POETIC DEVICES

Poetry is the kind of thing poets write. — *Robert Frost*
Man, if you gotta ask, you'll never know. — *Louis Armstrong*

A POET IS LIMITED in the materials he can use in creating his works: all he has are *words* to express his ideas and feelings. These words need to be precisely right on several levels at once:

- they must *sound* right to the listener even as they delight his ear
- they must have a *meaning* which might have been unanticipated, but seems to be the perfectly right one
- they must be *arranged* in a relationship and placed on the page in ways that are at once easy to follow and assist the reader in understanding
- they must probe the depths of human thought, emotion, and empathy, while appearing simple, self-contained, and unpretentious

Fortunately, the English language contains a wide range of words from which to choose for almost every thought, and there are also numerous plans or methods of arrangement of these words, called *poetic devices*, which can assist the writer in developing cogent expressions pleasing to his readers.

Even though most poetry today is read silently, it must still carry with it the feeling of being spoken aloud, and the reader should practice "hearing" it in order to catch all of the artfulness with which the poet has created his work.

THE SOUNDS OF WORDS

Words or portions of words can be clustered or juxtaposed to achieve specific kinds of effects when we hear them. The sounds that result can strike us as clever and pleasing, even soothing. Others we dislike and strive to avoid. These various deliberate arrangements of words have been identified.

Alliteration: Repeated consonant sounds at the beginning of words placed near each other, usually on the same or adjacent lines. A somewhat looser definition is that it is the use of the same consonant in any part of adjacent words.
Example: fast and furious
Example: Peter and Andrew patted the pony at Ascot

In the second definition, both *P* and *T* in the example are reckoned as alliteration. It is noted that this is a very obvious device and needs to be handled with great restraint, except in specialty forms such as limerick, cinquain, and humorous verse.

Assonance: Repeated vowel sounds in words placed near each other, usually on the same or adjacent lines. These should be in sounds that are accented, or stressed, rather than in vowel sounds that are unaccented.
Example: He's a bruisin' loser

In the second example above, the short *A* sound in *Andrew, patted,* and *Ascot* would be assonant.

Consonance: Repeated consonant sounds at the ending of words placed near each other, usually on the same or adjacent lines. These should be in sounds that are accented, or stressed, rather than in vowel

sounds that are unaccented. This produces a pleasing kind of near-rhyme.
    Example: boa**t**s into the pas**t**
    Example: coo**l** sou**l**

Cacophony A discordant series of harsh, unpleasant sounds helps to convey disorder. This is often furthered by the combined effect of the meaning and the difficulty of pronunciation.
    Example: My stick fingers click with a snicker
            And, chuckling, they knuckle the keys;
            Light-footed, my steel feelers flicker
            And pluck from these keys melodies.
            —"Player Piano," *John Updike*

Euphony: A series of musically pleasant sounds, conveying a sense of harmony and beauty to the language.
    Example: Than Oars divide the Ocean,
            Too silver for a seam—
            Or Butterflies, off Banks of Noon
            Leap, plashless as they swim.
            — "A Bird Came Down the Walk," *Emily Dickenson* (last stanza)

Onomatopoeia: Words that sound like their meanings. In *Hear the steady tick of the old hall clock*, the word tick sounds like the action of the clock, If assonance or alliteration can be onomatopoeic, as the sound 'ck' is repeated in tick and clock, so much the better. At least sounds should suit the tone – heavy sounds for weightiness, light for the delicate. *Tick* is a light word, but transpose the light *T* to its heavier counterpart, *D*; and transpose the light *CK* to its heavier counterpart *G*, and *tick* becomes the much more solid and down to earth *dig*.
    Example: boom, buzz, crackle, gurgle, hiss, pop, sizzle, snap, swoosh, whir, zip

Repetition: The purposeful re-use of words and phrases for an effect. Sometimes, especially with longer phrases that contain a different key word each time, this is called ***parallelism.*** It has been a central part of poetry in many cultures. Many of the Psalms use this device as one of their unifying elements.
    Example: I was glad; so very, very glad.
    Example: Half a league, half a league,
            Half a league onward…
            …
            Cannon to right of them,
            Cannon to left of them,
            Cannon in front of them
                Volley'd and thunder'd…

Rhyme: This is the one device most commonly associated with poetry by the general public. Words that have different beginning sounds but whose endings sound alike, including the final vowel sound and everything following it, are said to *rhyme*.
    Example: time, slime, mime
Double rhymes include the final two syllables. *Example:* revival, arrival, survival
Triple rhymes include the final three syllables. *Example:* greenery, machinery, scenery

A variation which has been used effectively is called slant rhyme, or half rhyme. If only the final consonant sounds of the words are the same, but the initial consonants and the vowel sounds are different, then the rhyme is called a *slant rhyme* or *half rhyme*. When this appears in the middle of lines rather than at the end, it is called *consonance.*
    Example: soul, oil, foul; taut, sat, knit

Another variation which is occasionally used is called near rhyme. If the final vowel sounds are the

same, but the final consonant sounds are slightly different, then the rhyme is called a *near rhyme.*
    Example: fine, rhyme; poem, goin'

Less effective but sometimes used are sight rhymes. Words which are spelled the same (as if they rhymed), but are pronounced differently are called *sight rhymes* or *eye rhymes.*
    Example: enough, cough, through, bough

Rhythm: Although the general public is seldom directly conscious of it, nearly everyone responds on some level to the organization of speech rhythms (verbal stresses) into a regular pattern of accented syllables separated by unaccented syllables. *Rhythm* helps to distinguish poetry from prose.
    Example: i THOUGHT i SAW a PUSsyCAT.

Such patterns are sometimes referred to as *meter.* Meter is the organization of voice patterns, in terms of both the arrangement of stresses and their frequency of repetition per line of verse.

Poetry is organized by the division of each line into "feet," metric units which each consist of a particular arrangement of strong and weak stresses. The most common metric unit is the iambic, in which an unstressed syllable is followed by a stressed one (as in the words *reverse* and *compose*).

Scansion is the conscious measure of the pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables in a line of poetry.

Stressed syllables are labeled with an accent mark: /   Unstressed syllables are labeled with a dash: –

Metrical feet may be two or three syllables in length, and are divided by slashes: |

There are five basic rhythms:

Pattern	Name	Example
– /	Iamb/Iambic	invite
/ –	Trochee/Trochaic	deadline
– – /	Anapest/Anapestic	to the beach
/ – –	Dactyl/Dactylic	frequently
/ /	Spondee/Spondaic	true blue

Meter is measured by the number of feet in a line. Feet are named by Greek prefix number words attached to "meter." A line with five feet is called pentameter; thus, a line of five iambs is known as "iambic pentameter" (the most common metrical form in English poetry, and the one favored by Shakespeare).

The most common line lengths are:

monometer: one foot	tetrameter: four feet	heptameter: seven feet
dimeter: two feet	pentameter: five feet	octameter: eight feet
trimeter: three feet	hexameter: six feet	

Naturally, there is a degree of variation from line to line, as a rigid adherence to the meter results in unnatural or monotonous language. A skillful poet manipulates breaks in the prevailing rhythm of a poem for particular effects.

THE MEANINGS OF WORDS

Most words convey several meanings or shades of meaning at the same time. It is the poet's job to find words which, when used in relation to other words in the poem, will carry the precise intention of thought. Often, some of the more significant words may carry several layers or "depths" of meaning at once. The ways in which the meanings of words are used can be identified.

Allegory: A representation of an abstract or spiritual meaning. Sometimes it can be a single word or phrase, such as the name of a character or place. Often, it is a symbolic narrative that has not only a literal meaning, but a larger one understood only after reading the entire story or poem

Allusion: A brief reference to some person, historical event, work of art, or Biblical or mythological situation or character.

Ambiguity: A word or phrase that can mean more than one thing, even in its context. Poets often search out such words to add richness to their work. Often, one meaning seems quite readily apparent, but other, deeper and darker meanings, await those who contemplate the poem.
Example: Robert Frost's 'The Subverted Flower'

Analogy: A comparison, usually something unfamiliar with something familiar.
Example: The plumbing took a maze of turns where even water got lost.

Apostrophe: Speaking directly to a real or imagined listener or inanimate object; addressing that person or thing by name.
Example: O Captain! My Captain! our fearful trip is done…

Cliché: Any figure of speech that was once clever and original but through overuse has become outdated. If you've heard more than two or three other people say it more than two or three times, chances are the phrase is too timeworn to be useful in your writing.
Example: busy as a bee

Connotation: The emotional, psychological or social overtones of a word; its implications and associations apart from its literal meaning. Often, this is what distinguishes the *precisely correct* word from one that is merely acceptable.

Contrast: Closely arranged things with strikingly different characteristics.
Example: He was dark, sinister, and cruel; she was radiant, pleasant, and kind.

Denotation: The dictionary definition of a word; its literal meaning apart from any associations or connotations. Students must exercise caution when beginning to use a thesaurus, since often the words that are clustered together may share a *denotative meaning*, but not a *connotative* one, and the substitution of a word can sometimes destroy the mood, and even the meaning, of a poem.

Euphemism: An understatement, used to lessen the effect of a statement; substituting something innocuous for something that might be offensive or hurtful.
Example: She is at rest. (meaning, she's dead)

Hyperbole: An outrageous exaggeration used for effect.
Example: He weighs a ton.

Irony: A contradictory statement or situation to reveal a reality different from what appears to be true.
Example: Wow, thanks for expensive gift...let's see: did it come with a Fun Meal or the Burger King equivalent?

Metaphor: A direct comparison between two unlike things, stating that one *is* the other or *does the action* of the other.
Example: He's a zero. *Example:* Her fingers danced across the keyboard.

Metonymy: A figure of speech in which a person, place, or thing is referred to by something closely associated with it.
Example: The White House stated today that... *Example:* The Crown reported today that...

Oxymoron: A combination of two words that appear to contradict each other.
Example: a pointless point of view; bittersweet

Paradox: A statement in which a seeming contradiction may reveal an unexpected truth.
    Example: The hurrier I go the behinder I get.

Personification: Attributing human characteristics to an inanimate object, animal, or abstract idea.
    Example: The days crept by slowly, sorrowfully.

Pun: Word play in which words with totally different meanings have similar or identical sounds.
    Example: Like a firefly in the rain, I'm de-lighted.

Simile: A direct comparison of two unlike things using "like" or "as."
    Example: He's as dumb as an ox.
    Example: Her eyes are like comets.

Symbol: An ordinary object, event, animal, or person to which we have attached extraordinary meaning and significance – a flag to represent a country, a lion to represent courage, a wall to symbolize separation.
    Example: A small cross by the dangerous curve on the road reminded all of Johnny's death.

Synecdoche: Indicating a person, object, etc. by letting only a certain part represent the whole.
    Example: All hands on deck.

ARRANGING THE WORDS

Words follow each other in a sequence determined by the poet. In order to discuss the arrangements that result, certain terms have been applied to various aspects of that arrangement process. Although in some ways these sequences seem arbitrary and mechanical, in another sense they help to determine the nature of the poem. These various ways of organizing words have been identified.

Point of View: The author's point of view concentrates on the vantage point of the speaker, or "teller" of the story or poem. This may be considered the poem's "voice" — the pervasive presence behind the overall work. This is also sometimes referred to as the *persona.*

- 1st Person: the speaker is a character in the story or poem and tells it from his/her perspective (uses "I").
- 3rd Person limited: the speaker is not part of the story, but tells about the other characters through the limited perceptions of one other person.
- 3rd Person omniscient: the speaker is not part of the story, but is able to "know" and describe what all characters are thinking.

Line: The line is fundamental to the perception of poetry, marking an important visual distinction from prose. Poetry is arranged into a series of units that do not necessarily correspond to sentences, but rather to a series of metrical feet. Generally, but not always, the line is printed as one single line on the page. If it occupies more than one line, its remainder is usually indented to indicate that it is a continuation.

There is a natural tendency when reading poetry to pause at the end of a line, but the careful reader will follow the punctuation to find where natural pauses should occur.

In traditional verse forms, the length of each line is determined by convention, but in modern poetry the poet has more latitude for choice.

Verse: One single line of a poem arranged in a metrical pattern. Also, a piece of poetry or a particular form of poetry such as *free verse, blank verse*, etc., or the art or work of a poet.

The popular use of the word *verse* for a stanza or associated group of metrical lines is not in accordance with the best usage. A stanza is a *group* of verses.

Stanza: A division of a poem created by arranging the lines into a unit, often repeated in the same pattern of meter and rhyme throughout the poem; a unit of poetic lines (a "paragraph" within the poem). The stanzas within a poem are separated by blank lines.

Stanzas in modern poetry, such as *free verse,* often do not have lines that are all of the same length and meter, nor even the same number of lines in each stanza. Stanzas created by such irregular line groupings are often dictated by meaning, as in paragraphs of prose.

Stanza Forms: The names given to describe the number of lines in a stanzaic unit, such as: *couplet (2), tercet (3), quatrain (4), quintet (5), sestet (6), septet (7),* and *octave (8).* Some stanzas follow a set rhyme scheme and meter in addition to the number of lines and are given specific names to describe them, such as, *ballad meter, ottava rima, rhyme royal, terza rima*, and *Spenserian stanza.*

Stanza forms are also a factor in the categorization of whole poems described as following a *fixed form.*

Rhetorical Question: A question solely for effect, which does not require an answer. By the implication the answer is obvious, it is a means of achieving an emphasis stronger than a direct statement.
Example: Could I but guess the reason for that look?
Example: O, Wind,
            If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?

Rhyme Scheme: The pattern established by the arrangement of rhymes in a stanza or poem, generally described by using letters of the alphabet to denote the recurrence of rhyming lines, such as the *ababbcc* of the *Rhyme Royal* stanza form.

Capital letters in the alphabetic rhyme scheme are used for the repeating lines of a refrain; the letters *x* and *y* indicate unrhymed lines.

In quatrains, the popular rhyme scheme of *abab* is called *alternate rhyme* or *cross rhyme*. The *abba* scheme is called *envelope rhyme*, and another one frequently used is *xaxa* (This last pattern, when working with students, is generally easier for them to understand when presented as *abcb,* as they associate matched letters with rhymed words).

Enjambment: The continuation of the logical sense — and therefore the grammatical construction — beyond the end of a line of poetry. This is sometimes done with the title, which in effect becomes the first line of the poem.

Form: The arrangement or method used to convey the content, such as *free verse, ballad, haiku*, etc. In other words, the "way-it-is-said." A variably interpreted term, however, it sometimes applies to details within the composition of a text, but is probably used most often in reference to the structural characteristics of a work as it compares to (or differs from) established modes of conventionalized arrangements.

- **Open:** poetic form free from regularity and consistency in elements such as rhyme, line length, and metrical form

- **Closed:** poetic form subject to a fixed structure and pattern

- **Blank Verse:** unrhymed iambic pentameter (much of the plays of Shakespeare are written in this form)

- **Free Verse:** lines with no prescribed pattern or structure — the poet determines all the variables as seems appropriate for each poem

- **Couplet**: a pair of lines, usually rhymed; this is the shortest stanza
- **Heroic Couplet:** a pair of rhymed lines in iambic pentameter (traditional heroic epic form)
- **Quatrain:** a four-line stanza, or a grouping of four lines of verse

Fixed Form: A poem which follows a set pattern of *meter, rhyme scheme, stanza form,* and *refrain* (if there is one), is called a *fixed form.*

Most poets feel a need for familiarity and practice with established forms as essential to learning the craft, but having explored the techniques and constraints of each, they go on to experiment and extend their imaginative creativity in new directions. A partial listing includes:

- **Ballad:** a narrative poem written as a series of quatrains in which lines of iambic tetrameter alternate with iambic trimeter with an *xaxa, xbxb* rhyme scheme with frequent use of repetition and often including a refrain. The "story" of a ballad can be a wide range of subjects but frequently deals with folklore or popular legends. They are written in a straight-forward manner, seldom with detail, but always with graphic simplicity and force. Most ballads are suitable for singing: "Barbara Allen" is an example.

  Many of the oldest ballads were first written and performed by minstrels as court entertainment. *Folk ballads* are of unknown origin and are usually lacking in artistic finish. Because they are handed down by oral tradition, folk ballads are subject to variations and continual change. Other types of ballads include *literary ballads*, combining the natures of epic and lyric poetry, which are written by known authors, often in the style and form of the folk ballad, such as Keats' 'La Belle Dame sans Merci."

- **Ballade:** a French form, it consists of three seven or eight-line stanzas using no more than three recurrent rhymes, with an identical refrain after each stanza and a closing envoi repeating the rhymes of the last four lines of the stanza

- **Concrete Poetry:** also known as *pattern poetry* or *shaped verse*, these are poems that are printed on the page so that they form a recognizable outline related to the subject, thus conveying or extending the meaning of the words. Pattern poetry retains its meaning when read aloud, whereas the essence of concrete poetry lies in its appearance on the page rather than in the words; it is intended to be perceived as a visual whole and often cannot be effective when read aloud. This form has had brief popularity at several periods in history.

- **Epigram:** a pithy, sometimes satiric, couplet or quatrain comprising a single thought or event and often aphoristic with a witty or humorous turn of thought

- **Epitaph:** a brief poem or statement in memory of someone who is deceased, used as, or suitable for, a tombstone inscription; now, often witty or humorous and written without intent of actual funerary use

- **Haiku:** a Japanese form of poetry consisting of three unrhymed lines of five, seven, and five syllables. The elusive flavor of the form, however, lies more in its touch and tone than in its syllabic structure. Deeply imbedded in Japanese culture and strongly influenced by Zen Buddhism, haiku are very brief descriptions of nature that convey some implicit insight or essence of a moment. Traditionally, they contain either a direct or oblique reference to a season

- **Limerick:** a light or humorous form of five chiefly anapestic verses of which lines one, two and five are of three feet and lines three and four are of two feet, with a rhyme scheme of *aabba*. Named for a town in Ireland of that name, the limerick was popularized by Edward Lear in his *Book of Nonsense* published in 1846, and is generally considered the only fixed form of English origin.

  While the final line of Lear's limericks usually was a repetition of the first line, modern limericks generally use the final line for clever witticisms and word play. Their content also frequently tends toward the ribald and off-color.

- **Lyric:** derived from the Greek word for lyre, lyric poetry was originally designed to be sung. One of the three main groups of poetry (the others being narrative and dramatic), lyric verse is the most frequently used modern form, including all poems in which the speaker's ardent expression of a (usually single) emotional element predominates. Ranging from complex thoughts to the simplicity of playful wit, the melodic imagery of skillfully written lyric poetry evokes in the reader's mind the recall of similar emotional experiences.

- **Ode:** any of several stanzaic forms more complex than the lyric, with intricate rhyme schemes and irregular number of lines, generally of considerable length, always written in a style marked by a rich, intense expression of an elevated thought praising a person or object. "Ode to a Nightingale" is an example.

- **Pantoum:** derived from the Malayan *pantun*, it consists of a varying number of four-line stanzas with lines rhyming alternately; the second and fourth lines of each stanza repeated to form the first and third lines of the succeeding stanza, with the first and third lines of the first stanza forming the second and fourth of the last stanza, but in reverse order, so that the opening and closing lines of the poem are identical.

- **Rondeau:** a fixed form used mostly in light or witty verse, usually consisting of fifteen octo- or decasyllabic lines in three stanzas, with only two rhymes used throughout. A word or words from the first part of the first line are used as a (usually unrhymed) refrain ending the second and third stanzas, so the rhyme scheme is *aabba aabR aabbaR.*

An example is " In Flanders Fields," by Lt. Col. John McCrae.

- **Sestina:** a fixed form consisting of six 6-line (usually unrhymed) stanzas in which the end words of the first stanza recur as end words of the following five stanzas in a successively rotating order, and as the middle and end words of each of the lines of a concluding envoi in the form of a tercet. The usual ending word order for a sestina is as follows:

  First stanza,   1- 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6
  Second stanza, 6 - 1 - 5 - 2 - 4 - 3
  Third stanza,   3 - 6 - 4 - 1 - 2 - 5
  Fourth stanza, 5 - 3 - 2 - 6 - 1 - 4
  Fifth stanza,   4 - 5 - 1 - 3 - 6 - 2
  Sixth stanza,   2 - 4 - 6 - 5 - 3 - 1
  Concluding tercet:
       middle of first line - 2, end of first line - 5
       middle of second line - 4, end of second line - 3
       middle if third line - 6, end of third line - 1

- **Sonnet**: a fourteen line poem in iambic pentameter with a prescribed rhyme scheme; its subject was traditionally love. Three variations are found frequently in English, although others are occasionally seen.

- **Shakespearean Sonnet:** a style of sonnet used by Shakespeare with a rhyme scheme of *abab cdcd efef gg*

- **Italian (Petrarchan) Sonnet:** a form of sonnet made popular by Petrarch with a rhyme scheme of *abbaabba cdecde* or *cdcdcd*

- **Spenserian Sonnet:** a variant of the Shakespearean form in which the quatrains are linked with a chain or interlocked rhyme scheme, *abab bcbc cdcd ee.*

- **Sonnet Sequence:** a series of sonnets in which there is a discernable unifying theme, while each retains its own structural independence. All of Shakespeare's sonnets, for example, were part of a sequence.

- **Triolet:** a poem or stanza of eight lines in which the first line is repeated as the fourth and seventh lines, and the second line as the eighth, with a rhyme scheme of *ABaAabAB*, as in Adelaide Crapsey's "Song" (the capital letters in the rhyme scheme indicate the repetition of identical lines).

- **Villanelle:** a poem consisting of five 3-line stanzas followed by a quatrain and having only two rhymes. In the stanzas following the first stanza, the first and third lines of the first stanza are repeated alternately as refrains. They are the final two lines of the concluding quatrain. The villanelle gives a pleasant impression of simple spontaneity, as in Edwin Arlington Robinson's "The House on the Hill."

THE IMAGES OF WORDS

A poet uses words more consciously than any other writer. Although poetry often deals with deep human emotions or philosophical thought, people generally don't respond very strongly to abstract words, even the words describing such emotions and thoughts. The poet, then, must embed within his work those words which *do* carry strong visual and sensory impact, words which are fresh and spontaneous but vividly descriptive. He must carefully pick and choose words that are just right. It is better to *show* the reader than to merely *tell* him.

Imagery: The use of vivid language to generate ideas and/or evoke mental images, not only of the visual sense, but of sensation and emotion as well. While most commonly used in reference to figurative language, imagery can apply to any component of a poem that evoke sensory experience and emotional response, and also applies to the concrete things so brought to mind.

Poetry works it magic by the way it uses words to evoke "images" that carry depths of meaning. The poet's carefully described impressions of sight, sound, smell, taste and touch can be transferred to the thoughtful reader through imaginative use and combinations of diction. In addition to its more tangible initial impact, effective imagery has the potential to tap the inner wisdom of the reader to arouse meditative and inspirational responses.

Related images are often clustered or scattered throughout a work, thus serving to create a particular *mood* or *tone.* Images of disease, corruption, and death, for example, are recurrent patterns shaping our perceptions of Shakespeare's *Hamlet.*

Examples:

- **Sight**: Smoke mysteriously puffed out from the clown's ears.
- **Sound**: Tom placed his ear tightly against the wall; he could hear a faint but distinct thump thump thump.
- **Touch**: The burlap wall covering scraped against the little boy's cheek.
- **Taste**: A salty tear ran across onto her lips.
- **Smell**: Cinnamon! That's what wafted into his nostrils.

Synesthesia: An attempt to fuse different senses by describing one kind of sense impression in words normally used to describe another.
Example: The sound of her voice was sweet.
Example: a loud aroma, a velvety smile

Tone, Mood: The means by which a poet reveals attitudes and feelings, in the style of language or expression of thought used to develop the subject. Certain tones include not only irony and satire, but may be loving, condescending, bitter, pitying, fanciful, solemn, and a host of other emotions and attitudes. Tone can also refer to the overall mood of the poem itself, in the sense of a pervading atmosphere intended to influence the readers' emotional response and foster expectations of the conclusion.

Another use of tone is in reference to pitch or to the demeanor of a speaker as interpreted through inflections of the voice; in poetry, this is conveyed through the use of connotation, diction, figures of speech, rhythm and other elements of poetic construction.