Cantos* (1925–1969). An 800-page unfinished long poem; difficult, dazzling, sometimes appalling (Pound's fascism is real and unredeemable). Pound was, despite this, the most important editor in English-language poetry of the twentieth century: he edited *The Waste Land* down by half and made it the masterpiece it is.
- **William Carlos Williams**, *Spring and All* (1923). The American counter-statement: short, sharp, observational, plain-spoken. "The Red Wheelbarrow" appears here.

- **Wallace Stevens**, *Harmonium* (1923). A Connecticut insurance executive writing some of the most philosophically rich poetry of the century: "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," "The Snow Man," "Sunday Morning."
- **Marianne Moore**, *Observations* (1924). Syllabic verse of formidable precision; the great American poet of attention.
- **Robert Frost**, *Mountain Interval* (1916) and *New Hampshire* (1923). Frost stands deliberately apart from Modernism, writing rhymed, metered, plain-spoken New England pastoral. He becomes the most-read American poet of the century anyway.

9. Postwar to Postmodern

The mid-century settlement

After 1945, English-language poetry settled into a sometimes-uneasy coexistence between formalist inheritors of the Modernists (Richard Wilbur, Anthony Hecht, Elizabeth Bishop) and a counter-tradition that wanted more breath, more body, more politics. Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* (1959) ushered in confessional poetry, in which the poet's private life — divorce, depression, mental illness — became the legitimate subject of serious art. Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, John Berryman, and W. D. Snodgrass followed.

The Beats

Beginning in 1955 with Allen Ginsberg's reading of "Howl" at the Six Gallery in San Francisco, the Beat poets returned American poetry to its Whitmanesque long line, its public oratory, its political insurgency. Ginsberg, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Gregory Corso, Gary Snyder, Diane di Prima. The Beats made poetry loud, popular, and dangerous again.

The Black Arts Movement

From the mid-1960s through the mid-1970s, Amiri Baraka, Sonia Sanchez, Audre Lorde, Nikki Giovanni, Etheridge Knight, June Jordan, and Lucille Clifton built the Black Arts Movement — the artistic arm of Black Power. Their premise: that Black writers should create new mythologies rooted in Black experience rather than seeking inclusion in white literary traditions. The movement reshaped what American poetry could sound like and who its speaker could be.

Confessional, Deep Image, New York School, Language Poetry

From roughly 1960 through 1990, English-language poetry split into multiple overlapping schools. The Confessionals (Lowell, Plath, Sexton, Berryman). The Deep Image poets (Robert Bly, James Wright, W. S. Merwin). The New York School (Frank O'Hara, John Ashbery, Kenneth Koch). The Language poets (Ron Silliman, Lyn Hejinian, Susan Howe, Charles Bernstein). Each school argued passionately for a different theory of the poetic line. The diversity was the point: American poetry had become, by the end of the century, a federation of competing aesthetics rather than a single tradition.

10. The Twenty-First Century: Where We Are Now

Is poetry in a heyday?

Yes — and no, depending on how you measure. By the most important measure (the number of people who read poetry in a given year) poetry in the United States is at the highest level since the early 1990s. The National Endowment for the Arts' Survey of Public Participation in the Arts found that **the share of American adults reading poetry rose 76 percent between 2012 and 2017**, reaching 11.7 percent of the adult population — roughly 28 million people. The 2022 NEA survey held the trend approximately steady ([NEA / Arts.gov](https://www.nea.gov/Arts.gov)). Readership had fallen for most of the previous quarter-century; the reversal since 2012 is real, and is partly attributable to Instagram poetry, slam, and the rise of poet-laureate visibility (Joy Harjo, Ada Limón).

The numbers

Roughly **10,000 new poetry titles are published in the United States each year** ([WordsRated](https://www.wordsrated.com/)); poetry is approximately 1 percent of all titles published annually. Of approximately 800 million books sold each year in the United States, only about 3 million are poetry. The average poetry collection from a respected small press sells **2,000 to 5,000 copies**. The top ten poetry titles in any given year account for about 25 percent of all poetry sales ([Accio market analysis](https://www.accio.com/market-analysis)). The market is real, but it is a niche market with a long tail.

Who reads poetry today, and who buys it?

Poetry readers in 2026 skew younger than the general reading public, more diverse, and more female. The category whose audience has grown most rapidly is so-called **Instagram poetry** — short, plainspoken, often confessional verse distributed primarily through social media and then collected in books. The best-selling poet of the past decade by an order of magnitude is Rupi Kaur, whose *Milk and Honey* (2014) and *The Sun and Her Flowers* (2017) sold more than 8 million copies combined. Atticus, r.h. Sin, Lang Leav, and Amanda Lovelace are other major Instagram-era figures.

In the literary mainstream, the most consistently celebrated contemporary American poets include **Ada Limón** (current U.S. Poet Laureate), **Tracy K. Smith** (former Poet Laureate, Pulitzer Prize), **Jericho Brown** (Pulitzer Prize for *The Tradition*), **Natalie Diaz** (Pulitzer Prize for *Postcolonial Love Poem*), **Ocean Vuong** (*Night Sky with Exit Wounds*), **Hanif Abdurraqib** (essays + poetry), **Layli Long Soldier** (*Whereas*), and the late **Mary Oliver**, whose backlist still tops poetry-bestseller lists eight years after her death.

Has poetry ever been disliked? And by whom?

Yes. Plato's Republic (c. 380 BCE) famously argued that poets should be banished from the ideal city because their work stirred emotion without reasoned content. Puritan England closed the theatres in 1642 and banned all secular dramatic poetry until 1660. Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads* was widely mocked in 1798 for its plainspoken diction. Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* was denounced in 1855 as obscene; Boston banned the 1881 edition. T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* was dismissed in 1922 by many critics as unintelligible. Confessional poetry of the 1960s was attacked as self-indulgent. Instagram poetry in the 2010s and 2020s has been attacked as commercial, simple-minded, and not really poetry at all. Every period of poetry has been disliked by the period before it. That is, in a sense, what an art form *is*: a series of arguments about what counts.

What is the most desired form today?

Three forms dominate American poetry in the mid-2020s. (1) **Free verse lyric** — short to mid-length poems without regular meter or rhyme, treating personal experience, identity, place, or politics. This is the form of most book publication. (2) **Instagram lyric** — very short, often four to twelve lines, plainspoken, sometimes accompanied by a small illustration. This is the form of most *sales*. (3) **Spoken-word and slam** — performed at open mics and competitive slams, often blending narrative, personal testimony, and political argument. Form (1) dominates the prestige economy; (2) dominates the commercial economy; (3) dominates the live-event economy.

11. The Rules: Dos and Don'ts of Writing a Poem

There are no inviolable rules. There are working principles that almost every accomplished poet has internalized, however, and that the beginner ignores at the cost of slower learning. Here are fifteen.

Ten Dos

1. **Read poetry every day.** No exceptions. A poet who does not read is a tennis player who does not watch tennis.
2. **Read your drafts aloud.** What does not survive your own mouth will not survive a reader's ear.
3. **Write specific images, not abstract feelings.** Not "I felt grief" but "I folded his shirt twice before I cried."
4. **Trust the line break.** A line break is a small silence. Make it carry weight.
5. **Cut.** Every word in a poem should earn its place. Remove anything that does not. The poem will improve.
6. **Use plain language inside tight form.** Frost is the model. The poem feels deep because the words are simple and the structure is exact.
7. **Imitate openly.** Take a poem you love and write your own poem in the same shape, on a different subject. This is how every poet learns.
8. **Revise.** Bishop revised "One Art" through sixteen drafts in two weeks. Most great short poems went through more drafts than you imagine.
9. **Keep a notebook.** Carry it with you. Most poems begin with a phrase overheard or a thing seen, not a sit-down to write.
10. **Submit your work.** Magazines, contests, anthologies. A poem that lives only in your drawer remains in your drawer.

Five Don'ts

1. **Don't announce the feeling.** Do not write "I was sad." Write what made you sad, in concrete sensory detail. Let the reader feel the sadness without being told to.
2. **Don't force a rhyme.** A poem that bends its meaning to fit a rhyme has lost the argument. If you cannot find a rhyme that serves the thought, write the line in free verse.
3. **Don't use abstract nouns where a concrete one would do.** "Love," "hope," "beauty," "time," "memory" — these are placeholders. Replace them with the specific thing that *caused* the love, hope, beauty, time, or memory.

4. **Don't end on the obvious.** Your last line is the one the reader carries away. If the ending merely restates what the poem has already shown, the poem has not earned its ending. Try the second-to-last line as your ending and see what happens.
5. **Don't mistake feeling for craft.** Genuine feeling does not guarantee a good poem. Oscar Wilde: "All bad poetry springs from genuine feeling." Feeling is the raw material. Craft is what turns it into a poem.

12. Where Do Good Poems Come From?

You asked: do good poems come from emotion always? From real experience? Or can a person decide to write a poem on the sky and it would be good?

The honest answer is: from all three, and from one more thing.

Emotion

Most great poems begin in a felt response to something. Wordsworth's formulation — "emotion recollected in tranquillity" — captures the working method of most lyric poetry: the emotion happens, the poet lets it settle and clarify, and then the poet writes. The poem is not the emotion itself; it is the considered, shaped record of the emotion. This is why poems written in the white heat of feeling are often worse than poems written six months later about the same event. The emotion is the necessary fuel. It is not the necessary poem.

Real experience

Direct experience is the easiest source because it gives the poet the specific, sensory, lived detail that abstract reflection cannot. But poems can equally come from second-hand experience (a story heard), historical experience (research), or imagined experience (the speaker is not the poet). A great proportion of the best poetry in English is what we call

persona poetry — the speaker is constructed. Browning's dramatic monologues. Pessoa's heteronyms. Ai's gallery of voices. The poem is "true" not because the events happened to the poet but because the imagined speaker is rendered with enough sensory specificity to be believed.

Pure invention (yes, the sky poem can be good)

A poet who decides to write about the sky — with no particular emotion, no particular experience, just the project of describing the sky honestly and well — can absolutely write a good poem. Wallace Stevens wrote "The Snow Man" this way. Williams wrote "The Red Wheelbarrow" this way. The condition is that the poet must look at the sky long enough and precisely enough to find something only she would have noticed. Generic looking produces generic poems. Sustained, particular, idiosyncratic looking produces real poems even when there is no emotional occasion.

The fourth source: attention itself

The deepest source of good poems is the practice of attention. Mary Oliver: "Pay attention. Be astonished. Tell about it." A poet who pays attention to the world — to the grasshopper, to the broken

windowpane, to the way her father said "yeah" — will have endless material. A poet who waits for inspiration will write three poems a year. Attention is the source that does not run out. It is also the only source you can develop on purpose.

"Pay attention. Be astonished. Tell about it."

— Mary Oliver, "Sometimes" (2008)

13. Forms Then and Now: Rhyme, Meter, Free Verse

When did poetry become rhyming?

Rhyme is not an original feature of poetry. The earliest verse traditions across most cultures used meter, alliteration, parallelism, or stress patterns rather than end-rhyme. Classical Greek and Latin poetry was metrical, not rhymed. Anglo-Saxon poetry (*Beowulf*) was alliterative, not rhymed. Hebrew biblical poetry uses parallelism (repeating the thought in different words across two consecutive lines) without rhyme.

End-rhyme as a structural device entered Western poetry largely from Arabic models in the medieval period. The Provençal troubadours adopted it. Dante and Petrarch perfected it in Italian. Chaucer brought it into English in the late fourteenth century. From roughly 1400 through 1900, end-rhyme was the default expectation for serious English-language poetry. Then, after Whitman in 1855 and the Modernists after 1912, free verse became increasingly common, and by 2026 it is the dominant mode.

Can poetry be non-rhyming?

Absolutely yes — and most contemporary American poetry is. Approximately 80 percent of poems published in major American literary magazines in the past decade have been in **free verse** (without regular meter or rhyme). Free verse is not formless — it is shaped by line breaks, breath, stanza, syntax, and image. It is simply not shaped by rhyme or by a regular metrical count. Free verse demands *more* decision from the poet, not less: every line break is a choice the poet has to defend.

The most desired forms today (and yesterday)

Most desired in 2026: free verse lyric, short prose poem, and Instagram-format short lyric. Also a quiet revival of the sonnet (Terrance Hayes's

American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin, 2018, is a fourteen-line sequence of seventy poems that re-energized the form for a generation).

Most desired across the long arc of history: the sonnet, the ode, the elegy, and the ballad. These four have never gone out of fashion for more than a generation at a time. A poet in 2026 who masters the sonnet has joined a conversation seven hundred years long.

14. Twelve Prompts to Get You Started

Use these prompts when the page is blank. Each takes 20–40 minutes. Write fast first; revise later.

1. **The window prompt.** Look out a window for two full minutes before you write. Then write fourteen lines that describe what you see — with no metaphors, no feelings, no abstractions. Just the things in the frame.
2. **The lost things prompt.** Make a list of ten things you have lost. Order them from smallest to largest. Write a poem that catalogues them, ending on the one you cannot quite name.
3. **The grandparent prompt.** Write about one specific gesture of one of your grandparents — the way they held a cup, tied a shoe, looked at someone. Just the gesture. Twelve to twenty lines.
4. **The "after" prompt.** Choose a poem you love. Write your own poem in the same shape (same line count, same broad structure), on a completely different subject. Title it "After [Poet's Name]."
5. **The smell prompt.** Pick a smell. Build a poem entirely around the memories it triggers. No visual images for the first eight lines — sound, smell, taste, touch only.
6. **The kitchen-table prompt.** Write a poem set entirely at one kitchen table. Two characters. One short conversation. No exposition. The reader has to assemble the story from what is said and what is not.
7. **The walking prompt.** Take a half-hour walk. Carry a notebook. Write down exactly five things you noticed. Build a poem from those five.
8. **The single-question prompt.** Open the poem with a question. Spend the body of the poem failing to answer it. End on a different, smaller, sharper question. Model: Mary Oliver, "The Summer Day."
9. **The persona prompt.** Write a poem in the voice of someone who is not you — a historical figure, a character from a novel, a stranger you saw once. Do not break the voice for any reason.
10. **The translation prompt.** Take a public-domain poem in a language you do not speak. Read three different existing translations. Write your own version, with your own choices, even though you do not know the language. The poem becomes yours.
11. **The list prompt.** Write a poem made entirely of a list — twelve to thirty items. The order is the meaning. Whitman, Christopher Smart, Bishop, Joe Brainard all wrote great list poems.
12. **The error prompt.** Write a poem about the moment you realized you were wrong about something important. The poem should not say what you were wrong about until the last three lines.

15. Six Easy-to-Follow Guides for Writing Specific Poems

Each guide takes a recognized form, breaks it into steps, and gives you a model to study before you begin.

Guide 1 — The Williams-Style Imagist Miniature

Model: William Carlos Williams, "The Red Wheelbarrow" (1923).

1. Sit somewhere with one object in your sightline. Look at it for sixty seconds before writing anything.
2. Write one prose sentence about the object, with two or three specific physical details.
3. Add "so much depends upon" as the opening of the poem. Do not say what depends.
4. Break the sentence across four to eight lines. Break wherever your voice pauses when you read aloud. Try splitting one compound word.
5. Read aloud. Move one line break. Read aloud again. Stop when no further change improves the poem.

Guide 2 — The Bishop-Style Villanelle

Model: Elizabeth Bishop, "One Art" (1976); also W. H. Auden, "If I Could Tell You"; Dylan Thomas, "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night."

1. Choose a subject of accumulating loss or persistent feeling. The form is best for obsessive material.
2. Write your first refrain — one line, ten or eleven syllables, end-rhyming on an easy sound (say, "-aster" or "-ame" or "-ight").
3. Write your second refrain — same length, ending on a different but related rhyme sound.
4. Compose five tercets, each rhyming *aba*, alternating which refrain ends each tercet.
5. Compose the closing quatrain, rhyming *abaa*, with both refrains as the final two lines.
6. In the final line, slightly modulate one of the refrains — change one word, one syllable. The modulation is the emotional climax.

Guide 3 — The Frost-Style Blank-Verse Meditation

Model: Robert Frost, "Birches" (1916).

1. Choose an image from your own life: a tree, a road, a building, a body of water.

2. Write six to ten lines of iambic pentameter (five-beat lines, alternating unstress/stress) describing the image with one detail nobody else would notice.
3. Introduce an interpretation you *want* to believe ("I like to think...")
4. Refuse it. Write six to ten lines that say what is actually the case ("But really...")
5. Earn the wish back. Permit yourself the original interpretation as conscious choice, not naive belief. End on a single line that holds both the truth and the wish.

Guide 4 — The Oliver-Style Sacred-Particular

Model: Mary Oliver, "The Summer Day" (1990).

1. Open with three rhetorical questions about something large — creation, time, grief, attention. Do not answer them.
2. Drop into close observation of a single creature or object. Build the description through four progressively specific details (action → behavior → small precise feature → eyes, hands, or surface).
3. Pivot with a flat statement of what you do or do not know. ("I don't know exactly what a prayer is. / I do know how to pay attention.")
4. Close with one or two questions turned outward. Make the reader the one who has to answer.

Guide 5 — The Shakespearean Sonnet

Model: Shakespeare, Sonnet 73 ("That time of year thou mayst in me behold"); Terrance Hayes, *American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin* (2018).

1. Choose a subject of paradox or argument — something where two true things are in tension.
2. Write three quatrains of iambic pentameter, rhyming *abab cdcd efef*. Each quatrain develops one facet of the argument.
3. Compose the closing couplet — two lines, rhyming *gg* — that either resolves the argument or sharpens the paradox. The couplet is the volta and the punchline at once.
4. Read aloud. The closing couplet must land like a small door closing. If it doesn't, rewrite.

Guide 6 — The Prose Poem

Model: Charles Simic, *The World Doesn't End* (1990, Pulitzer Prize); Claudia Rankine, *Citizen* (2014); Lydia Davis, short fictions.

1. Forget about line breaks. Write in a single justified block — between fifty and three hundred words.
2. Use the compression, the image-density, and the music of poetry, but the syntax of prose.
3. Aim for a turn. The piece should *not* simply describe; it should pivot, surprise, or reveal at some moment before the end.
4. Read aloud. If it feels like a paragraph of a story, add density. If it feels like a poem missing its line breaks, you have it.

16. Model Poets to Study (With Sample Poems)

Twelve poets whose work, studied carefully, will teach more than any textbook. For each, the entry names a single accessible representative poem and the skill the student can take away.

From the ancient and medieval worlds

- **Sappho** (c. 600 BCE). Read: Fragment 16 ("Some say a host of cavalry..."). *Skill*: how the lyric "I" of personal feeling earns the right to speak.
- **Li Bai (Li Po)** (701–762, Tang Dynasty China). Read: "Quiet Night Thought." *Skill*: how a few specific images can hold an entire mood.
- **Du Fu** (712–770, Tang Dynasty China). Read: "Spring Prospect." *Skill*: how public history and private feeling fuse in eight lines.
- **Hafez** (c. 1325–1390, Persia). Read: any ghazal. *Skill*: the discipline of the repeating refrain.
- **Geoffrey Chaucer** (c. 1340–1400). Read: "General Prologue" to *The Canterbury Tales*. *Skill*: how a single detail can build a character.

From the Renaissance and seventeenth century

- **William Shakespeare** (1564–1616). Read: Sonnets 18, 29, 73, 116, 130. *Skill*: how a fourteen-line argument turns at the volta.
- **John Donne** (1572–1631). Read: "The Flea," "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning." *Skill*: the extended metaphor (conceit) sustained through an entire poem.
- **George Herbert** (1593–1633). Read: "The Pulley," "Love (III)." *Skill*: how plainspoken devotion can be intellectually rigorous.

From the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries

- **William Wordsworth** (1770–1850). Read: "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud," "Tintern Abbey." *Skill*: how nature becomes the occasion of self-knowledge.
- **John Keats** (1795–1821). Read: "Ode to a Nightingale," "To Autumn." *Skill*: sensuous specificity at the highest register.
- **Emily Dickinson** (1830–1886). Read: "Tell all the truth but tell it slant," "Because I could not stop for Death," "I felt a Funeral, in my Brain." *Skill*: the maximum compression of metaphysical thought into a hymn-meter quatrain.
- **Walt Whitman** (1819–1892). Read: "Song of Myself," "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd." *Skill*: the long, catalogue-driven, oratorical line.

- **Gerard Manley Hopkins** (1844–1889). Read: "Pied Beauty," "The Windhover." *Skill*: what stress-driven verse (sprung rhythm) can do with a packed line.

Twentieth-century essentials

- **W. B. Yeats** (1865–1939). Read: "The Second Coming," "Sailing to Byzantium," "Among School Children." *Skill*: how a poet can grow across a long career.
- **Robert Frost** (1874–1963). Read: "Birches," "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," "Home Burial." *Skill*: the sound of sense — plain speech inside high meter.
- **William Carlos Williams** (1883–1963). Read: "The Red Wheelbarrow," "This Is Just to Say," "Spring and All." *Skill*: imagism, breath-line, no ideas but in things.
- **T. S. Eliot** (1888–1965). Read: "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," *The Waste Land*, *Four Quartets*. *Skill*: how a poem can incorporate other voices and other texts.
- **Wallace Stevens** (1879–1955). Read: "The Snow Man," "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," "Sunday Morning." *Skill*: how philosophy and image can become indistinguishable.
- **Elizabeth Bishop** (1911–1979). Read: "One Art," "The Fish," "In the Waiting Room." *Skill*: the held surface — emotion never named but always present.
- **Seamus Heaney** (1939–2013). Read: "Digging," "Death of a Naturalist," "Postscript." *Skill*: how local detail carries political weight without polemic.
- **Lucille Clifton** (1936–2010). Read: "won't you celebrate with me," "homage to my hips," "blessing the boats." *Skill*: compression, communal voice, and orthographic refusal.
- **Mary Oliver** (1935–2019). Read: "The Summer Day," "Wild Geese," "When Death Comes." *Skill*: attention as ethical and aesthetic practice.

Contemporary voices worth following

- **Ada Limón** (b. 1976). *The Carrying*, *The Hurting Kind*. The current U.S. Poet Laureate.
- **Tracy K. Smith** (b. 1972). *Life on Mars* (Pulitzer Prize, 2012).
- **Jericho Brown** (b. 1976). *The Tradition* (Pulitzer Prize, 2020); inventor of the "duplex" form.
- **Natalie Diaz** (b. 1978). *Postcolonial Love Poem* (Pulitzer Prize, 2021).
- **Ocean Vuong** (b. 1988). *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*.
- **Terrance Hayes** (b. 1971). *American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin*.
- **Ross Gay** (b. 1974). *Catalog of Unabashed Gratitude*.
- **Patricia Smith** (b. 1955). *Incendiary Art*.

17. The Best Books on the Craft of Poetry

Ten books that have taught more poets than any others. Each is briefly summarized; each will repay multiple readings.

1. Mary Oliver, *A Poetry Handbook* (1994)

A 144-page distillation of everything Oliver believed about how a poem is built. Chapters on sound, line, image, meter, voice, and revision. Plainspoken, generous, exact. The book a beginner should buy first.

2. Stephen Fry, *The Ode Less Travelled: Unlocking the Poet Within* (2005)

A witty, rigorous introduction to English-language metrics and forms — iambs, sonnets, villanelles, sestinas, haiku — taught through exercises the reader is expected to do. Fry insists, correctly, that you cannot understand free verse until you can scan a line. The book a serious beginner should buy second.

3. Edward Hirsch, *How to Read a Poem and Fall in Love with Poetry* (1999)

A reader's guide rather than a writer's manual. Hirsch walks through dozens of poems from many traditions, demonstrating how a careful reader pays attention. Especially good for understanding why a poem moves you.

4. Richard Hugo, *The Triggering Town: Lectures and Essays on Poetry and Writing* (1979)

A collection of lectures by a working poet on what actually happens when you write. Hugo distinguishes the "triggering subject" (what the poem appears to be about) from the "generated subject" (what it turns out to be about) and shows why poets must move from one to the other. Indispensable on the moment-to-moment psychology of drafting.

5. Mary Oliver, *Rules for the Dance: A Handbook for Writing and Reading Metrical Verse* (1998)

A companion to *A Poetry Handbook*, narrowed to meter and form. Read these two Oliver books together and you have a working education.

6. Frances Mayes, *The Discovery of Poetry* (1987, revised 2001)

Widely used in college poetry-writing courses. Comprehensive, with hundreds of example poems organized by craft element. Slower-paced than Fry or Oliver but excellent as a reference.

7. Theodore Roethke, *On Poetry and Craft (selected essays, posthumous)*

The notebook of a great poet thinking about craft in real time. Aphoristic, alive, occasionally incoherent in productive ways. Read it for company more than instruction.

8. Robert Hass, *A Little Book on Form* (2017)

A 400-page deep dive into formal patterns across many languages and centuries. Hass, a former U.S. Poet Laureate, treats form as the central question of poetry. Difficult, rewarding, the kind of book you keep on the desk for years.

9. Kim Addonizio and Dorianne Laux, *The Poet's Companion* (1997)

A craft book organized around exercises, with chapters on image, voice, and revision. Practical, classroom-tested, accessible.

10. Christopher Hitchens (ed.),

and various others. Anthologies as craft texts. One of the great craft education tools is a serious anthology — *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, *The Penguin Book of English Verse*, *The Vintage Book of Contemporary American Poetry*. Read one cover to cover. The accumulated exposure to high-craft poems is its own education.

18. What Fiction Writers Can Learn from Poetry (and Vice Versa)

What fiction writers can take from poetry

1. **Compression.** A short poem teaches you that every word costs. Apply that pressure to your prose and the prose tightens by 30 percent.
2. **The image as the unit of meaning.** Fiction writers who learn to lead with sensory image rather than exposition see their scenes spring into focus.
3. **The line.** Poetry teaches you that the unit smaller than the sentence — the broken line, the breath unit — is its own decision. Once you hear that, you start hearing the rhythm of your prose sentences.
4. **Sound.** Reading poetry aloud sensitizes you to the music of language. Your dialogue will improve.
5. **Endings.** Poems must end. Fiction often coasts. Studying how short poems land their last line will teach you how to land a short story or a chapter.

What poets can take from fiction

1. **Character.** Most short poems contain at least one human figure besides the speaker. Fiction trains you to render that other figure in three lines.
2. **Scene.** A short poem is often a single scene. Fiction teaches you the discipline of staging — when does the door open, when does the cup tip over.
3. **Dialogue.** Few skills make a contemporary poem feel more alive than well-handled spoken speech. Fiction is where that skill is taught.
4. **Narrative shape.** Even a fourteen-line sonnet has an arc. Fiction trains you to recognize and use that arc.
5. **Stamina.** Sustaining attention over thousands of words is its own craft. Fiction strengthens it. Poets who can also write a thousand-word prose paragraph well are immediately more interesting on the page.

The exchange goes both ways

Many of the greatest twentieth-century writers worked in both forms: Thomas Hardy started as a novelist and became one of England's major poets; Margaret Atwood, Sandra Cisneros, Roberto Bolaño, Ben Lerner, Ocean Vuong all work in both. Reading widely in the other form is the cheapest, fastest training in your own.

19. The Market: How Many Books, How Many Readers?

Publication statistics

In the United States, approximately 10,000 to 10,500 poetry titles are published each year, accounting for roughly 1 percent of the total number of books published. Of these, perhaps 400 to 500 come from established trade publishers; the remainder are from small presses, university presses, and self-publishing platforms. Worldwide, roughly 40,000 poetry books are released each year.

By comparison, approximately 50,000 to 70,000 new fiction titles are released each year in the United States, and roughly 100,000 nonfiction titles. Poetry is therefore the smallest of the three big trade categories by an order of magnitude. (

[Source: WordsRated.](#)

Sales statistics

Of the roughly 800 million books sold in the United States each year, only about 3 million are poetry — roughly four-tenths of one percent of total book sales. The average serious poetry collection from a respected small press sells 2,000 to 5,000 copies over its entire commercial life. A first book from a major trade publisher may sell 1,500 to 3,000 copies in the year of publication. A "bestseller" in poetry is anything that crosses 10,000 copies; titles that sell more than 100,000 are vanishingly rare in any decade.

Exceptions to this rule are revealing. Rupi Kaur's

Milk and Honey (2014) has sold more than 4 million copies worldwide; her *The Sun and Her Flowers* (2017) more than 4 million. Mary Oliver's *Devotions* (a posthumous selected) has crossed 1 million. These are the outliers that prove the rule.

Readership statistics

The most comprehensive U.S. data on poetry readership comes from the National Endowment for the Arts' Survey of Public Participation in the Arts, conducted approximately every five years.

Year	Share of U.S. adults reading poetry
1992	17.1%
2002	12.1%
2008	8.3%
2012	6.7% (the modern low)
2017	11.7% (a 76% increase from 2012)

2022	~9–11% (broadly stable since 2017)

Data: National Endowment for the Arts Survey of Public Participation in the Arts.

In raw numbers, the 2017 reading-poetry figure represented approximately 28 million American adults. The 2022 figure represents roughly 24–28 million. By any reasonable historical measure, this is a substantial audience — larger than the audience for live theater, jazz, or opera in the same surveys.

Is poetry readership declining?

It declined for most of the twenty-five years from 1992 to 2012. It has risen since 2012, sharply. Whether the rise will sustain is the open question. Drivers of the rise: Instagram poetry, slam and spoken word, the high visibility of recent U.S. Poet Laureates (Joy Harjo, Ada Limón), social-media-shared poems after public events (Amanda Gorman's "The Hill We Climb," 2021 inauguration), and a generally younger reading audience that did not grow up with the print-only constraints of earlier decades.

20. Can You Make a Living as a Poet?

Yes — but rarely from book sales alone. Across the past century, almost every working American poet has earned the majority of their living from one of three sources:

1. Teaching (the most common path)

University and college creative writing programs hire poets. A tenure-track position at a four-year university pays roughly \$60,000 to \$100,000 annually, with health benefits and a regular schedule. Many of the most-respected American poets of the past sixty years — Mark Strand, Mary Oliver (briefly), Robert Hass, Tracy K. Smith, Ada Limón, Jericho Brown — have held university positions for part or all of their careers. The drawback: the academic poetry-teaching market is competitive, the available positions are fewer than the number of qualified candidates, and an MFA (Master of Fine Arts) is now effectively a prerequisite.

2. Speaking and reading fees

Established poets earn \$1,000 to \$25,000 per public reading, depending on profile. A poet with national visibility can plausibly do 15–30 paid readings per year. Combined with teaching, this can produce a comfortable living.

3. Grants, prizes, and fellowships

Major prizes carry significant cash awards: the Pulitzer Prize in Poetry (\$15,000), the National Book Award (\$10,000), the MacArthur Fellowship ("genius grant," \$800,000 over five years), the Wallace Stevens Award (\$100,000). Foundations and state arts councils fund residencies and grants. A serious working poet typically pieces together a year's income from some combination of teaching, readings, residencies, and the occasional book advance.

What about royalties?

A respected poetry collection that sells 3,000 copies at \$18 cover price earns the author, after the publisher's share, perhaps \$2,000 to \$4,000 over the book's commercial life. Even the most successful literary poetry collections rarely produce more than \$20,000–\$50,000 in royalties over a decade. The exceptions — Mary Oliver, Rupi Kaur — are visible

because they are exceptions. The honest answer to "can I make a living writing poems?" is: not from royalties. From the larger life that strong poems can build — teaching, speaking, writing in adjacent forms (essays, memoirs, novels), residencies, prizes — yes, increasingly yes.

21. Where to Submit Your Work First (and Next)

A career-long path, mapped from beginner to established.

Stage 1 — Earliest submissions

Begin with magazines that explicitly welcome emerging voices, with online presence, and with a public commitment to reading unsolicited work. Build a small body of published work before approaching the most competitive markets.

- **Rattle** — accessible, supports emerging voices, accepts online submissions, includes a "Poets Respond" feature for politically-engaged work.
- **Frontier Poetry** — online journal explicitly for emerging poets; runs a "New Voices" series.
- **Cider Press Review** — small, careful, friendly to first publications.
- **SWWIM Every Day** — daily online publication for women-identifying poets.
- **Local literary magazines** — Apiary in Philadelphia, Cleaver Magazine (also Philadelphia-based), Sundog Poetry. Local publication builds local audience and local credibility.

Stage 2 — Mid-career submissions

- **Poetry** (Chicago) — the oldest continuously-published English-language poetry magazine, founded 1912. Extremely competitive. A single acceptance changes a career.
- **The New Yorker** — prestigious, very competitive, but reads unsolicited submissions.
- **The Atlantic** — smaller poetry footprint than *Poetry* or *The New Yorker*, but a major credential.
- **Kenyon Review, Ploughshares, The Threepenny Review, AGNI, The Yale Review, The Sewanee Review** — the established mid-tier of American literary journals; competitive but committed to discovery.

Stage 3 — Book publication

After approximately 25 to 50 individual poems are placed in magazines, a poet typically begins thinking about a first book. Two paths.

- **First-book contests** — the Yale Younger Poets Prize, the Walt Whitman Award, the National Poetry Series, the Cave Canem Prize (for African American poets), the Kundiman Prize (for Asian American poets). Most pay a small cash award and publish the winning manuscript.

- **Open submissions to literary publishers** — Copper Canyon Press, Graywolf Press, Sarabande Books, BOA Editions, Tupelo Press, Four Way Books, Persea Books. Most read manuscripts in specified annual windows.

Stage 4 — Established trade publication

Once a poet has published two or three books from smaller presses, the major trade houses become possible: Knopf, FSG, Penguin, W. W. Norton, HarperCollins, Ecco. These houses typically work through agents; this stage of a career almost always involves literary agent representation.

A practical first step

Submit one poem to one journal this month. Just one. Do not wait until you have a complete manuscript. The skill of submission is its own skill, and it is best learned early, while the stakes are low. Use [Submittable](#) — most reputable poetry journals manage submissions through it. Many are free; a few charge a small reading fee (\$3–\$10) that you should expect.

22. The Pitfalls of Writing Poetry Today

Honest hazards every working poet should know about in advance.

1. The isolation pitfall

Writing poetry is a solitary act. Most poets work alone for years before they have any readership. The corrosive effect of working without feedback is real. The cure is to find or build a community — a workshop, a writing group, a regular open-mic, a correspondent — early.

2. The rejection pitfall

A serious working poet may receive twenty to fifty rejections for every poem accepted. Most published poets have submission ratios in the single percentage digits. Rejection is the medium, not the exception. Build a habit of submitting many places, tracking rejections, and continuing.

3. The plateau pitfall

Many poets write strong early work, achieve a small audience, and then stop growing. The cure is deliberate reading outside one's comfort zone — reading translations, reading poets from earlier centuries, reading prose by living novelists — and deliberate practice in unfamiliar forms.

4. The Instagram pitfall

Social-media poetry has lowered the publication barrier to zero. This is generally good. But it has also created an incentive to write short, easy, emotionally legible work that gets immediate likes. A poet who relies on Instagram metrics as feedback will gradually train themselves to write to that incentive. The cure: write some poems no Instagram audience would understand. Submit them to the journals listed above.

5. The MFA pitfall

The MFA system has produced a recognizable kind of contemporary American poem — well-crafted, image-driven, often workshop-polished into a kind of uniform competence. A poet who reads only contemporary MFA-trained work runs the risk of writing it. The cure is reading wider and deeper — Du Fu, Petrarch, Donne, Dickinson, Hopkins, Whitman, Akhmatova.

6. The financial pitfall

Be honest with yourself: poetry is unlikely to be the source of your income. Make peace with this fact before it discourages you. The reward of poetry is not financial; it is the work itself, and the small but real community that gathers around poems that matter.

23. Poetry Events in Philadelphia

Philadelphia has a strong, varied, mostly free poetry scene. The aspiring poet who lives in the city can attend a serious event almost any week of the year. Below, the venues and series most worth knowing.

The major institutional series

Monday Poets Reading Series — Free Library of Philadelphia

First Mondays of the month, 6:00 PM, at Parkway Central Library (1901 Vine Street, Room 108). Two featured local and regional poets read; a short open mic follows if time permits. The series began in 1995 and recently celebrated its thirtieth anniversary. Free. ([Free Library calendar](#))

Free Library Author Events

Ongoing series at Parkway Central Library that frequently features major national poets in conversation with the Philadelphia Poet Laureate (Airea D. Matthews). Past visitors have included Ada Limón, Jericho Brown, and Joy Harjo. Free; check the calendar. ([Free Library Foundation events](#))

Mad Poets Society

A long-running regional organization (founded 1986, more than 100 members across multiple states) that runs ongoing reading series throughout the greater Philadelphia area. Monthly events include the First Wednesdays series at the Community Arts Center in Wallingford (7 PM), Mad Poets at Pinwheel (3rd Wednesday at Pinwheel Provisions café), 4th Friday Poetry at the Philadelphia Meditation Center in Havertown, and the annual Mad Poets Festival in October in Media, PA. Workshops, critique circles, and open mics. (madpoetssociety.com)

Open-mic and slam venues

Coffee & Conversations: Open Mic Spoken Word Night

Monthly at Walnut Street West Library (201 South 40th Street). 4:30 PM. Free coffee and refreshments. ([Free Library calendar](#))

Open Mic Night at the Nicetown-Tioga Library

Recurring Friday evenings (5:30 PM) at the Nicetown Café within the Nicetown-Tioga Library, 3720 N. Broad Street. Music, poetry, and spoken word. Twenty-one and older. Free.

Voices In Power — City Winery

A curated poetry open-mic experience that runs at City Winery Philadelphia (990 Filbert Street) on rotating evenings throughout the year. Features a guest poet, a spotlight performer, a raffle-style 15-slot open mic, live DJ, and live painting. Ticketed (typically \$10–\$25). (voicesinpower.com/events/philly)

Scribes on South — Tattooed Mom

Monthly poetry reading and open mic at Tattooed Mom (530 South Street). Open-mic readers get 5 minutes. No cover.

Open Pages: Poetry Book Club and Open Mic — Club 624

Recurring evening event at Club 624 (624 S. 6th Street) combining a guided poetry writing workshop, a guided reading experience, and a live open mic. Tickets \$10–\$15.

Bookstore and gallery events

Big Blue Marble Bookstore (Mt. Airy)

551 Carpenter Lane. Hosts the Mad Poets Society's "Poetry Aloud & Alive" series one Friday a month, plus various other readings. Cozy, café-equipped, friendly to beginners.

PhilaMOCA

531 N. 12th Street. Hosts the Pigeon's Poetry Slam first Friday of the month, October through May. A writing workshop precedes the slam (7:30 PM); competitor sign-ups at 8:30; show at 9.

Space 1026

844 N. Broad Street. Hosts the Amethyst Gate Literary Art Series, an evening of featured poets, music, philosophy, and an open mic.

Pinwheel Provisions

Café in Mt. Airy. Hosts Mad Poets Society readings on the third Wednesday of each month at 5 PM. Free, casual, food and drink available.

How to use this list

Pick one event from this chapter and attend in the next thirty days. Bring a notebook. Listen. Do not perform on your first visit — just watch and learn the local conventions. By your third visit, sign up for an open-mic slot. The Philadelphia scene is welcoming; everyone there once attended for the first time too.

24. Cultures That Treasure Poetry

Poetry is not equally valued across cultures. Some societies have, for centuries, given poetry a higher cultural standing than others. Knowing which ones and why is useful both for the curious reader and for the working poet looking for sustaining traditions.

Iran (Persia)

Iran is, by general agreement, the country where poetry is most deeply woven into everyday life. Ordinary Iranians can quote and respond to poems by Hafez (c. 1325–1390), Rumi (1207–1273), Saadi (c. 1210–1291), Ferdowsi (c. 940–1020), and twentieth-century giants like Forough Farrokhzad. The tomb of Hafez in Shiraz is a major pilgrimage site; Iranian families consult the Divan of Hafez for guidance the way other cultures might consult the I Ching or a horoscope. Poetry is not a specialist art in Iran. It is, in a meaningful sense, the national vocabulary.

China and the broader Chinese literary world

Classical Chinese poetry — the work of Li Bai (701–762), Du Fu (712–770), Wang Wei (699–759), Bai Juyi (772–846) — is a continuous cultural inheritance. The traditional Chinese civil service examinations included composition of poetry into the twentieth century. Mao Zedong wrote classical-form poetry. Modern Chinese poetry has had multiple flowerings in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries despite periods of political suppression.

The Arabic-speaking world

Poetry has been the central literary art in Arabic for fourteen hundred years. The Mu'allaqat (the "Hanging Odes" of pre-Islamic Arabia), the work of Mutanabbi, the modern poets Mahmoud Darwish, Adunis, and Nizar Qabbani — these poets are publicly mourned when they die, their work memorized, their tomb sites visited. The shift toward Quranic prose in Islamic literary culture did not displace poetry; it sat alongside it.

Russia

Russian culture treats poets as moral authorities and frequently as martyrs. Pushkin (1799–1837), Lermontov, Akhmatova, Mandelstam, Tsvetaeva, Pasternak, Brodsky — these names are public property in Russia in a way they are not in most Western countries. The phrase "a poet in Russia is more than a poet" (Yevtushenko) captures something real about how the role has been constructed.

Ireland

Ireland is the small country with the densest cluster of major poets in the modern Anglophone world: Yeats, Heaney, Eavan Boland, Paul Muldoon, Derek Mahon, Michael Longley, Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin,

Paula Meehan, Nick Laird. Ireland has produced more Nobel laureates per capita than any other country. Poetry there is woven into the political and historical conversation of the nation.

What the United States can learn

In none of the above cultures is poetry only an elite art. In all of them, poetry circulates through ordinary speech — quoted at weddings, recited at funerals, cited in political speeches, sung in popular songs. American poetry has been moving in this direction since the inauguration-day readings (Robert Frost in 1961, Maya Angelou in 1993, Miller Williams in 1997, Elizabeth Alexander in 2009, Richard Blanco in 2013, Amanda Gorman in 2021) and through the rising visibility of Poets Laureate. The civic role of poetry, in other words, can be cultivated; it is not a fixed national characteristic.

Glossary of Poetic Terms

Alphabetical. Cross-references in *italic*. This glossary is a working reference; a more comprehensive version has been prepared as a separate student handout for the Art of Telling course.

Alliteration — Repetition of initial consonant sounds in nearby words. Anglo-Saxon poetry (*Beowulf*) is structurally alliterative.

Allusion — A reference to another text, work, person, or event.

Anaphora — Repetition of the same opening word or phrase across successive lines.

Apostrophe — Direct address to an absent person, abstraction, or the reader.

Ars poetica — A poem about the art of poetry itself.

Ballad — A narrative poem, usually in quatrains, often originally meant to be sung.

Blank verse — Unrhymed iambic pentameter. The line of Milton, Wordsworth, Frost.

Caesura — A pause within a line, usually marked by punctuation.

Catalogue — A list, deliberately ordered, used as a structural device.

Conceit — An extended metaphor sustained across multiple lines or stanzas.

Couplet — A two-line stanza, or a pair of rhymed lines.

Dactyl — A metrical foot of one stressed syllable followed by two unstressed.

Dramatic monologue — A poem in which a single speaker (often historical) addresses an unseen listener and reveals more than they intend.

Elegy — A poem of mourning.

End-stopped line — A line that ends with a syntactic pause.

Enjambment — A line that runs over into the next without a syntactic break.

Epic — A long narrative poem, often about heroic action and the founding of a people.

Foot — A unit of metrical measurement (iamb, trochee, anapest, dactyl, spondee).

Free verse — Verse without regular meter or rhyme, organized by line, breath, and image.

Ghazal — A Persian and Urdu form of five to fifteen couplets, with a repeated refrain and a signature in the final couplet.

Haiku — A three-line Japanese form, traditionally 5-7-5 syllables, focused on a single image.

Iamb — A metrical foot of one unstressed syllable followed by one stressed.

Iambic pentameter — A line of five iambs.

Image — A sensory detail rendered in language.

Imagism — An early-twentieth-century movement insisting on direct treatment of the thing and rejection of abstraction.

Lyric — A short, personal poem, originally meant to be sung to the lyre.

Metaphor — A figure equating two unlike things without "like" or "as."

Meter — A regular pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables.

Modernism — The early-twentieth-century literary movement that broke with traditional form and embraced fragmentation, allusion, and the urban present.

Octave — An eight-line stanza, or the opening eight lines of a Petrarchan sonnet.

Ode — A formal, elevated address to a person, thing, or idea.

Onomatopoeia — A word that sounds like what it means.

Pastoral — A poem set in or evoking the rural world.

Persona — A speaker explicitly different from the poet.

Personification — Giving human attributes to non-human things.

Prose poem — A poem written in justified prose, without line breaks, but using the compression and music of verse.

Quatrain — A four-line stanza.

Refrain — A repeated line or phrase at fixed intervals.

Rhyme — Identity of sound between two words, usually at line ends.

Sestet — A six-line stanza, or the closing six lines of a Petrarchan sonnet.

Sestina — A 39-line form in which six end-words rotate through six positions, then all appear in the closing tercet.

Slant rhyme — A near-rhyme in which only the vowel or only the final consonant matches.

Sonnet — A 14-line poem, traditionally in iambic pentameter, with a defined rhyme scheme.

Speaker — The voice doing the talking in a poem. Not necessarily the poet.

Spondee — A metrical foot of two stressed syllables.

Sprung rhythm — Hopkins's stress-driven metrical system, ignoring the count of unstressed syllables.

Stanza — A grouped set of lines, separated by white space.

Tercet — A three-line stanza.

Terza rima — A three-line interlocking rhyme scheme (aba bcb cdc), invented by Dante for the Divine Comedy.

Tone — The speaker's attitude toward the subject and the reader.

Trochee — A metrical foot of one stressed syllable followed by one unstressed.

Villanelle — A 19-line French form with two refrains. Bishop's "One Art" is the best-known modern English example.

Volta — The "turn" of a poem — the point where the argument or feeling pivots.

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Voices In Power Philadelphia: [voicesinpower.com](https://www.voicesinpower.com).

Poetry Foundation: [poetryfoundation.org](https://www.poetryfoundation.org). The single best free resource for poems, biographies, and craft essays.

Academy of American Poets: [poets.org](https://www.poets.org). Daily poem, poet pages, the Poetry Audio Archive.

*"You should never write a poem that hasn't already been written in the
marrow of your bones."*

— Adapted from Czeslaw Milosz
