



Guide to form – Poetry

If I can write in any form, which should I choose? This is the question we are most often asked. There is no ‘better’ or ‘worse’ form but the brief notes below may help you decide.

Stop all the clocks. **Poetry** is often the most personal and intense genre – the one we turn to in joy or grief; so, if your topic is very personal or emotional, a poem may be the right choice.

Good poets have a feel for rhythm and imagery. Poetry tends to be metaphorical so it may talk about your subject by seeming to be about something else. Tony Harrison explores the mysteries of life and death in ‘A Kumquat for John Keats’:

You'll find that one part's sweet and one part's tart:
say where the sweetness or the sourness start.

I find I can't, as if one couldn't say
exactly where the night became the day ...
which makes for me the kumquat taken whole
best fruit, and metaphor, to fit the soul
of one in Florida at 42 with Keats
crunching kumquats, thinking, as he eats
the flesh, the juice, the pith, the pips, the peel,
that this is how a full life ought to feel,
its perishable relish prick the tongue,
when the man who savours life 's no longer young,
the fruits that were his futures far behind.
Then it's the kumquat fruit expresses best
how days have darkness round them like a rind,
life has a skin of death that keeps its zest.

Check out this extract from 2021 Orwell Youth Prize winning poem ‘Two For Joy’ by Isabella Rew (the full poem is [here](#)) and read why she chose to write in this form below:

I've befriended the magpie who perches
On my next-door neighbour's roof. I watch her
Test the sanitised air with her keen beak.
I feel her rest on my shadow's shoulder

When I take my daily walk and we greet
The sky together like a long-lost friend.

Isabella said:

“The form of my poem is a sonnet and these typically experience a volta, a ‘turning point’, in mood from the first octet to the following sestet. I wanted to write a love poem to the natural world and contrast this love with the painful reality of its imminent loss.”



Dem tell me. Some poems, often described as **performance poetry** are more energetic and direct, closer to dramatic monologue. Its rhythms tend to be highly emphatic; it is usually forceful more than subtle – but the best has a great deal of variety.

Here John Agard objects to his school history lessons, in ‘Checking out Me History’:

Dem tell me
Dem tell me
Wha dem want to tell me
Bandage up me eye with me own history
Blind me to me own identity
Dem tell me bout 1066 and all dat
dem tell me bout Dick Whittington and he cat
But Toussaint L’Ouverture
no dem never tell me bout dat ...

In a very different style, Maya Angelou also fights back in ‘And Still I Rise’:

Does my sexiness upset you?
Does it come as a surprise
That I dance like I've got diamonds
At the meeting of my thighs?

Out of the huts of history's shame
I rise
Up from a past that's rooted in pain
I rise

Have a read of ‘New Hair Who Dis (Dear Mrs Johnson)’, a poem by Faith Falayi, who was a Youth Prize Winner 2021:

Dear Mrs Johnson,
Hello, it’s me again.
I know I was in your office just yesterday
but you never give me the chance to explain.
So I’m writing you a letter
and, from student to headmaster,
I’ve got some things to say.

And this is why she chose this form:

“I wanted the reader (or listener) to be able to imagine the poem as a real conversation, to feel with all the energy, vibrancy and rhythm that really brings talking about black hair to life. The force of spoken word allows the reader to feel a part of the story, to be active, and hopefully, to be inspired to take part in making a change in the way black hair is received in society.”