

NEW WRITING VIEWPOINTS

Teaching Poetry Writing

A Five-Canon Approach



TOM C. HUNLEY

Teaching Poetry Writing

NEW WRITING VIEWPOINTS

Editor: Graeme Harper, *University of Wales, Bangor, Wales, Great Britain.*

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A Five-Canon Approach

Tom C. Hunley

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**For my teachers, especially the late Wendy Bishop,
who helped me get this book started;
for my students, especially Crystal Fodrey,
who helped me get it finished;
and, always, for Ralaina.**

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Contents

Acknowledgements	vii
1 It Doesn't Work For Me: A Critique of the Workshop Approach to Teaching Poetry Writing and a Suggestion For Revision	1
2 Rhetorical Theory as a Basis for Poetry Writing Pedagogy	22
3 Towards an Art of Poetic Invention.....	33
4 Some Specifics about the General: Arrangement	57
5 Elements of Poetic Style	81
6 Poetry Writing Instruction and the Forgotten Art of Memory	105
7 Delivery: Bringing the Words into the World	122
8 Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackboard Page.....	156
9 Conclusion	179
Index	182

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Chapter 1

It Doesn't Work For Me: A Critique of the Workshop Approach to Teaching Poetry Writing and a Suggestion For Revision

I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by faulty pedagogy ...

John Undergrad is a second-year college student whose degree will be in Business Management, but he's not all business. While interning at a bank last summer, he received two reprimands for writing poetry on the job. He didn't mind though; the poems came to him, and he felt like he had to jot them down, despite the consequences. He's been a closet poet ever since an encouraging high-school English teacher intrigued him with the irony in Edwin Arlington Robinson's 'Richard Cory' and the rhymed storytelling in Robert Service's 'The Creation of Sam McGee.' John uses an elective on a class in poetry writing, hoping he'll learn more about poets such as Robinson and Service and how to emulate them. He spends weeks listening to discussions, not of published verses by established writers, but of drafts by his fellow students, and he occasionally chimes in, saying 'I like it' or 'It doesn't quite work for me.'

Then his turn comes; he makes twenty copies of a poem he has written, reads it aloud, and waits. The teaching assistant says 'It's a bit sentimental, isn't it class?' One student says 'The long lines are a risk, but you get away with it.' A second student, an English literature buff and the class star, says 'The religious imagery is too Miltonic, and the end rhymes make the poem feel old-fashioned.' John isn't sure what the teaching assistant means by 'sentimental,' he knows he hasn't been trying to 'get away' with anything, he's not sure what 'end rhyme' is, and he definitely doesn't know what 'Miltonic' means. But he has learned workshop etiquette; instead of asking these questions and appearing defensive, he simply says

'thank you for the feedback,' and silently vows never to show his poems to anyone again. He tells his friends in the Business Department that he took a poetry writing class because 'It's an easy "A",' and several of them sign up the following semester.

John's sister, Jane Graduate Student, holds a degree in English Literature with a writing emphasis. She completed three poetry writing workshops at her undergraduate institution, where her work received great praise from two college instructors, and she placed three poems in a local literary journal. She enjoys reading Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, and her two instructors, but beyond that she doesn't really 'get' most poetry. Upon graduation from the MFA program, she plans to seek a job teaching creative writing. She looks at what her instructors do in class, and thinks that it would be fun and easy. However, sometimes she doubts herself, as when she gets writer's block and can't seem to get unstuck or when she reads through poems in the local literary journal and can't make sense of them. She is also concerned because she vaguely knows of forms such as the villanelle and the ghazal, but she isn't confident about her ability to identify and define them, much less write them. As an unconscious means of hiding these insecurities and protecting her status as class star, she finds herself using terms such as 'enjambment,' 'pentameter,' and 'metonymy' without quite knowing what they mean.

While John Undergrad and Jane Graduate Student are composites of students I have observed, their fictionalized experiences typify the results of pedagogical methods used in contemporary college classrooms in the United States. The pedagogical methodology most commonly used in American colleges functions more as a convenience for the instructors than as a vehicle for meeting the needs of students. The traditional workshop model of teaching undergraduate poetry writing has gone virtually unquestioned for the past seventy years and has been ratified by hundreds of universities, treated as *the* way to teach creative writing, despite a paucity of studies or empirical evidence or proof. Established in 1931 as a method for teaching elite graduate students, the traditional workshop model does not adequately address or even consider the needs of apprentice writers; it does not encourage instructors to take their jobs or their students seriously; it routinely puts students on the defensive and discourages them from taking necessary, productive risks in their writing; and it fosters unhealthy competition among students that hinders their growth as writers. The typical creative writing teacher who simply has students read their drafts aloud and then leads full-class discussions about these student texts is like a physical education teacher who just rolls out a ball and tells the kids to play. The result is the same: undisciplined students without much technique or skill – and a lot of injuries!

Dave Smith makes a good point when he asks in his book *Local Assays*: 'Doesn't it seem a bit unnatural to begin a workshop of college students by immediately throwing their poems into a public scrutiny and asking that public for a response?'¹ In that book, Smith goes on to discuss a sequence designed to give students practice critiquing texts before actually addressing each others' work, but he stays inside the box of the traditional workshop model, rather than offering a substantive alternative to the process that he has correctly diagnosed as unnatural. *Teaching Poetry Writing: A Five-Canon Approach*, is a book for poetry writing instructors who wish to step outside of the box and consider a paradigm that is quite different from the traditional workshop approach. By following the approach laid out in this book, poetry writing instructors at all levels can ensure that their students are armed with an arsenal of invention strategies, conversant about form and structure, capable of identifying and writing in a variety of styles, equipped to quote large quantities of poetry from memory, and attuned to the oral/aural elements of poetry.

If the traditional workshop model is so ineffective, why do 76% of undergraduate poetry writing teachers still use it as their primary mode of instruction?²

There is no sound theoretical basis for using the traditional workshop model at the undergraduate level, or in most of today's graduate workshops, for that matter. The workshop model was not designed with undergraduates or the ruck of graduate students in mind. It was designed for gifted, elite writers who needed very little instruction, though they may have benefited from criticism on their manuscripts.

Wallace Stegner offers a succinct history of the workshop model in his 1988 book *On the Teaching of Creative Writing*. According to Stegner, methods used by Harvard professors Dean Le Baron Russell Briggs and Charles Townsend Copeland led directly to the establishment of the Breadloaf Writers' Conference, initially directed by publishing mogul John Farrar, who hired a faculty that included Robert Frost, Louis Untermeyer, and others who 'lectured, read manuscripts, conducted seminars and workshops, played a lot of tennis, drank too much.'³ Breadloaf introduced creative writing instruction and the workshop model into the American university system, not as part of the core curriculum, but as a summer program for non-matriculated writers. Other writers' conferences modeled on Breadloaf soon sprang up. Then, with the establishment of the Writers' Workshop at the State University of Iowa under the direction of Paul Engle in 1930, creative writing and the traditional workshop model entered the core curriculum at the graduate level.

In what Donald Justice, the former head of Iowa's program, retrospectively refers to as 'a kind of pyramid scheme,'⁴ Iowa graduates founded scores of other programs, offering degrees in creative writing and using the traditional workshop model as the primary or only method of instruction. In her essay 'Duck, Duck, Turkey: Using Encouragement to Structure Workshop Assignments,' Mary Swander succinctly points out the flaws in using the traditional workshop approach with beginning and intermediate writers:

Paul Engle developed the workshop as a place where young, polished writers could come for a year or two and have their work critiqued. Engle assumed his graduate students already knew how to write. What they needed, he reasoned in this post-WWII era, was a kind of boot camp where they would be toughened up to the brutality of the enemy: the attacking critics . . . When creative writing became 'democratized,' classes in poetry, fiction, and play-writing were offered to students with little developed literary skill. Yet most instructors of creative writing clung to a pedagogy intended for those young writers that Paul Engle had brought to Iowa City in the early days of his directorship: Flannery O'Connor, Constance Urdang, William Stafford, Mark Strand, and Charles Wright.⁵

When a creative writing program is able to recruit students who are already polished writers, perhaps the best pedagogy is one in which the instructor facilitates opportunities for the students to learn from each other. The traditional workshop model seems ideally suited for such interaction. According to Stegner, writing with elite students like Engle's in mind: 'The best teaching that goes on in a college writing class is done by members of the class upon one another.'⁶ But as Swander points out, most of us are working with a very different kind of student population, and as such, we need to use a very different teaching methodology.

The traditional workshop model provides established writers with a source of income that leaves them plenty of time for their own writing. However, a convenience for teachers certainly does not equal a beneficial experience for students. Daniel Menaker states: 'There is general agreement among professional writers and editors that . . . these [workshop-oriented] curricula are of extremely dubious value, except perhaps to the institutions themselves.'⁷ And yet the workshop continues to gain ground to the point where it is now assumed that it is the core of any serious writer's training. As Bruce Bawer puts it in his 1998 essay 'Poetry and the University': 'In the last decade or so, as a matter of fact, many people in the poetry world have begun to take it for granted that the only serious way

of preparing for a career as a poet is to enter a university creative-writing program.⁸

If the traditional workshop model entered American academies as a method for teaching elite graduate students, why do so many undergraduate poetry writing instructors employ it?

According to Swander, the workshop model has been perpetuated, despite its ineffectiveness with beginning and intermediate students, because 'young teachers tend to model their mentors.'⁹ This is highly plausible, as a partial explanation. Given the lack of attention given to creative writing pedagogy in nearly all graduate creative writing programs in the United States, it is natural for young teachers to model the teaching methods of their mentors, even when teaching under very different circumstances. The workshop model has been perpetuated in undergraduate classrooms largely because of the lack of attention to teacher training and pedagogical theory within MFA programs. Many creative writing instructors use the traditional workshop model because they haven't received any pedagogical training as part of their degrees and they pattern their beginning undergraduate classes after the workshop-style classrooms taught by their own mentors. In her 2001 study 'Professional Writers/Writing Professionals: Revamping Teacher Training in Creative Writing Ph.D. Programs,' Kelly Ritter surveys twenty-five English departments that offer the Ph.D. with creative dissertation option, finding that only four of them (University of Georgia, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Western Michigan University, and The University of Louisiana-Lafayette) offer any kind of pedagogical training for creative writing teachers: 'Even though nearly all new Ph.D.'s in creative writing have taught in their field, they more than likely have never been guided through that teaching; more than likely they have stumbled along, without formal, professional training or guidance.'¹⁰ If students at the doctoral level receive no training on how to teach in their chosen field, think of how much harder it must be for Master's students and newly minted MFAs to effectively teach creative writing. David Starkey recalls the problems he encountered while trying to teach beginning poets via the traditional workshop model:

[I] was allowed to teach the beginning poetry workshop, which I tried to run as a graduate workshop . . . [A]ssuming that my students were bursting with poetry they could hardly wait to write down, I discussed invention activities only in passing and their poetry reflected this neglect. Quite simply, I was unprepared for the job I thought I'd been trained to do.¹¹

In the introduction to *Colors of a Different Horse*, a collection of essays about creative writing instruction, Hans Ostrom hypothesizes that creative writing teachers' resistance to theory and pedagogy springs from a 'writers first' ethos and reliance on 'validation through performance and testimony.' He then notes the lack of teacher training in the creative writing field: 'Performance and testimony are natural fallback positions in the absence of training.'¹²

Eve Shelnutt laments the 'passivity' that most creative writing instructors exhibit when it comes to seeking new methods of instruction: 'The assumption could easily be that most teachers of creative writing find the workshop format effective because it is the only format they know.'¹³ It is astounding that in an era in which rhetoric/composition instructors have vigorously experimented with new teaching methods and published their findings, their colleagues across the hall continue to passively adapt inherited methods of teaching their craft. Virginia Chestek observes that '. . . at a time when lower-level composition courses are increasingly process-oriented . . . The processes by which creative writing students initially develop their ideas and assemble them into these final products are largely ignored.'¹⁴

The traditional workshop model is based largely on the convenience of its instructors and it does not address or even consider the needs of apprentice writers. Marie Griffin expresses this concern in a letter to the editor of the *The Writer's Chronicle*, (then *AWP Chronicle*), published in its September 2000 issue: 'It is unfair to blame writing programs for every literary disappointment, but some of these programs would do far more to enlighten writers of the 21st century if they honestly looked at the needs of beginning and emerging writers.'¹⁵ While the traditional workshop model ostensibly promotes student-centered classrooms, with students interacting in a circle rather than passively listening to lectures while sitting in rows, in practice it is more often teacher-centered, catering to the professor's need to perform professorial duties in as expedient a manner as possible before returning to his/her own writing. In her afterword in *Colors of a Different Horse*, Wendy Bishop relates a horror story from her days working on a masters degree in creative writing: 'This teacher, in the years I studied with him, returned no annotated texts, gave no tests, shared no grading standards, kept to no schedule or syllabus, designed no curriculum. That's the way it was: master knows, disciples wait for enlightenment'.¹⁶ This disregard for students hardly sounds like a student-centered classroom.

Unfortunately, stories such as this one are commonplace in creative writing workshops, in which tenured or visiting instructors commonly shirk real teaching and substitute a cult of personality. In an essay entitled

'Passion, Possibility, and Poetry,' Dave Smith rightly suggests that students need some training before they can adequately respond to each others' writing. He then falls back on the claim that teaching writing, like writing itself, is a mysterious process: 'The process of teaching writing, and of writing . . . is more intuitive than rational. If it were not so, if we had a formula, what results we could expect from every student.'¹⁷ I share Smith's enthusiasm about the possibilities of poetry and the potential in students. I vigorously disagree with his inference that teachers of creative writing can't demystify their craft and learn innovative, effective ways to teach creative writing. We can do this, and our students need us to do it.

Taking our students seriously means getting serious about reviewing and revising our pedagogical practices

The traditional workshop model fails to take creative writing instruction seriously, and it does not take students seriously. In *On the Teaching of Creative Writing*, Wallace Stegner famously responds to the question 'In your judgment, what is it that most needs to be done for students?' by stating 'They need to be taken seriously.'¹⁸ When instructors don't bother with lesson plans, syllabi, explicit grading policies, exercises aimed to help combat writer's block, exercises designed to give students the proper terminology needed for critiquing each others' work, and so on, are students really being taken seriously? Or are they being treated as an inconvenience, an odious chore that pays the bills and takes away from the professor's 'real work' of writing poetry?

If creative writing instructors fail to take their teaching and their students seriously, no one will take creative writing seriously as an academic discipline. Wendy Bishop quotes an undergraduate as defining creative writing as 'anything you felt like putting down on paper.' Bishop goes on to state: 'In her [the student's] world view, students in creative writing classes seemed launched on a teacherless field-trip . . .' ¹⁹ This is a common view around academia, and it's not an unfair one. Students sign up for creative writing classes as electives because they view the classes as easy A grades and they view creative writing, especially poetry, as a chance to vent artlessly about their feelings.

Just as students tend to view creative writing classes as easy As, our colleagues in other disciplines view creative writing as a light discipline, and this won't be repaired until creative writing teachers get serious about making classes more rigorous and pay attention to advances in pedagogical theory. Also, would-be writers need to be introduced to the disciplines involved in the vocation to which they are considering committing themselves. Rather than creating writers who are dependent on writers'

groups and workshops, we need to teach writers the tools they'll need as committed, productive writers. As Stegner states on pages 32–33 of *On the Teaching of Creative Writing*:

It [writing] should be taken as seriously as the search for the replicating machinery in the DNA of the E.Coli virus x 170. Rigor is what we are talking about, a responsibility to a certain kind of truth and to observed reality. The worst writing classes with which I have had any experience have been the soft ones – the mutual-admiration societies . . .²⁰

Stegner isn't alone in his observation that the traditional workshop model fails to adequately prepare apprentice and emerging writers for the hard work involved in their chosen vocation. Bawer states: '[T]hey [young poets] need to learn discipline; they need a sense of literary tradition, of form, of poetry as craft.'²¹ None of these can very efficiently be transmitted in a classroom that follows a pedagogical model that assumes students already possess this knowledge and discipline.

Many creative writing instructors who teach according to the traditional workshop model, fearing time-consuming confrontations with students, opt to praise student work liberally in the hopes that these students will leave happily and quickly, leaving the instructor more time for writing. Others believe that their main function as teachers is to encourage students to generate as much work as possible, reasoning that the students will improve with practice. Others may even view the workshop as a therapy session more than a vehicle for education. Workshops that do not emphasize technique risk encouraging students to pass off chopped prose diary entries as poetry. Citing a backlash against the elitism of the high modernists, Bawer observes: '[P]ost-Beat poets have encouraged young people to think of poetry as something that requires not craft or intelligence or talent so much as sincerity. Just write what you feel, the idea goes, and you have a poem.'²²

While well-meaning workshop leaders who are too kind and gentle do damage to students by failing to prepare them for the rigors of the writing life, the traditional workshop model is perfectly suited to the even more insidious practice of punishing necessary risk-taking, rewarding safety and conformity, and routinely putting writers on the defensive. Anyone who has enrolled in a handful of different workshops has encountered that professor whose words are like a hot stove – the students learn not to write in a given way for fear of being scorched. Bawer addresses the effect of putting student writers on the defensive, giving a fine description of much contemporary poetry and the people who write it:

[T]heir authors are trying desperately to avoid expressing a recognizable human feeling . . . They're poets who avoid attempting difficult forms or rendering complex emotions for fear of exposing their limitations, who avoid sensitivity itself for fear of crossing the line into sentimentality.²³

Phyllis Gebauer recommends that student writers undergo training on how to receive feedback. In 'Criticism – The Art of Give and Take,' Gebauer offers advice on how to withstand workshop comments, which she calls 'taking it.' Her suggestions for how to go about 'taking it' include 'Be aware that you might not hear right,' 'Learn to recognize a personal attack and rise above it,' and 'Don't waste time and energy trying to defend yourself.'²⁴ The benefits of the traditional workshop model do not merit all of this stressful preparation. We should not teach the kinds of classes that make students feel like they need a training manual on self-protection before they enter the classroom doors.

The prominent compositionist Peter Elbow describes another ill effect of the traditional workshop model's focus on critique of drafts at the expense of all other aspects of the writing process. While the traditional workshop model affords student writers the opportunity to hear a multitude of suggestions about changes that they might make to their work, it makes no serious attempts to endow them with the revision strategies that could enable them to make those changes. Elbow describes students leaving a workshop session intending to rewrite, but instead stuffing their work in a drawer, too discouraged to ever return to it. I wonder, what percentage of workshopped poems actually get profitably revised? I suspect that, rather than improving a particular piece of writing, a workshop session is just as likely to completely destroy it while dampening its author's enthusiasm and drive. The end result, according to Elbow, is that 'next time we have the impulse to write, we're just a bit less likely to pick up the pen.'²⁵

Students often lack the terminology needed to intelligently critique each others' writing, even after participating in several different workshops. In *Craft So Hard to Learn*, James Whitehead explains how the lack of terminology at places such as University of Iowa led to the creation of form and theory classes at graduate level:

I discovered from being in workshops as a student – several places, most especially at the University of Iowa – that there was a little difficulty with a common ground for vocabulary, and in knowledge of certain traditions and modalities in both poetry and fiction. Now this is a little more acute in poetry, of course; for the terminology of poetry is a little more ancient and a little more complex, by way of being derivative from Latin and Greek sources.²⁶

Yet creative writing instructors continue to use the traditional workshop model, patterned after the University of Iowa program that Whitehead mentions, on undergraduates who have far less working terminology for discussing each others' writing than graduate students at elite graduate institutions. Eugene Garber describes the predictable result: 'I have been in workshops where the commentary was so groundless, stupid, and hurtful that I swore I'd never have anything to do with another one.'²⁷ Many committed writers, like Garber, have repeatedly promised themselves that they would not put themselves through more workshops, only to go back on those promises because of the widespread myth that workshops provide the primary means for writers to develop their craft.

An Alternative: The Computer-Assisted Five-Canon Approach

Committed teachers of creative writing need to experiment more with alternatives to the traditional workshop model, and we need to more regularly share our successes and failures with each other via journals devoted to creative writing pedagogy and panel presentations at conferences. I am encouraged by the recent success of *New Writing: The International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing*, based in the United Kingdom, and the Australian online journal *Texte*, but there is a need for a journal of creative writing studies in the United States as well. One result of the dialogue that takes place in these journals, I hope, will be that teaching creative writing using the traditional workshop model will soon seem as backwards as teaching composition using the modes of discourse. I am putting forth one alternative to the traditional workshop model, offering it not as *the* way to teach poetry writing to undergraduates, but as one viable alternative.

My alternative to the traditional workshop method is twofold. First of all, while instructors who use the traditional workshop model devote most or all available class time to discussions of student texts, I propose limiting critique of drafts to (1) one-on-one conferences with the professor, held twice each term or thereabouts, at the individual instructor's discretion, and (2) virtual workshopping in which students critique each others' drafts via online discussion threads using listservs or course management systems. Second, in the absence of time-consuming workshop sessions, I propose spending class time applying the five canons of classical rhetoric–invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery–to poetry writing. In this model, rather than spending most or all class time critiquing drafts as products, poetry writing teachers spend approximately equal amounts of time on each of these canons, or parts, of composition. I

also propose that students receive training on how to critique each others' work before they do so online.

This five-canonical process was extrapolated by ancient Greek and Roman scholars from Aristotle's *Rhetoric* and used in handbooks devoted to teaching students to compose speeches. It is easily adaptable to poetry writing instruction and it is in fact a perfect model for teachers of undergraduate poets. Invention, in classical rhetoric, drew on topics or set formulas not only including the familiar modes such as comparison/contrast and cause/effect but also including puns and other idea-generating techniques. Types of invention commonly practiced in contemporary composition classrooms include free writing, clustering, Kenneth Burke's pentad (which analyzes events in terms of act, agent, scene, agency, and purpose), the five journalist's questions, and tagmemics (a systematic method of analyzing a unit of information three ways: as a particle or static unit, as a wave or dynamic unit changing over time, or as a field or unit seen in context of its relationship to other units).²⁸ Invention exercises can enhance creative writing classes, and they frequently have, most often at the beginning of the term before critique of drafts takes over the bulk of class time. In *Ecclesiastes*, Erasmus described a speech as a living thing, calling invention 'in language what bones are in an animal's body, that which must be firm lest all else collapse.'²⁹

Earlier I related David Starkey's discovery that he couldn't just expect novice writers to bring in poems to discuss in workshop because they needed assistance producing drafts. Apprentice writers – and experienced writers as well – often feel the urge to write something but aren't sure how to begin, and almost all writers know the frustration of writer's block. This is where classical rhetoric's first canon, invention, becomes an invaluable tool for the poetry writing classroom. Joseph Moxley makes this point in his essay 'Creative writing and composition: Bridging the gap.'

By focusing primarily on revising and editing, the workshop fails to address prewriting strategies. Given that many professional writers such as Donald Murray report that they spend as much as 85 percent of their time searching for ideas and rehearsing possible alternatives, our omission of prewriting strategies is troublesome.³⁰

Arrangement occurs in rhetoric when 'the arguments devised through invention are placed in the most effective order.'³¹ It is 'the art of ordering the material in a text so that it is most appropriate for the needs of the audience and the purpose the text is designed to accomplish.'³² In the poetry writing classroom, this would involve attention to form and structure, which is currently taught as a separate 'Poetic Technique' or 'Form and Theory' course in many Master's programs and not taught at

all to most undergraduate poets. Erasmus, continuing with his speech-as-living-body analogy, stated that arrangement ‘is in language what the sinews are in an animal’s body, joining the parts of the speech in the proper manner.’³³

Style, like invention, has been profitably adapted by some creative writing teachers, though not enough. It is ‘the art of producing sentences and words that will make an appropriately favorable impression on readers or listeners.’³⁴ The practical study of style consists of exercises designed to generate figurative language; attention to word choice; sentence-level considerations such as diction, syntax, and structural variation; and stylistic imitations of rhetors or writers that one admires. To Erasmus, ‘this is in language what flesh and skin are in the body, and gives a seemly covering to the bones and sinews.’³⁵ Spending too much class time (often the entire class) critiquing student poems uses up precious time that could be spent on stylistic analysis and imitation of model poems.

In her essay ‘The Model Poem,’ Maura Stanton points out that ‘[e]xercises based on model poems not only result in better poems from the students, but also train them to think like poets.’³⁶ However, at the end of the same essay, she laments: ‘In a one semester poetry writing class, when most of the time is spent discussing students’ own work, I may be able only to teach a handful of great poems.’³⁷ If Stanton were following the computer-enhanced, five-canonical model rather than the traditional workshop model, she would have a lot more class time available for the stylistic imitation exercises that she would like to be leading.

In *On the Teaching of Creative Writing*, Wallace Stegner states: ‘It is . . . common practice to send a student out to learn a particular technique by studying a particular writer who was good at it: Joyce, say, for stream of consciousness or Conrad for the tricks of multiple narrators.’³⁸ This practice is nowhere near common enough, and that in a busy world, it makes sense to spend class time on stylistic analysis and imitation, rather than squandering it critiquing drafts by student writers who have received little or no formal training on how to produce those drafts.

Poetry existed as an oral art long before written cultures emerged, and the classical canons of memory and delivery can help connect student writers to that great tradition. In a discussion of the role of these canons in classical rhetoric, Bizzell and Herzberg point out: ‘The sensual power of word magic to create belief was perhaps most potently felt while rhetoric was still employed largely in oral genres . . .’³⁹ In classical systems, rhetors studied mnemonic devices, such as making rooms in a house stand for parts of a given oration, enabling them to memorize their own speeches and those of others. ‘For example, a rhetor could mentally connect the introduction of his speech to the porch of a house, the background narration

to the foyer, the thesis and proof to the arch and the grand ballroom, and the conclusion to the antechamber.⁴⁰ In the current age, people have used strikingly similar procedures for memorizing poetry. One of the great memorization feats in recent memory belongs to John Basinger, a professor emeritus at Three Rivers Community-Technical College in New London, Connecticut. Basinger, also an actor who had a small part in the movie *Children of a Lesser God*, memorized all of Milton's *Paradise Lost* over an eight-year period, then recited the entire poem in eighteen hours. According to an Associated Press story printed in *The Rhode Island News*, while working at memorizing the epic, Basinger 'imagined himself as a mountain climber on a range with 12 peaks. Or, more fancifully, as a shepherd with 12 flocks, each containing 600 to 1,200 sheep, the number of lines in a book of *Paradise Lost*'.⁴¹

Plato's view of the canon of memory in the art of rhetoric is a perfect model for poets, who speak of muses and often believe that their poems come to them from mysterious unknown places. 'For Plato, memory is a link not just with earthly places but with those heavenly places where ideal forms and true knowledge reside.'⁴² It makes sense to memorize a multitude of poems as a means of finding creative inspiration. In Erasmus's scheme of a speech as a living organism, memory corresponds with breath. Keeping in mind that 'inspiration' means 'breath,' this analogy makes perfect sense. Poets derive inspiration from intimate acquaintance with the work of other poets, and what better way to receive this inspiration than to memorize poems?

Perusing the *Paris Review Interviews* or the University of Michigan's *Poets on Poetry Series* makes it evident that many of the most successful poets have memorized uncanny amounts of poetry. Surely they find it handy to have great poetry swimming around in their heads while they compose their own poems as well as when they are being interviewed. Teachers of apprentice poets who don't stress memory in their classes fail to introduce their students to a part of the craft that many poets find essential. The poet Donald Justice goes so far as to claim that one of the primary motives for poetry and for other art forms is 'to keep memorable what deserves to be remembered'.⁴³ If this is so, an apprentice poet who pays no attention to the canon of memory is missing out on something that is at the very core of the poet's craft.

In 'The Theory and Practice of Imitation in Classical Rhetoric,' Edward Corbett calls for a return to memorization exercises in composition courses, claiming that memorization enabled student writers of 17th-century England to unconsciously and spontaneously draw on the rhythm and phraseology of the King James Bible: 'Anyone who has had the experience while writing of having a phrase or a structure come back

to him unbidden from the deep well of the subconscious might be willing to concede that the restoration of the practice of memorizing might be a good thing.⁴⁴

Roman rhetoricians held the opinion ‘that voice, gestures, and facial expressions materially affect the impact of all that has gone into a speech.’⁴⁵ Today, the primary carriers of poetry’s oral tradition are coffeehouse and barroom performance poets, whom poetry writing instructors can profitably look to as models for teaching the fifth canon, delivery. According to Erasmus: ‘Performance, like delivery and movement, is a property of a living creature; without its addition an animal will be just like a statue, and so delivery and movement are like the life of life.’⁴⁶ If a speech is a living organism, a poem surely is as well. Unless we want our students to write lifeless poetry, we had better spend class time teaching them how to perform their work.

How This Theory Looks in Practice: A Typical Week in a Computer-Enhanced, Five-Canon Classroom Compared to a Typical Week in a Traditional Workshop-Oriented Classroom

By moving peer critique, or workshopping, out of the undergraduate poetry classroom and onto course management systems or listservs for students to attend to as homework, it is possible to make the act of writing the primary classroom activity. Instead of spending the bulk of class time critiquing poems that students wrote at home, left to their own devices, students can spend most of their class time working on their poetry, using five categories of exercises patterned after the five canons of classical rhetoric. To illustrate, here is a sample week-long sequence designed for a sophomore-level class that meets five times a week for fifty minutes at a time, followed by a typical week in a class that uses the traditional workshop model:

Five-canonical approach

Monday (invention): The class will meet outside (this works better in the springtime or at schools like Florida State University, where I taught while pursuing my doctorate). Over the weekend before class, students will be asked to watch something on television (anything that interests them) and make some notes on it. Students spend class time on an invention activity that I learned from the poet Thomas Lynch, which involves writing a poem based on the juxtaposition of three unrelated items. Each student must bring an inanimate household item and something from a newspaper (article, obituary, advertisement, or want ad). Students let their gaze fall on something in the landscape (a leaf, a stone bench, a fountain,

whatever). They spend the class time trying to draft a poem that relates these seemingly unrelated items. If the task sounds daunting, the professor can read Lynch's 'A Note on the Rapture to His True Love,' which Lynch wrote using this exercise.⁴⁷

Tuesday (arrangement): Students will learn how to appreciate and write sestinas. First, the instructor can read the class a sample sestina such as Harry Matthews' hilarious 'Histoire,' or Elizabeth Bishop's moving 'Sestina.' The instructor could then provide a little history of the form; *A Norton Anthology of Poetic Forms* is a good source for this information. The instructor could then explain the simple pattern of end word repetition at play in the form. Next, the instructor asks each student to come up with six words, say three words related to a job the student has had and three words related to a hobby. If the instructor likes, he/she could turn it into a collaborative exercise by having the students pair up and trade three of their words. While the paired students will be working with the same words, they won't actually collaborate on the draft. Then the instructor would guide the students as they write their six words in the right margin of a piece of paper. Students would spend the rest of the class period writing lines that end with the appropriate words, essentially filling in the part of each line that leads to the end word (teleuton) in the right margin; most will have the first three stanzas of a sestina by the end of the period, and they will know how to proceed if they choose to complete a poem in this form.

Wednesday (style): For Tuesday night homework, students will need to read chapter 3 of Daniel Alderson's *Talking Back to Poems*.⁴⁸ The book is a textbook that teaches students to write poetry through stylistic imitation, a method that, according to Hans Ostrom, calls to mind 'John Milton or Samuel Johnson imitating Latin poets in their composition books, thereby acquiring the gravitas of their later works.'⁴⁹ Chapter 3 of Alderson's book offers students training in how to notice the imagery in poems. In addition to reading this chapter, students will copy Nikki Giovanni's 'Winter Poem' and Charles Simic's 'Fork' (pp. 62 and 64 in Alderson's book) by hand. This will give them a visceral feel for these poems. The cerebral understanding may come then, or it may come in the class discussions. After brief discussions in which students share what they noticed about each poem, students spend class time drafting poems that echo these works. As a stylistic imitation of Giovanni's poem, students will draft poems on the theme of mystical transformation, using no end rhymes, no metrical regularity, no punctuation, and no stanza breaks. In response to Simic's poem, students will employ irony and concrete imagery in a surrealistic poem about an ordinary object.

Thursday (memory and delivery): Class begins with an 'exam,' in

which students clear their desks and write 10–14 lines of poetry from memory. Instructors may allow students to choose which poems they will memorize, but it's a good idea for instructors maintain veto power, lest an entire class should do what my own sixth-grade class did: copy a poem full of one-word lines, most of which (appropriately) consisted of the word 'lazy.' Next, show a clip from a film in which a poet performs his or her work, such as *Love Jones* or the documentary *Slamnation*. Discuss the performance poet's oratorical techniques, and, time permitting, have students read their own poems in groups, practicing these techniques.

Friday (terms for critique): The instructor leads a brief discussion about online critiques, offering students some new terms that they might use when discussing each others' poems. Students spend the rest of class time working on drafts begun on Monday through Wednesday.

Throughout the week, students will keep an image journal consisting of one image (one sentence, or one fragment) per day. This discipline teaches students to be mindful and receptive – crucial qualities for poets. To keep them from writing all of these entries in one sitting, they will have to post them to a course management system on a daily basis, or they will have to send daily one-line emails to their instructor. In addition to the three or four first drafts generated during the week via the in-class invention, arrangement, and style exercises, they may be generating new drafts that grow out of these image journals. Each student will be required to post a draft on Blackboard or on the class listserv every other week, and the rest of the class will be required to critique the poem online. Once every week or so, the instructor ought to spend ten or fifteen minutes commenting on the effectiveness of this peer critique and introducing new terms and suggestions for how to constructively comment on each others' work.

Traditional workshop model

Monday: Three poems get critiqued.

Tuesday: Three other poems (by different students) get critiqued.

Wednesday: A third set of three poets have their work critiqued.

Thursday: The class star has his/her work critiqued. The bell rings before anyone else gets a turn to have a poem critiqued.

Friday: Three more poems get critiqued.

In the five-canon approach, each student will produce the beginnings of between two and five poems in the sample week outlined above, and each student will have a poem critiqued online by peers who have received training on how to constructively critique each others' drafts. Students in a traditional workshop are typically asked to produce approximately one poem every two weeks, using their own devices, with little or no input

from the instructor into their actual composition processes. Rarely do more than half of the students receive feedback on their work in a given week, and that feedback comes primarily from fellow students who likely have not received any training on how to critique poetry.

Wallace Stegner comments on students of his who 'could neither give nor take criticism without getting fiery red in the face and rough in the voice,' and goes on to say that 'if criticism affects you that way, you are very unlikely to "make it" as a writer, because there is no way to learn, except through criticism – your own or someone else's.'⁵⁰ Without downplaying the very real role that criticism plays in every writer's development, I have to dispute Stegner's claim that 'there is no way to learn, except through criticism.' Of course constructive criticism is a valuable part of a writer's education, but it is only one of many components of a writer's education. It doesn't make sense to devote all (or most) classroom time to feedback; it's much more helpful to walk students through the writing process first, rather than merely judging a final product that the student wrote according to haphazard, self-taught principles.

Critiquing can better be performed outside of the classroom, using course management systems or class listservs. As I will demonstrate in Chapter 8, online workshops can lead to thoughtful, considered responses; they can enable every student, even the shyest ones, to participate in discussions of their peers' creative work; rather than trying to shout each other down in order to get a word in edgewise; writers receiving feedback online can 'hear' more of the comments because they will be able to reread the comments at their leisure; and writers receiving feedback online retain a sense of dignity as they receive the criticism in the safety of their own home computer terminals.

In her essay 'The Body of My Work Is Not Just a Metaphor,' Lynn Domina criticizes the position of authority that professors tend to assume in workshops, and she details various times when students found themselves in '[A] situation which erodes the foundation of authentic writing – the necessity of revealing one's own perception of truth.'⁵¹ Domina worries that this fear of self-revelation can be exacerbated in the cases of students who write from places of marginalization.⁵² She recommends that creative writing instructors use their authority 'to model tolerance as an appropriate response to the variety of perspectives revealed in student writing.'⁵³ But if critique of drafts is removed from its central position in creative writing courses, and if instructors spend class time working on writing exercises along with their students, instructors will be less authoritative and more like fellow writers who have progressed further in the journey than their students. Fears of what others think of the final product will be allayed, since the focus will clearly be on the process, not on the product.

John Undergrad and Jane Graduate Student in the Computer-Enhanced, Five-Canon Classroom

Imagine that John Undergrad and Jane Graduate Student have taken poetry writing classes based on applications of the five canons of classical rhetoric, rather than on the traditional workshop model. John has decided not to take any more creative writing classes, but he has an even greater appreciation of his favorite poets, Edwin Arlington Robinson and Robert Service, because he has a better understanding of the difficult process involved in writing poetry. Also, he has discovered other poets whose work will enhance his private library, such as D.H. Lawrence, Louise Bogan, and Kenneth Koch. He spreads the word in the Business Department that creative writing classes are definitely not easy As. A couple of his colleagues pick up this challenge, take a writing course, and go on to become English minors and fairly accomplished, satisfied poets.

Fast forward: Jane is in the final year of a three-year MFA program. In this program, she has studied with three fine teaching poets who have walked her and her classmates through every step in their own writing processes. Jane has been as encouraged by the rough, uneven quality of her teachers' in-class invention exercises as by the publishing success these same teachers have enjoyed once they have transformed these exercises into finished poems. Jane knows a good deal of poetry by heart, she has gained confidence about performing her poetry in front of audiences, and she can easily write a ghazal, a villanelle, or even a double sestina or a roundeau redouble if her invention exercises lead in any of those directions. Having received training in how to teach both composition and creative writing, she is confident that she will know how to transmit her knowledge of writing as well as her love of it to as many students as show interest.

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5. M. Swander, 'Duck, duck, turkey: Using encouragement to structure workshop assignments,' *Power and Identity in the Creative Writing Classroom: The Authority Project*, ed. A. Leahy (Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 2006), 168.
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19. Bishop, *Released into Language*, 181.
20. Bawer, 'Poetry and the university,' 119.
21. Bawer, 'Poetry and the university,' 119.
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Chapter 2

Rhetorical Theory as a Basis for Poetry Writing Pedagogy

[T]hroughout most of the history of Western civilization, poetry was written and read by people for whom rhetoric was the major craft of composition.¹

To the extent that our own time regards poetry as having the ends of rhetoric – if not exemplary eloquence than persuasive discourse – the two arts remain all but inextricable.²

Walt Whitman, MFA?

For modern and contemporary American poets, Walt Whitman has been a touchstone and sometimes an obstacle. Ezra Pound felt so overshadowed by Whitman's influence that he wrote his poem 'A Pact' as a kind of declaration of independence from Whitman's strangulating influence. D.H. Lawrence wrote similar poems in an attempt to shake off some of Whitman's heavy influence on his poetry. Allen Ginsberg was so entranced by Whitman's work that he imagined himself, in his poem 'A Supermarket in California,' accompanied by Whitman as he shopped for peaches, bananas, and pork chops. Just about every serious contemporary poet owes some debt to Whitman. In the preface to *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman writes: 'The proof of a poet is that his country absorbs him as affectionately as he has absorbed it,'³ and Whitman has certainly succeeded under this criteria. Whitman's poetic apprenticeship was markedly different from the training typically undergone by today's would-be Whitmans. It is revealing to take a closer look at the theoretical underpinnings of the workshop model, the early history of the establishment of the workshop model at the University of Iowa, and the manner in which this model spread throughout the American university. It is also revealing to contrast workshop methodology with the means that Whitman used to develop his skills as a poet.

The first creative writing course at Iowa, called 'Verse-Making Class,' was taught in 1897 – five years after Whitman's death – by George Cam

Cook. It ‘possessed the elements of the basic “workshop” gathering: writing by the participants, criticism, and general discussion of “artistic questions.”’⁴ Cook, a heavy drinker, ‘never reported an absence’ but students came ‘to see what charming truancy their teacher would next devise and gravely lead them to.’⁵

The Iowa workshop as it exists today got rolling in 1931, when the first creative Master’s thesis, ‘Paisley Shawl’, by Mary Hoover Roberts, was accepted at Iowa.⁶ The workshop’s influence grew in the 1950s due to successful publication by some Iowa students and some good publicity. According to Stephen Wilbers, author of a history of Iowa’s creative writing program, the program received its first big publicity boost from Poetry when that Chicago-based literary journal devoted half of an issue to poets affiliated with the Iowa Writers’ Workshop.⁷ Articles praising Iowa’s creative writing program appeared in *Time*, *Esquire*, and *Writer’s Digest* in the late 1950s.⁸

The Iowa workshop model formed the basis of the creative writing workshop familiar to today’s creative writing students. According to Wilbers, peer critique of drafts stood at ‘the heart of the program.’⁹ Whitman would not have thrived in such an environment. He had nothing but harsh criticism for the work of his trinomial contemporaries: John Greenleaf Whittier, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Edgar Allan Poe, and William Cullen Bryant.¹⁰ Maybe they would have benefited from some time spent in workshop with Whitman. Maybe they would have revised some of their poems based on his comments. More likely, they would have wanted to box his ears.

Wilbers’s book contains an entire chapter full of comments by Iowa teachers who believe that creative writing can’t be taught. Beginning in the 1960s, students of these teachers who didn’t believe in teaching went on to found scores of creative writing programs.¹¹ The appendix to Wilbers’s book, published in 1980, lists twenty-five graduate programs founded or directed by Iowa graduates. A quick glance at the *AWP Official Guide to Writing Programs* reveals that approximately 100 graduate creative writing programs now have Iowa graduates on their staff. So now we have this situation in which the dominant teaching methodology in creative writing pedagogy is modeled on the ideas of professors ‘who view art as the product of unfettered genius’ and believe that ‘the idea of teaching or learning the art of writing as one might teach or learn mathematics’ is ‘repugnant.’¹² This begs the question, if these writers do not believe that their craft can be taught, why would they subject themselves to the frustrations and futility of a teaching career? Why don’t they earn a living doing something that they believe can actually be accomplished?

Wilbers admits that the workshop model isn’t for everyone: ‘Depending

on individual temperament and needs, a writer might flourish from the association with other writers or flounder from the pressure of competition.¹³ Yet the workshop model is basically the only available model of poetry writing instruction. What happens to those students whose temperaments and needs are not served by this model? We need a rhetoric of poetry writing instruction in place for teachers who don't view the classroom as an arena for competition and don't want to pit students against each other. We need it for those student writers who don't respond well to competitive workshops. If the prevailing teaching methodology leaves some of its students floundering, dedicated teachers will want to have other methods available to help them reach those students, who have just as much right to flourish as those for whom the workshop model is a good fit. If some students flounder, when they might have flourished, that is a failure on the part of the instructor, a failure on the part of the entire profession whose reigning methodology allows some of its talented students to fall through the cracks.

Whitman's own self-education provides an instructive model for a rhetoric-based alternative to the Iowa workshop model. While Whitman had contempt for poetry writing contemporaries, he scrupulously studied the styles of the successful orators of his day, 'whose techniques are felt in his poetry.'¹⁴ Whitman came of age during a golden age of political oratory, and he learned from some of the best. For example, though Whitman was unimpressed by Daniel Webster's Whig politics, he was dazzled by Webster's eloquent cadences, and he went to hear him speak whenever possible.¹⁵ He also admired the speeches of some of America's women suffragettes. According to Whitman biographer David S. Reynolds, 'Whitman was a close observer of women's oratory and became a poetic celebrant of women's new public role.'¹⁶

In addition to learning from political orators, Whitman closely studied the rhetorical flourishes of the preachers of his day. He analyzed the oratorical styles of Brooklyn preachers in a regular column that he wrote for the *Eagle*,¹⁷ and, according to Reynolds, 'Whitman's casual fusion of earthly and divine images in his poetry owed much to the pulpit stylists he observed so closely.'¹⁸

In *Classical Rhetoric in English Poetry*, Brian Vickers includes Ovid, Shakespeare, John Dryden, and several great prose writers in a list of writers who 'believed that rhetoric was the important discipline for a writer'.¹⁹ How many potential Whitmans, Shakespeares, Drydens, and Ovids may have been among those writers who have floundered in workshop-based poetry writing classes because they were not temperamentally suited to this particular pedagogical model? How many of the writers who have flourished in workshops would have become even better writers, rising

to the next level, if we had a rhetoric of poetry writing instruction in place similar to ones that produced Ovid, Shakespeare, and Dryden, or even something resembling Whitman's intuitive method of rhetoric-based self-education?

Rhetoric as Parent Discipline to Composition Studies

The field of composition studies has drawn extensively from the well of rhetorical theory. As a result, composition studies has grown more theoretically sophisticated, individual teachers have become more effective and more efficient, and the discipline as a whole has earned greater respect. It seems, in fact, that compositionists have been taken seriously, or not taken seriously, in direct proportion to the amount of influence that they have allowed rhetorical theory to have over their discipline. In *Composition-Rhetoric: Backgrounds, Theory, and Pedagogy*, Robert J. Connors discusses the clout that professors of rhetoric had c. 1800:

The discipline of rhetoric at the college level entered the nineteenth century as one of the most esteemed fields in higher education. The professor of rhetoric in 1800 – in touch with an intellectual and rhetorical tradition more than two millennia old, yet revised and revitalized by recent theoretical advances – was a respected figure on his campus.²⁰

Contrast this with the status of grammar-based composition teachers, who comprise an academic proletariat, even an underclass, at many colleges that regard composition as a service course. Also contrast it with the role of the poet in the academy, who is often regarded by colleagues as a kind of modern-day court jester, good for occasional entertainment in the form of public readings, but not someone to serve on a committee with and certainly not someone to take seriously as a scholar.

The return to rhetoric as a basis for composition studies has led to greater esteem for composition studies as an academic discipline, and it can do the same for creative writing. Current-traditional rhetoric, with its emphasis on the modes of discourse (compare / contrast, classification, cause and effect, etc.) is rooted in rhetorical treatises by George Campbell, Hugh Blair, Richard Whately, and others.²¹ Expressionism, another 20th-century approach to composition studies, has its basis in what James Berlin calls 'subjective theories of rhetoric' put forth by Plato, Richard Weaver, and others.²² In the 1950s and 1960s, compositionists leapt headlong into the search for ways to draw on classical rhetoric. James Berlin refers to this period as a renaissance.²³ I would like to see a similar renaissance in the field of creative writing pedagogy. Connors states 'Rhetorically oriented schol-

arship . . . led composition studies out of the backwater area where it had been glumly encamped for so long.²⁴ Creative writing pedagogy is still in a backwater area, relying on untested, unproven methods that have remained relatively stagnant for seventy-five years.

Composition studies, as a discipline, is unusual in that ‘rather than emerging from a body of knowledge, it was a field decreed necessary and continued by social fiat.’²⁵ Poetry as literature is a traditional knowledge-based discipline, but creative writing is market-driven, and it is similar to composition studies in that respect. This is one reason why something that has been good for composition studies could also be good for creative writing. The other reason is that writing is writing, and, as I will demonstrate, rhetoric has provided the theoretical basis for all kinds of writing instruction for millennia.

Ralph Berry points out that creative writing, as an academic discipline, originated as an offshoot of composition studies.²⁶ Yet the two disciplines have drifted far apart. Those of us who specialize in creative writing instruction can learn a good deal from compositionists. In addition to adopting rhetorical theory as a basis for our instruction, we can start discipline-specific scholarly journals devoted to exchanging exercises and ideas about teaching. The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) started *English Journal* in 1912 and *College English* in 1938. The *Conference on College Composition and Communication* was founded in 1949, and its journal of composition studies, *College Composition and Communication*, has been around since 1990. Creative writing pedagogy, in contrast, is still in its infancy, at least in terms of the exchange of ideas via scholarly journals. The first journal dedicated entirely to creative writing pedagogy was the UK-based *New Writing: The International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing*, established in 2003, and there still is no refereed journal devoted to creative writing pedagogy in the United States. This shows how far we have lagged behind as a serious academic discipline.

Wendy Bishop has pointed out that the divide between approaches to teaching creative writing composition confuses students, making them believe that creative writing is all fun and no work while composition is all work and no fun. Bishop puts it this way: ‘When students arrive in creative writing classes with dichotomous attitudes – composition is no fun, creative writing therefore must be fun – creative writing classes can appear surprisingly restrictive to students first discovering that say, poetry is a difficult art.’²⁷ We are not telling our students the whole truth about the poet’s craft if we don’t introduce poetry writing as a difficult discipline, requiring our students to read poetry, write responses to published poems, write essays, and complete multiple revisions of individual poems.

A Short History of Rhetoric's Impact on Poetry and Poetry's Resistance to Rhetoric

Peter Mack points out that 'officially, rhetoric is concerned with the production of orations, the most prestigious form of prose composition in the ancient world; in practice, its observations transfer to other forms of prose and to poetry'.²⁸ Contemporary compositionists have shown how the insights of rhetoric transfer to their discipline, and poetry writing instructors need to vigorously follow up on Mack's insight that rhetoric has something to teach poets, as well as writers of prose.

We need to rediscover those insights that creative writing teachers lost after the workshop model took hold. Take the Greeks, for example. According to Mack, most Greek poets 'received their training in the advanced use of language from the study of rhetoric, and therefore found it natural to think about writing in the terms which rhetoric provides'.²⁹ Most of today's poetry writing instructors view the creative impulse as something more like Plato's 'inspired madness'.³⁰ Such a stance is definitely not ahistorical. Poets have long spoken of inspiration as something mysterious, something delivered by the muses. Mack addresses that position too: 'From the time of Homer and Hesiod, poets have claimed to write under divine instruction'.³¹ But we can't defensibly charge tuition and then tell our students to simply burn incense to try to invoke the gods and muses, can we?

Rhetoric's shaping influence on poets didn't end with the Greeks. According to Brian Vickers, a literature professor, 'it continued to dominate education and literature in the Middle Ages, in the Renaissance, and indeed exerted its shaping force into the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries'.³² Some poets and scholars continued to be uneasy about this, though. For example, these 1833 remarks by John Stuart Mill highlight the differences between the two arts: 'Eloquence is written to be heard, poetry to be overheard'.³³ Since the Romantic period, many poets have strived to transcend rhetoric.³⁴ In *Essays on Epitaphs*, William Wordsworth expresses his fear 'that rhetoric's facility in providing words for the poet might lead to a dangerous detachment from thought and feeling, the necessary foundation for poetry'.³⁵

Romantic attitudes toward poetry provide a poor framework for teachers because they focus on the elements of poetry writing that we can't teach while taking a defeatist attitude toward those elements of poetic craft that we can teach. We can't teach genius. We can't find talent in students who don't have it. I think this is what people mean when they say that writing can't be taught. But we can teach technique, and we can teach a healthy respect for the art. We can give talented students a road map on how to best

develop their talents. The five canons of rhetoric provide the best model available for teaching students as much as we can in the limited time we have with them, whether it's a quarter, a semester, or a couple of years.

Why I Recommend that Poetry Writing Instructors Base Their Pedagogy on Rhetoric Rather Than on Poetics

Why should poetry writing instructors turn to treatises on rhetoric, rather than poetics manuals, for pedagogical models? Because rhetoric has traditionally been concerned with 'the production of spoken and written texts' whereas poetics is limited to 'the interpretation of texts.'³⁶ Even Aristotle's *Poetics* is, according to the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 'after all not a handbook of composition but a theory of poetry, of its nature and elements, developed in part by comparison with drama.'³⁷ The poetics manuals might provide a foundation for literature classes, but rhetoric is better suited to serve as the underpinnings for courses in poetry writing.

Throughout the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, manuals on poetry writing treated poetry as a mode of rhetoric: 'Most medieval manuals of poetry were rhetorics and only the sections on versification made any significant distinction between poetry and oratory.'³⁸ Geoffrey of Vinsauf's *Poetria nova*, the most popular treatise on poetry writing composed in the Middle Ages, stresses rhetoric's third and fifth canons (style and delivery).³⁹ Several Renaissance-era poetics manuals, most prominently George Puttenham's 1589 *Arte of English Poesie*, treat rhetoric's first three canons (invention, arrangement, and style) as an organizing principle.⁴⁰

What Our Field Stands to Gain from the Development of a Rhetoric of Poetry Writing Instruction

Among the primary benefits of using the five canons of rhetoric in poetry writing classrooms is the fact that this method can make instruction more systematic, less haphazard. In the workshop model, instructors tend to provide most of their instruction in context of issues that come up during discussions of drafts of student poems, citing principles that occur to the instructor at the time. Even poetry writing instructors who try to be very systematic are bound to miss some things without a framework, such as the computer-assisted, five-canonical model, that facilitates organizing instruction. In the workshop model, one class might get introduced to an entirely different set of principles than the next, depending on what happens to pop into the instructor's head during workshop sessions. In a five-canonical-based class, the instructor is sure not to leave out any of the basics because the model ensures that students get a certain amount of instruction in each of the five key areas. Many instructors currently use

a modified version of the workshop model, supplementing peer critique with writing exercises to be performed in or out of class, because they understand that workshopping alone is insufficient. The computer-assisted, five-canonical model can provide these instructors with a framework for tailoring and balancing their lessons.

Three additional benefits of rhetoric-based poetry writing instruction are that it provides student poets with a greater arsenal of figures and tropes (which are bread and butter to poets), it aids the construction of a speaking persona, and it helps student poets gain awareness of their audience. Mack points out that recurrence is an important principle in poetry and suggests that young poets could benefit from the study that rhetoricians have done into figures of repetition:

Many rhetorical figures are based on repetition (of sounds, words, and structures, in different positions within the sentence), which is one of the fundamental properties of poetry. Conversely, both rhythm and rhyme, the constitutive features of many forms of poetry, are among the figures of rhetoric.⁴¹

For poetry writing instructors who are interested in introducing their students to various uses of figurative language, I recommend Chapter 4 of *Classical Rhetoric in English Poetry*, by Brian Vickers, which illustrates various figures and tropes, using examples culled from canonized English poetry. For example, in this chapter we learn that 'gradatio' is the name of the use of the last word (or words) of one clause as the first word (or words) of the next, and that this figure appears in works by Homer, Sidney, Herbert, and Milton.⁴² Another excellent source is *Poetic Designs: An Introduction to Meters, Verse Forms, and Figures of Speech* by Stephen J. Adams. Adams goes into more detail than Vickers about tropes and figures, devoting forty-three pages to the subject and offering a wealth of examples and definitions.

The development of a rhetoric of poetry writing instruction can also help teach poets the ins and outs of constructing a speaking persona for a given poem. Mack points out that Aristotle's *Rhetoric* contains some constructive advice on this matter, which, he contends, is particularly helpful for writers of lyric poetry: '[W]riters of lyric poetry . . . must give attention to the presentation of the speaker of a given poem. Rhetorical textbooks (particularly Aristotle's *Rhetoric*) consider the methods of constructing a favorable persona (*ethos*).'⁴³

Finally, audience awareness and analysis is a central concern of rhetoric. One of the key points in Aristotle's *Rhetoric* is that 'the orator composes by giving priority not to form but to audience.'⁴⁴ Peter Mack writes: 'The awareness of audience, which is one of the defining charac-

teristics of rhetoric, also encourages poets to think about issues of voice and address.⁴⁵ An ancillary benefit of basing poetry writing instruction on rhetorical principles is that giving serious consideration to audience is bound to broaden poetry's audience, drawing back many of the readers who have been put off by the hermeticism of much modernist and post-modern poetry.

Over the past fifteen years, a host of essayists have blamed creative writing programs for poetry's marginal role in contemporary culture. The most famous of these articles are 'Who Killed Poetry?' by Joseph Epstein and 'Can Poetry Matter?' by Dana Gioia. I'm always a little puzzled when these writers suggest that the proliferation of creative writing programs has decreased the size of poetry's audience. At the very least, the thousands of students studying poetry writing at any given time, many of whom wouldn't have been studying poetry writing during an earlier era, comprise a small army of poetry readers who might not otherwise be readers of poetry. If poetry writing instructors take their jobs seriously, I think we, as a group, are in a unique position to help train generations of highly skilled poets who will take on an increasingly greater role in shaping the larger culture. At the same time, we have a unique opportunity to train our students to be better, more enthusiastic readers of poetry, thus enlarging poetry's audience.

One of the most recent widely-read essays blaming creative writing programs for marginalizing poetry is David Alpaugh's 'The Professionalization of Poetry,' which appeared in two parts in the January / February 2003 and March / April 2003 issues of *Poets & Writers*, and lays the blame for all of the ills of contemporary poetry on a cadre of 'professional' poets who teach creative writing in universities. Alpaugh estimates that graduate creative writing programs are certifying 2500 'professional' poets per decade.⁴⁶ (Does anyone ever complain that there are too many trained singers, too many dancers learning their craft from more experienced dancers? Does anyone suggest that any sculptor who makes a living by teaching other sculptors is ruining the art of sculpting or that all actors ought to be autodidacts?) Alpaugh is bothered by the thousands of 'professional' poets with 'comfortable careers'⁴⁷ teaching in creative writing programs who devote a good deal of their time to 'devising exercises to deal with writer's block.'⁴⁸

Alpaugh's poetry professional is a straw man. The problem is not that poetry is being professionalized due to the increasing number of poets teaching at the university level. Quite the reverse. The problem is that too many poets who enter the teaching profession do not see themselves as professionals, and there are not enough professional journals, not enough carefully theorized teaching methodologies, not enough support mechanisms in place for poetry writing instructors who wish to take their

creative writing pedagogy seriously. The development of a rhetoric of poetry writing instruction will be an important step toward remedying this problem. Alpaugh does rightly state, near the end of his essay: 'We cannot disestablish the profession; but we can make it better.'⁴⁹ One way to improve the profession is to employ a new paradigm for teaching poetry writing, such as the computer-assisted, five-canonical model.

Notes

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2. *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 1993, s.v. 'rhetoric and poetry.'
3. W. Whitman, 'Preface 1855—Leaves of Grass, first edition,' *A Norton Critical Edition: Leaves of Grass*, ed. S. Bradley and H.W. Blodgett (New York: Norton, 1973), 731.
4. S. Wilbers, *The Iowa Writers' Workshop: Origins, Emergence, & Growth* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1980), 35.
5. Wilbers, *The Iowa Writers' Workshop*, 35.
6. Wilbers, *The Iowa Writers' Workshop*, 39.
7. Wilbers, *The Iowa Writers' Workshop*, 94.
8. Wilbers, *The Iowa Writers' Workshop*, 102–103.
9. Wilbers, *The Iowa Writers' Workshop*, 97.
10. D.S. Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's America: A Cultural Biography* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1995), 318–319.
11. Wilbers, *The Iowa Writers' Workshop*, 105.
12. Wilbers, *The Iowa Writers' Workshop*, 125.
13. Wilbers, *The Iowa Writers' Workshop*, 125.
14. Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's America*, 168.
15. Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's America*, 168–169.
16. Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's America*, 219.
17. Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's America*, 173.
18. Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's America*, 40.
19. B. Vickers, *Classical Rhetoric in English Poetry* (London: Macmillan, 1970), 15.
20. R.J. Connors, *Composition-Rhetoric: Backgrounds, Theory, and Pedagogy* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1997), 171.
21. J. Berlin, *Rhetoric and Reality: Writing Instruction in American Colleges, 1900–1985* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987), 8–9.
22. Berlin, *Rhetoric and Reality*, 11–12.
23. Berlin, *Rhetoric and Reality*, 120–138.
24. Connors, *Composition-Rhetoric*, 207.
25. Connors, *Composition-Rhetoric*, 7.
26. R.M. Berry, 'Theory, creative writing, and the impertinences of history,' *Colors of a Different Horse: Rethinking Creative Writing Theory and Pedagogy*, ed. W. Bishop (Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers, 1994), 63.
27. W. Bishop, 'Crossing the lines: On creative composition and composing creative writing,' *Colors of a Different Horse: Rethinking Creative Writing Theory and Pedagogy*, ed. W. Bishop (Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers, 1994), 187.
28. *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric*, 2001, s.v. 'poetry.'
29. *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric*, 2001, s.v. 'poetry.'
30. *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric and Composition*, 1996, s.v. 'poetics.'

31. *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric*, 2001, s.v. 'poetry.'
32. Vickers, *Classical Rhetoric*, 15.
33. *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 1993, s.v. 'rhetoric and poetry.'
34. *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric*, 2001, s.v. 'poetry.'
35. *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric*, 2001, s.v. 'poetry.'
36. Berlin, *Rhetoric and Reality*, 1.
37. *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 1993, s.v. 'rhetoric and poetry.'
38. *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 1993, s.v. 'rhetoric and poetry.'
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40. *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 1993, s.v. 'rhetoric and poetry.'
41. *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric*, 2001, s.v. 'poetry.'
42. Vickers, *Classical Rhetoric*, 139–141.
43. *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric*, 2001, s.v. 'poetry.'
44. *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 1993, s.v. 'rhetoric and poetry.'
45. *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric*, 2001, s.v. 'poetry.'
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47. D. Alpaugh, 'The Professionalization of Poetry, Part II,' *Poets & Writers* 31 (2), (2003), 24.
48. Alpaugh, 'The Professionalization of Poetry, Part 1,' 21.
49. Alpaugh, 'The Professionalization of Poetry, Part II,' 25.

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Chapter 3

Towards an Art of Poetic Invention

After God, Shakespeare invented most.

Victor Hugo¹

[O]nly that man can be called a poet who invents, who creates insofar as a man can create. The poet is he who discovers new joys, even if they are hard to bear. One can be a poet in any field: it is enough that one be adventuresome and pursue any new discovery.

Guillaume Apollinaire²

The [traditional] poetry workshop resembles a garage to which we bring incomplete or malfunctioning homemade machines for diagnosis and repair . . . We advance our nonfunctional machine into a circle of other apprentice inventors and one or two senior Edisons. ‘Very good,’ they say; ‘it almost flies . . .’

Donald Hall³

Invention Defined and Defended

Before we are able to write something good, we have to write *something*. Writers with sophisticated invention strategies tend to be much less daunted by blank pages or empty computer screens, much less likely to complain about writer’s block, and much more willing to take risks in their writing and to boldly revise. After all, if they experiment intrepidly with a given piece of writing and even risk ruining the piece, they haven’t lost too much; they can be confident in their ability to begin and sustain new writing projects.

The term ‘invention’ has had lots of definitions in its 2500 year history. My favorite, for the purposes of seeking an art of poetic invention, might be ‘an art of questioning in the presence of wonder.’⁴ The purpose of an art of invention is to make ‘use of what is known to go beyond it to what is not known.’⁵ Therefore, a good writing prompt will be flexible so that the writer can use it as a launching pad that will thrust him/her beyond it,

into the unknown. I think of a moment in one of poet/professor Theodore Roethke's journals, in which he promises: 'I'll deliver you, dear doves, out of the rational, into the realm of pure song.'⁶ A good invention exercise will begin with something known, the rational, and move the writer into uncharted territory, the realm of pure song.

While some models of the writing process define invention narrowly and relegate it to the early stages of a given writing project, many contemporary compositionists view the writing process as recursive and see the need for invention strategies at all stages. For example, compositionist Richard E. Young defines invention as 'usually the process and art of creation, discovery, and problem-solving.'⁷ According to a broad definition such as Young's, invention is a way to get a piece of writing started, a way to propel it forward, and a way to get past the inevitable obstacles that come up in the writing process. The late Wendy Bishop, who published widely in the field of creative writing pedagogy as well as in composition studies, concurred with Young, defining invention exercises as 'writing prompts in the form of writing exercises that help you start and then continue writing.'⁸ Surely poets, like writers in other genres, would benefit from a sophisticated art of invention. Bishop's poetry writing textbook, *Thirteen Ways of Looking for a Poem*, is loaded with invention exercises geared toward beginning and intermediate poets.

Many beginning poets argue that they are not able to write poems by force of will; they only write when the poems come unbidden into their consciousness – when they're inspired. Young acknowledges that invention is not always a premeditated act: 'It [invention] can refer to the discovery, either deliberate or accidental, of a subject or an idea by intellect or imagination.'⁹ An inventive mind keeps having intellectual and imaginative discoveries, either deliberately or through lots of happy accidents. More often than not, though, those happy accidents are the end product of prolonged, deliberate effort. When a poem 'just comes' to a poet, that's a gift from the muse, or more likely a reward for all of the time spent deliberately seeking such discoveries through invention activities that may or may not have produced fruit when initially conducted.

Romantic-influenced notions of composition (poetic composition as well as other forms of composition) have led to widespread resistance to the very idea of an art of invention. In Young's words: 'For those arguing that giftedness is a prerequisite to original composition, the study of invention is irrelevant to the study of rhetoric, since a gift can be neither taught nor learned.'¹⁰ Compositionist Joe Hardin recalls that when he was an undergraduate, on the first day of class his fiction writing instructor told the class: 'I can't teach you anything about writing.'¹¹ The traditional workshop model is an ideal setup for professors who believe that while

writing can't be taught, it can be judged. It's an ideal setup for professors who believe that their main role is to recognize and encourage talent and to discourage students deemed untalented. 'Writing like this suggests that you might need to find something to do with your hands. Tennis is an excellent sport,' poet Philip Levine once told an enthusiastic but 'untalented' student, in front of his whole class at Fresno State University.¹²

It might appear to a casual observer that the exponential rise in the number of undergraduate and graduate creative writing programs indicates a good deal of optimism regarding the question of whether or not writing can be taught. Upon closer inspection, though, it becomes clear that full-class workshopping, the most widely used pedagogical methodology in these creative writing programs, reinforces Romantic-influenced notions that writing can't be taught, and this methodology makes the creative writing classroom a perfect habitat for uncommitted teachers who are attracted to it because it doesn't demand much prep time or genuine effort on their part. Of course, there are lots of sincere creative writing teachers who are seeking sounder, more sophisticated teaching methods, as well as composition instructors who know a lot about teaching essay writing but doubt their ability to teach creative writing; these teachers comprise my target audience for this book as well as my inspiration for it.

The *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* calls invention 'the most complex and important of the five steps' (or canons), and goes on to inform readers that 'it concerns the preliminary tasks of collecting, exploring, discovering, or creating materials for use.'¹³ Despite this acknowledgment that invention is key for poets, a vast majority of poetry writing instructors use the workshop model, which by its very nature neglects this crucial, variegated issue, focusing entirely on 'fixing' finished drafts and leaving poets – even novice poets – to hunt in the dark for their own methods of generating new poems. This won't do. Our pedagogy should reflect our actual writing practices, beginning with invention. Take this chapter, for example. Before drafting it, I spent seven weeks on the kind of invention work described in the *Princeton Encyclopedia*: gathering materials, reading, underlining, making notes in the margins, writing notes in a notebook, creating an outline, talking about my ideas, and free writing. Then I spent three days writing the first draft. Next I had a colleague read it, and we met over coffee so that she could give me feedback. Then I returned to my invention strategies, looking for ways to work my colleague's best ideas into the revised version of the chapter. Yes, critique was a part of the process. But, from the way the traditional creative writing workshop is set up, you would think that I spent seven weeks receiving feedback over coffee (a very grande cup of coffee, indeed!) and that I completed the pre-

writing, drafting, and revision in a few spare moments. That's the extent to which most creative writing workshops overemphasize peer critique.

If we're serious about teaching students to write poetry, we should start by getting serious about teaching them about invention strategies. This involves creating – inventing – writing prompts that work in practice and have a sound theoretical basis. It also involves clearing class time for these vital activities. If we're not serious about telling students the whole truth about the writing process, and if we're only really interested in running manuscript critique services, there are plenty of venues for that outside of the classroom (we can place our classified ads in the back pages of *Poets & Writers* and people will send us manuscripts to critique).

Inventing with Words, Discovering New Worlds: Poetic Exploration and Experimentation

Poets and other creative writers are like inventors in that we bring wonderful new things into the world through an experimental process of trial and error. The *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* points out that some theorists state that 'poetic invention legitimately embraces the powers of "imagining" things and hence of producing visionary, supernatural, and "marvellous" subjects.'¹⁴ Think of the visionary writings of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, of Arthur Rimbaud, of Andre Breton and his circle of surrealists; think also of fanciful contemporary poets such as James Tate, Dean Young, and Lawrence Raab. On March 10, 1876, after Alexander Graham Bell said 'Mr. Watson – come here – I want to see you,' the first words successfully spoken into a telephone, he must have been as awestruck as a poet who had just hit on an original image or rhyme after arduous note-taking, talking, and planning. And it wasn't magic that enabled Orville and Wilbur Wright to fly. It took a whole rubric of invention strategies. First they observed birds and took copious notes. Next, they read about successful hang-gliding flights and corresponded with the inventors of the hang-glider. Later, when the wings weren't powerful enough, when the airplane spun out of control, they turned to their toolbox of problem-solving techniques. This process of planning, research, correspondence, and problem-solving is strikingly similar to the process of invention that writers employ while prewriting and revising. We don't often get inspired while we're idly flying a kite; we're more likely to get inspired while we purposefully fly a kite, waiting for lightning to strike, à la Benjamin Franklin inventing the lightning rod.

Poets are also like all discoverers, with curious minds, who turn over stones and find whole worlds that had previously gone unnoticed. The *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* states that

in most mimetic theories in Western poetics, poetic invention is conceived primarily as a matter of the proper imitation of nature (in one or another of the several senses of that term), since the desired effects of poetry, it was argued, are possible only through images or likenesses of real or natural things.¹⁵

Think of Elizabeth Bishop, of William Carlos Williams, of John Clare's early work. We all know the story of Sir Isaac Newton and the apple. The story is that when the apple struck Newton, it fell with an amount of a force that startled him so much that the idea of gravity struck him as hard as the apple itself had. Guillaume Apollinaire, the French poet who coined (invented) the terms 'collage' and 'surrealism,' compared Newton's method to that of an inventive poet: 'One can begin with an everyday event: a dropped handkerchief can be for the poet the lever with which to move an entire universe. It is well known how much an apple's fall meant to Newton when he saw it, and that scholar can thus be called a poet.'¹⁶ Newton said he was meditating in his garden when the idea hit him; later I'll show how meditation is in itself a valid invention strategy used by poets and essayists alike.

The French surrealist poets conducted tons of experimental invention exercises such as 'automatic writing' (a precursor to free writing), the 'exquisite corpse,' 'analogy cards,' and 'the game of variants.'¹⁷ The common ground between the poet inspired by a dropped handkerchief and the inventor inspired by a knock on the noggin is that both have prepared minds. Similarly, it's fair to say that Louis Pasteur was a poet working for his patron when he discovered the rabies vaccine after Napoleon III asked him to find a cure for diseases that were killing the Paris wine industry. And when Pasteur uttered his famous dictum, 'In the fields of observation, chance favors only the prepared mind,' he was telling poets and other would-be discoverers not to sit around waiting to be inspired. He was telling them to learn their trades.

Sir Philip Sidney encompassed both concepts, discovery and invention, in his *Apology for Poetry*, in which he credited poetic invention with 'making things either better than nature bringeth forth, or quite anew, forms such as never were in nature.'¹⁸ The first canon helps facilitate both activities, and it has done so for 2500 years, which etymology makes clear. Whereas in English, *invention* refers to the creation of something new and *discovery* means finding something that already exists but has hitherto gone unnoticed, both the Latin word *invention* and the Greek word *heurin* refer to both processes.¹⁹ Writers are not alone in the need to have working methods for invention and discovery. Advocates of invention exercises

claim ‘that without a good supply of heuristic method no artist could create, no scientist could discover, no technician could invent.’²⁰

Young tells us: ‘Artistic performance requires more than knowledge of an art of invention and its underlying principles. It requires substantial training, including repeated practice in imaginative use of method in a variety of rhetorical situations.’²¹ Class time is needed. The traditional workshop model doesn’t even provide an art of invention. In the traditional workshop model, invention is largely left to the student to work out for himself or herself. If a student can’t generate new poems, most workshop teachers shrug and write the student off as untalented or uninspired. I counter that the student’s failure is actually the failure of the traditional workshop. Prevailing pedagogical practices aren’t equipping poetry writing students with the tools that will unleash their imaginations, and foremost among those tools is a repertoire of invention strategies. For help, we can turn to composition studies and to rhetoric, its parent discipline.

Invention in Classical Rhetoric

Invention techniques used today in composition classes (and to a lesser extent in contemporary creative writing classes) are part of a tradition that goes back to the Greek *technê*, handbooks dating to the 5th century BC. The poet Hesiod associated *technê* ‘with fire that enables craft production and the potential for invention that shifts the power between humanity and the gods.’²² This shows how highly poets in the ancient world valued these techniques. They considered their composition handbooks fire stolen from the gods, keys that could unlock the gates to previously unimagined worlds.

Thucydides and Hippocrates contrasted *technê* in war/seafaring and medicine, respectively, with reliance on divine inspiration and dumb luck. They both considered their disciplines as too crucial to leave to chance or untried methods.²³ I view poetry writing as equally crucial, and I believe poetry writing instructors – especially those working with beginning and intermediate poets – need to introduce their students to techniques that will help them generate new work, rather than leaving writers to their own devices, flailing about in search of inspiration.

The *technê* included a set of exercises known as the *progymnasmata*, which was ‘structured so that the student moved from strict imitation to a more artistic melding of the often disparate concerns of speaker, subject, and audience.’²⁴ So when young Greek scholars were first learning to compose speeches, they started with stylistic imitations of model speeches by professionals (Chapter 5 on style, I will address the ways that poets can benefit from stylistic imitation). Then, once they had synthesized stylistic elements of various professional rhetors, they moved onto invention

exercises as a later step toward discovering (or inventing) their own voices and writing truly original works.

Of the fourteen categories of pro gymnasmata, at least six are applicable to poetry: mythos, or fable (think of Anne Sexton's *Transformations*); gnome (Latin 'sententia') in which students recommend or disprove an aphorism; enkomion, or praise (likely the origin of the 'ode'); psogos, or blame (see curse poems in Lewis Turco's *Book of Forms*); synkrisis, or comparison, which combined praise and blame; 'ekphrasis,' or description (most often of a work of art).

In classical rhetoric, invention consisted of the rational discovery of materials for arguments, and imagination was introduced at a later stage of composition to add style to those arguments. Louisiana State University professor Joshua Gunn explains: 'With the advent of the concept of the productive and creative imagination in the Renaissance, invention became the province of the imagination, and the distinction began to dissolve.'²⁵

But even in the classical period, I'm not sure the divide between invention and the imagination was ever as complete as Gunn's remarks imply. Poets and storytellers were steeped in rhetoric, part of the trivium of the ancient educational system, and the technē couldn't have been far from their minds while they composed their creative works. Several scholars have pointed out that the so-called Greek romances, or novels, written in the first three centuries AD, were written using techniques gleaned from the pro gymnasmata. According to compositionist/fiction writer Sandra Giles: 'Achilles Tatius's *Leucippe and Clitophon*, Longus's *Daphnis and Chloe*, and Heliodorus's *Ethiopian Story* . . . clearly exhibit a high degree of attention to such pro gymnastic favorites as allusion, paradox, antithesis, ecphrasis, and syncrisis, among others.'²⁶ If Greek storytellers used invention exercises to write imaginatively, surely some of the poets did too, and an updated form of technē could aid the poets of today and tomorrow.

Invention in Composition Studies

For almost three decades, the prominent compositionist Donald Murray has been arguing for the need for sophisticated prewriting instruction: 'We need to take all the concepts from classical rhetoric and combine them with what we know from modern psychology, from studies of creativity, from writers' testimony about the prewriting process.'²⁷ Contemporary compositionists, particularly of the school known as expressionists (or expressivists), have answered the call, and this is one of the ideas that has galvanized composition studies and helped build it into a more serious academic discipline. It's also a key area where creative writing pedagogy has lagged significantly behind.

Invention exercises provide ‘more help than trial and error efforts, which waste time and effort.’²⁸ The writer who invests time on prewriting works in a manner that is more effective and more efficient than trial and error. If more young poets learn workable prewriting strategies, less of them will quit writing in frustration after they graduate and move on to demanding careers and busy lifestyles.

Good invention exercises help writers tap their own intuitive faculties, rather than giving them formulaic, mechanical methods of writing. Compositionist Janice Lauer tells us: ‘Heuristic thinking in any creative activity is a more flexible way of proceeding than formal reasoning or formulaic steps and a more efficient way than trial and error. Working in tandem with intuition, heuristic thinking prompts conscious activity.’²⁹

After passing through a stage of consciously using invention exercises, most writers graduate to more tacit applications that suit their own styles.³⁰ Just as skilled free verse poets must begin by learning forms so that their verse has something to be free from, experienced artists inventing intuitively must learn a battery of formal invention strategies before discarding them.

Donald Murray urges writers to begin before they have ideas: ‘Ignorance is a great starting place.’³¹ So many novice writers insist that they only write when inspired. More experienced writers understand that inspiration is the result of hard work. An arsenal of invention strategies can give a writer something productive to do while waiting for inspiration to come; often, well-thought-out invention strategies can actually induce inspiration.

In another article, Murray reinforces this insight, maintaining that ‘resistance’ and ‘delay’ are necessary before drafting. Otherwise, he claims, writers rush in before digging deep. He recommends that teachers have students use talk as prewriting and that they write ‘discovery drafts.’³²

Amy Hodges stresses the recursive nature of writing and invention’s role at all stages: ‘The act of writing well is based on a process that begins and ends with invention.’³³ At the onset of a writing project, Hodges recommends a variety of techniques including building an interest inventory and conducting a self-interview about the topic. She also views peer critique as a heuristic tool: ‘Peer reviewing . . . can be a great way to invent new possibilities for your essay.’³⁴

In an influential early article on prewriting, Gordon Rohman calls prewriting ‘the stage of discovery in the writing process when a person assimilates his subject to himself.’³⁵ To help writers get closer to their subjects, Rohman recommends three methods: journaling, guided meditation, and writing analogies as a means to view one’s subject in different ways.³⁶ Of the first method, Rohman points out that Thoreau’s journals on journaling ‘illustrated as well as described the process of discovery.’³⁷

Of the second method, Rohman states: ‘The meditation was designed to be a heuristic model, something which served to unlock discovery.’³⁸ To see this method’s potential for poetic discovery, one needs to look no further than devout Christian poets such as Gerard Manley Hopkins, Thomas Merton, William Everson (Brother Antonius), and Scott Cairns (on the one hand), and practicing Buddhist poets including Gary Snyder, Philip Whalen, Mila Repa, and Allen Ginsberg (on the other hand).

In Rohman’s third method, students supply an ‘analogical vehicle’ to compare with their subject. This provides a focal point and a way to process the material at hand, so that the writer can more fully understand the subject and write about it more confidently, using language that is more personal, more original. Rohman characterizes writers as ‘people who recognize things,’ and the use of analogical vehicles is designed to provide ‘shocks of recognition.’³⁹

Rohman seems to have viewed prewriting as a kind of pre-audience self-talk as well as a way for the writer to talk to himself or herself about strategies for reaching an audience. He describes the writer as someone ‘with an exceptional power of revealing his experience by expressing it, first to himself (prewriting) and then to others (communicating) so that we recognize the experience as our own too.’⁴⁰

Unlike Amy Hodges and other later compositionists who view writing as a recursive process in which writers continually return to invention, Rohman’s schema is stage based, with invention, or prewriting, occurring only at the beginning of the writing process.

One of the more useful invention strategies advocated by compositionists is an application of Kenneth L. Pike’s linguistic theory, tagmemics. Since Pike’s seminal textbook *Rhetoric, Discovery and Change* appeared in 1970, ‘tagmemics has come to be associated with certain “discovery tools,” or heuristics, found in it that attempt to restore invention and problem-solving to the center of the writing and critical thinking process.’⁴¹ Pike defined a ‘tagmeme’ as any discrete chunk of language.⁴² Thus a poetic line can be construed as a tagmeme, as can an image or a stanza. Tagmemics provides a systematic way to look at any subject in three different ways that Pike referred to as the ‘particle perspective’ (what is X?), the ‘wave perspective’ (how has X changed over time?), and the ‘field perspective’ (how does X relate to Y or Z?).

So if I wanted to write about my Toyota Corolla, for example, I could first use tagmemic prewriting to generate some insights about the car. Looking at the car as a particle, I would likely analyze its various components: the 1.6 liter engine, the fourteen-inch wheels, the height-adjustable seatbelts, and so on. Looking at the car as a wave, I might compare it to this year’s Corolla, to the 1975 Corolla Sports Sedan, and to the 1968 Corolla Deluxe

Coup. Looking at it as a field, I might compare it to competitors such as the Honda Civic and the Nissan Sentra.

Pike coined the terms ‘etic’ and ‘emic’ to describe what he viewed as an outsider’s view of a topic (etic) and an insider’s view of the same topic (emic). According to compositionist James J. Murphy: ‘The emic observer’s task is to “translate” for the companion – that is, to use particle, wave, and field perspectives to move the friend from an etic knowledge toward an increasingly emic one, in other words a bridge to new knowledge and unfolding vision.’⁴³ A poet, like an essayist, can act as an emic translator of his or her subject, writing with conviction and authority, aided by tagmemic prewriting.

Students in composition classes use tagmemics to brainstorm ways to ‘approach or limit a general subject or problem’ and ‘to generate a long list of details, examples, and ideas in support of a clearly defined thesis.’⁴⁴ Poets, too, need ways to approach and limit (focus) their topics, and they certainly can benefit from any technique that can help them add details to a poem. Therefore, poetry writing instructors could make profitable use of tagmemics.

Another invention method that is popular in composition studies is the use of topical questions. Many compositionists refer to these as ‘Aristotle’s topics’ because Aristotle’s *Topica*, which listed twenty-eight tried-and-trusted lines of argument, was ‘the first systematic treatment of the subject of general or reusable arguments.’⁴⁵ However, it was Cicero, in his book, also called *Topica*, who first approached topics ‘as means of invention rather than as an analytics of argument.’⁴⁶ According to compositionist Lisa Ede, a short list of five of Aristotle’s topics (definition, comparison, relationship, circumstance, and testimony) can provide questions to ask about any given subject during prewriting:

The classical topics represent natural ways of thinking about ideas. When confronted by an intellectual problem, we all ask such questions as these:

- What is it? (definition)
- What is it like or unlike? (comparison)
- What caused it? (relationship)
- What is possible or impossible? (circumstance)
- What have others said about it? (testimony)⁴⁷

In *The Little Rhetoric and Handbook*, Edward P.J. Corbett provides his own list of twenty-two topics classified under the headings ‘questions about physical objects,’ ‘questions about events,’ ‘questions about abstract concepts,’ and ‘questions about propositions.’⁴⁸ This list of topics may help poetry writing instructors facilitate poetic invention.

Many composition students are familiar with the use of journalist's questions (who, what, when, where, why, and how) as an invention technique. Ede writes:

Although you might discover much the same information by simply brainstorming, using the journalist's questions ensures that you have covered all these major points. Furthermore, using the journalist's questions automatically organizes information as you generate it, whereas a brainstorming list would need to be analyzed and reorganized.⁴⁹

Keep in mind Ezra Pound's famous remark that 'literature is news that stays news'⁵⁰ and these equally famous line from 'Asphodel,' by William Carlos Williams: 'It is difficult / to get the news from poems, / yet men die miserably every day / for lack / of what is found there.'⁵¹ Surely if poets are interested in making their works eternally newsworthy, the journalist's questions make a logical starting point.

Another question-based invention strategy in common use in composition classes is Kenneth Burke's pentad. A writer can use the pentad to try to make sense out of any given event. The five parts of the pentad are: act, actor, scene, agencies, and purpose. So if I want to use Burke's pentad to make sense out of one of the 2004 American presidential debates, for example, I would start by identifying the act (the debate), the actors (George W. Bush, John Kerry, and moderator Jim Lehr), the scene (Miami University), the agencies (microphones, television cameras, rehearsed scripts and, in Kerry's case, a pen), and the purpose (both candidates were vying for votes). The pentad gets really interesting when you start pairing the five terms in different ways: act to actor, actor to scene, actor to agency, actor to purpose, act to scene, act to agency, act to purpose, scene to agency, scene to purpose, and agency to purpose, asking questions such as 'What does the act have to do with the actor?' and 'What do the agencies have to do with the purpose?'.⁵² This is yet another invention strategy that could have interesting applications in poetry writing classes.

Listing is another prewriting method commonly used in composition classes. A type of list that seems especially appropriate for poetry writing instruction is the 'observation chart,' in which the writer makes five columns (one for each of the five senses) and lists all the sensory images associated with a topic. Composition instructor Ed Reynolds writes: 'Its columns force you to pay attention to all of your senses, so it can help you do a more thorough, specific observation. We are accustomed to relying on our sight, but smells, tastes, sounds, and touch can sometimes give us more important information about a subject.'⁵³

Clustering is an invention strategy that is used not only in college com-

position classrooms, but also frequently in elementary and secondary schools as well. It is perfectly suited to the free-associative nature of poetry writing, and I think our students would benefit from teacher modeling of clustering as poetry prewriting.

Free writing is the most popular invention strategy in current use in composition classes. The acknowledged guru of free writing is the prominent compositionist Peter Elbow (although he credits fellow compositionist Ken Macrorie with introducing the concept to him).⁵⁴ In *Writing Without Teachers*, Elbow refers to free writing as ‘the most effective way I know to improve your writing.’⁵⁵ Since free writing is even more ubiquitous than clustering, I won’t explicate it in detail here. I will say, though, that while the main thrust of the argument I’m making is that the field of creative writing pedagogy has a lot to learn from the field of composition/rhetoric, this seems to be a case of compositionists borrowing a technique from poets. Compare Alastair Brotchie’s description of automatic writing, as practiced by the French surrealists, with Elbow’s description of free writing, as practiced in composition studies:

Automatic writing is the most direct of Surrealist techniques.

Sit at a table with pen and paper, put yourself in a ‘receptive’ frame of mind, and start writing. Continue writing without thinking about what is appearing beneath your pen. Write as fast as you can. If, for some reason, the flow stops, leave a space and immediately begin again by writing down the first letter of the next sentence. Choose this letter at random before you begin, for instance a ‘t’, and always begin this new sentence with a ‘t’.⁵⁶

The idea is simply to write for ten minutes (later on, perhaps fifteen or twenty). Don’t stop for anything. Go quickly without rushing. Never stop to look back, to cross something out, to wonder how to spell something, to wonder what word or thought to use, or to think about what you are doing . . . If you get stuck it’s fine to write ‘I can’t think what to say, I can’t think what to say’ as many times as you want; or repeat the last word you wrote over and over again; or anything else. The only requirement is that you *never stop*.⁵⁷

Different Ways that Writers Invent

Skilled writers invent assignments for themselves. This staves off writer’s block and helps writers push forward into new realms of the imagination. One of Wendy Bishop’s suggested methods for ‘inventing inventions’ is to work backwards from a finished text.⁵⁸ This practice

goes back all the way to Aristotle, whose art of rhetoric ‘was based on inductive generalizations about the practice of those who argue effectively.’⁵⁹ An art of poetic invention, by the same token, should come from inductive study of poets’ practice. I frequently invent writing exercises for my students based on what I see happening in finished, published poems. For example, once my class was discussing Marie Howe’s poem ‘What the Living Do,’ in which the speaker addresses a departed loved one, describing the quotidian details of her life without him, the drudgery of everyday life, but also the yearning and passion that we sometimes experience in otherwise mundane moments.⁶⁰ The poem sparked a stimulating conversation, and I could sense that several of the students were inspired by the poem. So I said, ‘Okay, let’s all try to write poems, in long-lined couplets like Howe’s, that try to convey both the tediousness and the wonder of everyday life while pondering the bridge between life and whatever afterlife there may be.’ Here’s a poem that one of my students wrote in response to that impromptu prompt:

What the Dead Do
by John Owen

Sure, I’ve never been dead, but I’ve met my ghost
who is much more handsome, always clean-shaven, and polite.

At dinner, he says *please, thank you, pardon*, and never burps.
When describing modern art, he uses terms like *Fauvism, de Stijl,*

and *Bauhaus*, while I can only muster the generics: *interesting, abstract,*
and *neat-o!* My ghost, I’ve read his latest book, and his poems

seem to kiss my temples and pull a woolen blanket up to my chin –
and his voice, it sounds like a thousand lullabies when he says,

in French, *Vous êtes merveilleux* and *Je t'aime* which means *You are Great*
and *I Love You*. When he says things like this, I fall in love with
myself,

my dead self, who tells me I’m such a good friend, but that he doesn’t feel
the same way. And even when rejecting me, my ghost is kind.

How he died, he won’t say, only that it was painless, and he went out
gracefully, kissed the crook of his widow’s elbow. He tells me his
funeral,

my funeral, was a nice one, and even our father's ghost will be there, because this is what the dead do, they pity the living that pity the dead.

Bishop also recommends mining textbooks and other teacher's assignment sheets for workable invention exercises.⁶¹ Associated Writers and Writing Programs (AWP) annually compiles a guide based on this principle; creative writing teachers from all over North America contribute their favorite assignments. Behn and Twichell's *The Practice of Poetry* contains quite a few strong assignments used by some of the leading poet/professors in the country. *Teachers and Writers* also put out a book, *Old Faithful*, in which various teachers contributed their most effective exercises, though it contains other genres of writing in addition to poetry.

Beginning writers need their teachers to invent assignments for them at first, but they also need to be taught how to give themselves assignments. To get students in the habit of inventing their own invention exercises, I sometimes have them make up their own assignments based on what they observe in published poems. One semester I had each student give a presentation on a current literary journal, and as part of the assignment, the student was required to create an invention exercise based on something that he or she observed in one of the poems published in the journal. That class came up with the following assignments: an aubade based on an everyday image; a poem quoting lines from a book (real or imagined) that the speaker is reading while also discussing events in the speaker's life; a poem attributing metaphysical attributes to an everyday object; a poem containing at least five consecutive lines in the 'the _____ of my _____ is _____' structure; a poem that compares or contrasts the same action being done by different generations; a poem that comments on another literary work as J. Patrick Lewis has done in his poem 'Mini Book Reviews'; a poetic treatment of the poet's favorite movie; a poem in which the first and third stanzas are identical; a poem that braids some medical condition or symptom with some other event in the speaker's life; a poem in the form of a psychologist's log; a poem in which the speaker imagines that someone or something has transformed into something else. By taking cues from published poems, beginning writers not only learn to write better; but they also learn to read more closely, and they become more appreciative readers of poetry.

The dare poem, an invention exercise created by Amanda Warren, who teaches at Western Michigan University,⁶² provides a great way to get students in the habit of inventing inventions. Each student writes the guidelines for a poem and dares a classmate to write a poem that follows these guidelines. One of my students dared a classmate to write a poem

that met all of the following criteria: it must involve someone climbing a skyscraper; it must be a directed process analysis, or how-to poem; each line must have one more word than the last; Bill Gates, Popeye, and the Mona Lisa must come up at some point. Here's the poem that resulted:

Strange
by Will Gramling

Strange
To walk,
Strange to hop
Up so many stairs
Without my legs attached properly.

One is in Seattle with Bill Gates.
He downloaded it because he was bored, bastard.
So now I'm down to one, but it's in Reno
Having an affair with my wife's arm, what a bitch.

What a bitch is right, the shape I'm in, climbing stairs
Without legs, hopping, with my tongue wagging, licking dirt off
the steps
Just to survive, and hopping is hard, and I wish I were Popeye
Because he would just eat spinach, and get buff, and grow his legs
back.
And if I were him, I'd get pissed off, and start running, and raising
hell.

Bill Gates would go down, hard. He could have my leg and sell it on
E-Bay, to himself.

How beautiful, how strange, like the Mona Lisa, only better, to kill
the richest, without my legs.

Sharon Roberts, of University of Central Florida, is one teacher who has been thinking outside of the box, using technology to enhance her students' prewriting experiences. Roberts' research shows that using word-processing software for invention activities allows students to complete more writing in a shorter amount of time. From this, she concludes that it makes sense to use word-processing software for invention activities 'because the goal is to create a bulk and range of ideas.'⁶³ Using software programs called Inspiration™ and Kidspiration™, Roberts has enabled her students to create cluster diagrams on their computers. She also advocates the

use of ‘sense charts’ on Excel™ spreadsheets and ‘author’s idea files’ on Filemaker Pro™.⁶⁴

Not only do writers invent their own invention exercises, some of them go so far as to invent new forms. John Ciardi invented the thirty-six line trenta sei, Robin Skelton invented the viator,⁶⁵ Michael Heffernan invented a form that combines elements of the sestina with elements of the sonnet, and I invented a hybrid form called the haiku sonnet. The *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* describes this process as follows: ‘Here, “invention” most often refers to finding, or otherwise producing, the subject matter or “content” of poems. But the concept has also been used to indicate the production of poetic form or structure.’⁶⁶

In a graduate (or advanced undergraduate) poetry writing class, teachers would do well to have students invent new forms and explain the prosody behind them. One semester, a group of my beginning creative writing students invented a form called the descendaiku. The first stanza of a descendaiku is a traditional haiku, with three lines containing five, seven, and five syllables, respectively. The second stanza contains three slightly shorter lines, with four syllables, then six syllables, then four syllables again. Each stanza is shorter than the last, until finally, the poem concludes with a single syllable stanza. I was delighted and greatly impressed. What a perfect form for discussing loss, the passage of time, the way we lose everything in the end!

At the revision stage, compositionist Amy Hodges argues that writers need to re-invent themselves as the first readers of their own work.⁶⁷ Just as we create personas to speak for us in our poems, we need to cultivate a ‘critic’ persona who will aid in the revision process. Mine is usually a kinder, gentler version of William Logan – a no-nonsense reader who makes me laugh while pointing out the shortcomings in my drafts. At other times, I feel the need to get in touch with my inner Harold Bloom – a critical persona who can remind me that what the poem has to say is more important than what I think I have to say.

Writers ‘invent’ the intellectual or emotional response that they hope to instill in their audience. Rhetorician Walter Watson states: ‘The rhetor must therefore be able to invent the motivation that will lead to the decision he is advocating.’⁶⁸ Substitute ‘poet’ for ‘rhetor’ and ‘emotion’ or ‘effect’ for ‘decision’ and this principle’s value for poets becomes evident: The poet must therefore be able to invent the motivation that will lead to the emotion (or effect) he or she is advocating. Watson continues: ‘The three sources of persuasion, speaker, audience, and speech, all provide possibilities for the invention of motivation.’⁶⁹ The poet, like the rhetor, can and must ‘invent’ his or her speaker, whether that means using an invented persona or discovering one’s own voice. Reader-response theory also

holds that all writers, including poets, invent or invoke their intended or ideal audience, consciously or unconsciously. The reader-response theorist Edmund White goes so far as to say that the writer must invent the reader. According to White, each writer 'must assume a new responsibility: to create the kind of reader he or she needs for the text being produced.'⁷⁰

Rhetors and writers invent emotions inasmuch as their writings bring those emotions into the world of those who are touched by their writings. Poets, in particular, invent means of catharsis for themselves and for their audiences:

The speaker invents the emotion in the sense of bringing it into existence, and the emotion is inventive in the sense of bringing what is thought by the audience into conformity with its demands. It thus differs from the emotional catharsis effected by poetic works. The emotions aroused by poetic works are enjoyed for their own sake and do not aim at anything beyond themselves.⁷¹

Despite this perceived difference between poets and rhetors, it's fair to say that poets invent the emotional reactions of audience members by using suggestive, creative language.

Let's face it, creative people tend to be good liars, and a lot of writers are mischievous. Poets are no exception. They enjoy making things up. Dante and his contemporaries referred to poetry as 'the beautiful lie.' So it's no accident that lies are one of the three main sources of poetry in Kenneth Koch's seminal textbook for young poets, *Wishes, Lies, and Dreams*. One common form of lie is the 'excuse.' Before they start putting their beautiful lies down on paper, many young future poets exercise their imaginations by skipping class and dreaming up excuses for those absences. Creative writing instructors who want to prod their students into generating new work would do well to view each absence as an opportunity, rather than a problem. The following attendance policy does just that:

For an absence to be considered excused, you are required to write an outlandish, imaginative, yet somewhat believable excuse (approximately 250 words) by the next class session. As with any writing assignment in this class, clichés are unacceptable, so please don't write a tired excuse of the 'My dog ate my homework' variety. Come up with something that is new, untrue, and uniquely you. Your overall course grade will be dropped by 1% for each absence that is not followed up by an acceptable excuse.

Students seem to enjoy this, and oftentimes they rise to the occasion and the excuses function as prewriting for future poems. The downside of this attendance policy is that some of the more creative students may

want to miss class on purpose just to have an opportunity to use an excuse that they have concocted. Excuses range from stories about eloping over the weekend, exploding cats, dream-like tales featuring talking stomachs and kidneys, a story about being abducted by clowns, a yarn about a scam artist leaving a dead dog in the author's driveway as a way to try to accuse the author of killing the dog and collecting some recompense, several descriptions of incidents involving Columbian drug lords, and the following, from Kim Reynolds:

Feeling like Gregor Samsa

When Kim Reynolds awoke Thursday morning from coughing, sneezing, wheezing, and aching, she found herself transformed in her bed into a horrible zombie. My arms wriggled before me in a dizzying and uncontrollable frenzy. At first, I was alarmed by the thought of my frantic limbs seeking the bloodlust of brains but I slowly realized that they were madly flailing toward a box of Kleenex. However, it would be a terrible task to have to get up out of bed to grab the elusive tissues. When I tried to hop out of bed like I normally do I realized that there was no way that, in my current condition, it would be possible. Instead, I would have to muster up the little strength left in my limbs, roll myself free from the warm confines of the blanket, and rock my lower body until my legs dangled freely above the cold and unwelcoming planks of hardwood floor beside my bed. Why didn't I ever put a rug there, I wondered as my feet winced at the initial shock of the cool wood. As I neared the Kleenex box, the soft and glorious tissue, I felt my whole body growing heavy and achy as it apparently rebelled against my movement from the bed. Upon reaching for the tissues, a cough unlike any other cough I'd had before erupted from some unknown depths in my lungs. It was so loud and unnerving that it woke my dog, Nemo, from a sound sleep with a frightened yelp. Still I struggled onward intent on making my way to school to attend the much-anticipated special guest that would grace our poetry class that day. I glanced backward at the clock and noticed that I was running slow today and was already behind in my morning routine. What would my teachers and classmates think if I didn't show up for school? I had paid good money to attend those classes and I was not going to miss them now. I made my way toward the bathroom hoping that a cool splash of water from the sink would motivate me to get the move on. I looked in the mirror and saw a sight that horrified me beyond any scare that I had encountered before. My face was replaced overnight with the horrible face of a zombie. The

skin was pale and splotchy with dark raccoon like circles under the drooping and bloodshot eyes and for a moment I could have swore that I saw a tiny trickle of blood dripping from the right corner of my lip. Another deep and painful coughing fit sent me clinching weakly to the countertop. When I looked in the mirror the second time, I didn't see the blood but I still questioned my zombie status. My questions were soon answered as I approached the kitchen where my husband was making his usual pot of morning coffee. When he spotted me, shuffling slowly into the kitchen, he screamed a note so loudly and highly that even the most seasoned soprano would have blushed. 'Get away from me zombie,' he cried. 'You won't get my brains,' he said as he bolted out the kitchen door. At that point I decided it would be in the best interest of all Western instructors and students if I stayed home for fear that I might scare them all to death or at the very least expose them to the zombie germ I had contracted.

It's a good idea for teachers to complete invention exercises along with their students because it shows that all of us have to write poems (or essays or stories) from the ground up. Kerry Holmes, a University of Mississippi professor who advocates teacher modeling of prewriting, writes: 'Teachers can diffuse students' feelings of inadequacy when they model writing. Students may think "The teacher is having a hard time just like me, yet she seems excited about writing. I guess I'll give it a try."'⁷² It takes a gutsy poet-professor to do this. There's a risk of being deflated in the eyes of students, of giving up the cult of personality that many poet-profs depend on. While he didn't actually write with us when I took his classes, David Kirby taught me a lot about writing by showing the class journal entries that he used as prewriting, then showing us the completed poems and explaining how he got from A to B.

Into the Realm of Pure Song: Invention in the Poetry Writing Classroom

The following are some practical ways to incorporate invention in the poetry writing curricula:

- First and foremost, limit the amount of class time spent critiquing drafts of students' poems. This takes time away from invention exercises and other important classroom activities.
- Whenever possible, complete invention exercises along with your students. This will encourage you to keep coming up with fresh exercises (ones you would want to do yourself). Also, it will encourage your students by showing them that poems aren't just born perfect –

even the instructor has to struggle through the writing process, writing throwaway lines right beside those exciting lines that ultimately become the bases for publishable poems.

- Make all of your writing prompts flexible. Make it clear that you see the prompts as launching pads that will propel poems into unexpected new realms.
- Have students create ‘observation charts’ or ‘sense charts,’ either on paper or on Excel™ spreadsheets. Have them make five columns, one for each of the senses, listing all the images they associate with a given topic.
- Create new writing prompts inductively, based on what you see working in published poems.
- Exchange writing prompts with other teachers. An organized idea exchange is AWP’s annual book of pedagogy papers, which is available at their conference or on their web site (<http://www.awpwriter.org>).
- Your students won’t always have you there to offer them writing prompts; they need to learn to give themselves assignments. Encourage students to create new writing prompts, for themselves and for each other. One way to do this is to have them write guidelines for dare poems. Another way is to have them work inductively from published poems, isolating the elements of the poems that they enjoy and giving themselves assignments that will help replicate these effects while adding a new twist to them.
- Challenge your students and advanced undergraduates to invent new poetic forms.
- Get your students to re-invent themselves as the first readers of their own work. First have them list attributes for their ‘inner critic.’ Second, have them role-play their inner critic persona by having them critique unpublished or published poems by others. Third, have them write a criticism of one of their own drafts.
- As a revision exercise, have students ‘invent’ the audience for one of their own poems as well the audience’s emotional and intellectual reaction to the poem. This could take the form of a guided free write describing a person whom they would like to reach with the poem and the response they would like to evoke in that person.
- Make lemons into lemonade by turning student absences into opportunities for them to write imaginative, outlandish excuses.
- Updating the progymnasmata (mythos): Have the students write twists on fables or other familiar tales.
- Updating the progymnasmata (sententia): Have students recommend or disprove aphorisms.

- Updating the progymnasmata (*enkomiom*): Assign odes and/or eulogies.
- Updating the progymnasmata (*psogos*): Have students write ‘curse poems.’ You might first show the battle scenes from the film *Eight Mile* or give them copies of Old English liturgical curse poetry.
- Updating the progymnasmata (*synkrisis*): Assign a comparison poem, combining praise and blame.
- Updating the progymnasmata (*ekphrasis*): Bring photographs, postcards, or reproductions of paintings to class, and ask students to write about them.
- Have students list all the things they are curious about. Then have them brainstorm different research methods. Once they’ve gathered enough information, have them write a poem incorporating their research.
- Have students keep a journal or a commonplace book. I’ve had some success assigning ‘image journals’ in which students record one sensory impression per day. Once they’ve accumulated a number of images, I ask them to write poems connecting a few of the images.
- Lead a guided meditation session, followed by free writing.
- Lead a brainstorming session in which students write analogies as a means to getting a handle on a subject. In addition to provide the needed ‘shock of recognition,’ this might lead to some figurative language that could be put to use in a poem.
- Assign tagmemic prewriting.
- Emplify Burke’s pentad.
- Try starting with the topical questions.
- Get the students’ creative juices flowing via free writing and/or automatic writing.
- Have the students brainstorm a chart by creating an observation chart (or any kind of list).
- Have the students brainstorm a poem by using the journalists’ questions.
- Use clustering as a means to get students free associating before drafting a poem.
- Donald Murray makes a suggestion that has worked for many prose writers and might also help poets, especially those who are composing longer pieces: ‘Stop in the middle of a sentence so that you can finish the sentence and be involved in the writing immediately after the interruption or the next day when you return to your writing desk.’⁷³ This is worth a try. It can’t hurt, and it just mi . . .

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Chapter 4

Some Specifics about the General: Arrangement

Introduction

Rhetoric's second canon, arrangement (Greek *taxis*, Latin *disposition*) is 'the art of dividing a discourse into its parts and the inclusion, omission, or ordering of those parts according to the rhetor's needs and situation and constraints of the chosen genre.'¹ The least written about of the five canons,² arrangement has always been a sort of neglected middle child, rarely stealing the spotlight away from invention and style, its attention-grabbing siblings on either side.

Jeanne Fahnestock, writing for the *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric and Composition*, uses a military analogy to explain the difficulty of discussing arrangement: 'Like Poland between Germany and Russia, arrangement has always been invaded by its stronger neighbors, the first and third canons, so that discussions of arrangement frequently become discussions of invention and style.'³ Given the interrelatedness of the five canons and the importance of invention and style, it isn't hard to imagine arrangement raising one white flag to invention and another to style.

On the one hand, shaping content is really a way of making content, so it is hard to distinguish arrangement (shaping) from invention (making). Take this chapter, for example. Before I hit on a strategy for arranging it into seven sections (1 Introduction; 2 Arrangement in the Rhetorical Tradition; 3 Arrangement in Composition Studies; 4 Fixed or Organic Form in Classical Rhetoric, Contemporary Composition Studies, and Business Writing; 5 Finding the Available Means of Poetic Persuasion; 6 Arranging Poetry in the Verse Mode: Traditional Forms; 7 Arranging Poetry in the Prose Mode: Free Verse; and 8 Practical Classroom Applications), all I had was a blurry mass of scrawled notes, underlined texts, and marginalia. Had I invented anything? Certainly nothing I would bother to patent. The invention and the arrangement finally went hand in hand. The Roman rhetorician Quintilian used an architectural analogy to illustrate the relationship between

invention and arrangement: '[W]ithout skilled, prior organization the most elegant material would be little more than rubble.'⁴

On the other hand, the decisions a writer makes when arranging content affect the writer's stylistic choices, and vice versa. An orator who decides, for whatever reason, to follow the conventions of a sermon will use different diction, a different tone, and a different level of formality than an orator who decides to present the same basic material in the form of a speech given in the town hall. An essayist who decides to write a fractured narrative or a lyric essay will necessarily employ a different strategy than an essayist writing a formal argumentative/persuasive piece. A poet who decides to arrange his or her words in the form of a sonnet may gravitate towards different figures and tropes than a poet who chooses to treat the same subject matter in a free verse poem. As we will see in Chapter 5 on style, issues such as diction, tone, tropes, and figures of speech fall under the rubric of style – yet these stylistic elements both follow from and influence any text's arrangement.

Like Farnestock, Quintilian employs military terminology as a way to discuss arrangement. He compares the role of arrangement to the role a general plays in a war. 'It would be folly to hold a general to a fixed, predetermined disposition of his forces... Guided by judgment and imagination, the general stands ready to make whatever adjustments in strategies eventualities may dictate,' states Quintilian.⁵ Whether working on a speech, an essay, or a poem, a writer needs to draw on his or her intellectual and imaginative powers to find the form that will bring out the best in the work-in-progress. And 'form' is indeed the term poets use that most closely corresponds with arrangement. For example, Thomas Monroe, in *Form and Style in the Arts*, refers to poetic form as a text's 'mode of arrangement'.⁶ Additionally, the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* defines form in terms of 'metrical patterns as well as lexical, syntactic, and linear arrangements'.⁷

Arrangement in the Rhetorical Tradition

In *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student*, Edward P.J. Corbett identifies four considerations that influence the arrangement of any piece. The first question the writer or rhetor needs to ask is one of genre. For the rhetor, that means asking whether the discourse at hand is deliberative (concerned with influencing future events), judicial (concerned with interpreting past events), or ceremonial (concerned with praise or blame of individuals).⁸ For a poet, the equivalent question is whether to write a lyric poem, a narrative poem, or a dramatic poem. Students need to understand the distinctions between these three subgenres of poetry. They

need to be able to identify a given poem as lyric, narrative, or dramatic, and they need to learn strategies for writing in each subgenre.

The second consideration that Corbett identifies is subject matter. This will largely determine what kind of material and how much of that material the writer or rhetor needs to arrange. The third consideration that Corbett identifies is ethos, the writer or rhetor's own authority and good will influences arrangement. Finally, Corbett states that writers and rhetors need to consider audience when deciding how to arrange a given piece.⁹ Audiences of both rhetoric and poetry require assurance, very early on, that they are about to encounter something that will move them, involve them, delight them, or at least instruct them. Aristotle knew this. He suggested 'that audiences pay attention if they are convinced the subject concerns themselves, or something great, marvelous, or pleasurable.'¹⁰

As a way to make students aware of the importance of arrangement, poetry writing instructors might have students take fables, narrative poems by other people, and their own narrative poems and try arranging them in different ways. Fahnestock points out that this was, in fact, the first exercise in the *progymnasmata*.¹¹

In classical rhetoric, orators traditionally arranged their speeches into five parts: exordium, narratio, confirmatio, refutatio, peroratio.¹² In this section, I will explain each briefly, and I will address possible adaptations for poetry writing instructors whenever applicable. It is possible to view each of these as a unique aid to invention, as well as part of a classical arrangement. 'The unknown author of the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* maintains that invention is inherent' in each of these.¹³ In later sections of this chapter, I will demonstrate that knowledge of various aspects of poetic form (defined broadly as free verse technique as well as traditional prosody) can help generate new material, just as knowledge of the parts of a classical oration helped orators compose their speeches.

The first part, exordium, means literally 'beginning a web' in Latin. I like the image of a debater as a spider setting out to spin a web that listeners get helplessly caught up in. The poet, too, spins a web that captures readers who offer up their willing suspense of disbelief. I suppose this is especially true of narrative poets, spinning their yarns. The Greek term for this part of this introductory part of a speech is proemium, which literally means 'before the song'.¹⁴ That certainly sounds like something that could prove useful for poetry, especially lyric poetry, which, as its name indicates, was originally accompanied by the strumming of a lyre. In the classical period, it was common for orators to try to establish ethos, during this clearing of the throat, just as musicians, while testing the microphones, might play their most impressive licks in order to build anticipation of their concerts:

Aristotle remarked that the introduction to some speeches was comparable to the preliminary flourishes that flute players made before their performance – an overture in which the musicians merely displayed what they could play best to gain the favor and attention of the audience for the main performance.¹⁵

Some common openings in speeches include jokes, apt quotations, and anecdotes. Any of these could work as openings in poetry. In *Elements of Rhetoric*, the 19th-century rhetorician Richard Whately offers the following categories for openings: introduction inquisitive (aiming to demonstrate that the subject has gravitas and general interest); introduction paradoxical (aiming to show that though the argument seems improbable, it is in fact valid); introduction corrective (aiming to show that the subject has been unfairly ignored or misunderstood); introduction preparatory (aiming to set up an unusual approach to a subject; and introduction narrative (an anecdotal opening).¹⁶ Here's an exercise for a poetry writing class: have the students analyze fifty (or twenty) opening lines in poems and write about their findings. The instructor might present Whately's taxonomy as a framework for discussing openings, suggesting that students count how many poems fit each category while looking for new categories identified and framed by the students.

The Latin word 'narratio' is commonly translated as 'statement of fact' rather than as 'narration.' Basically, narration equals exposition, so it has a role in narrative poetry if not in the lyric mode.

'Confirmatio' refers to the proofs that an orator offers to support his or her argument.¹⁷ In argumentative prose, the most common arrangement strategy is to move from weaker arguments to stronger ones. Another strategy is to move from familiar arguments to unfamiliar ones. A third strategy is to sandwich weaker arguments between stronger ones.¹⁸ As an exercise, poetry writing teachers might give students images from other people's published poems and ask them to arrange the images using each of these principles, or using whatever principles of arrangement occur to them. The point is to get them thinking of strategic ways to order their material. Students often find it revealing that the sequence of words and images in the final draft of a poem can and sometimes should differ substantially from the sequence in which the poems originally come in during the invention and early draft stages.

While 'confirmation,' in rhetoric, means presenting supporting arguments, 'refutation' means countering opposing arguments. In a poem, whose arguments does a poet need to counter? Their own.

In his 1924 essay 'Anima Hominis,' William Butler Yeats famously remarks, 'We make out of the quarrel with others, rhetoric, but of the

quarrel with ourselves, poetry.¹⁹ Pulitzer-winning poet Stephen Dunn beautifully illustrates this concept of poetry as quarrel-with-oneself in his essay ‘Artful Talk,’ in which he introduces his concept of ‘drift and counterdrift’ in poetry: ‘Drift and counterdrift seem central to the way many of my poems behave. It’s also the way my mind works. I can hardly make a statement without immediately thinking of its opposite. At their best, my poems enact and orchestrate mixed feelings and contrary ideas.’²⁰ Like the skilled chess player playing both sides of the board, interesting poets need to be as competitive in their quarrels with themselves as skilled debaters are in their quarrels with others, so poets can surely benefit from rhetoric’s four tools of refutation: appeals to reason, emotional appeals, ethical appeals, and wit.²¹

The closing statement in rhetoric is known as *peroratio* (literally ‘finishing off’) in Latin and *epilogos* (literally ‘to say in addition’) in Greek.²² According to Aristotle, a good *epilogos* should accomplish the following goals: (1) leave the audience with a favorable impression of the speaker; (2) amplify points; (3) rouse the appropriate emotion in audience members; (4) summarize the facts and arguments that the speaker has presented.²³ As a way to make students more aware of what their endings are accomplishing (or not accomplishing), poetry writing instructors could have students analyze the endings of twenty different poems and write about how well they accomplished Aristotle’s four objectives and any other criteria that the students deem important.

In addition to shaping content, each of these five parts can help spark new ideas. Whether an orator is composing an *exordium*, a *narratio*, a *confirmatio*, a *refutatio*, or a *peroration*, invention is bound to take place.²⁴ This holds true in poetry as well. Many times I’ve sat down to work, without any initial idea, and started fooling around with words, only to discover during invention that the poem at hand wanted to be a sonnet, a pantoum, or a villanelle; then, I allowed the requirements of the form to steer me towards ideas that I didn’t even realize were in my head. Paradoxically, the restrictions presented by a given form help generate new content. My preferred term for this phenomenon is the oxymoron ‘enabling restrictions.’

Arrangement in Composition Studies

In composition studies, arrangement ‘has not received the attention given to invention or style,’ and when compositionists do discuss it, they are more prone to use words like ‘form,’ ‘structure,’ and ‘organization.’²⁵ I would like to see more rhetorical-minded compositionists address arrangement at length, because without arrangement, there is no composition.

Ronald S. Crane knew this back in the 1950s, remarking that no matter how much note-taking, planning, and other invention work he might do on a given writing project, he could never seem to get anything down on paper without ‘a kind of intuitive glimpse of a possible subsuming form for the materials.’ Crane goes on to state that ‘I have never been able to write anything which seemed to me, in retrospect, to possess any quality of organic wholeness, however uninteresting or thin, except in response to such a synthesizing idea.’²⁶ Studying the art of arrangement means developing an essential skill, a skill that will transform scattered notes into a coherent whole.

The modes of discourse (classification, comparison/contrast, analysis, description, etc.), once a staple of composition courses, are basically strategies for arranging material. Because they were applied in an extremely artificial, prescriptive, arhetorical way, most serious contemporary compositionists consider the modes passé. It is more common for today’s compositionists to think of arrangement in terms of a series of speech acts or intended effects on readers. To illustrate this, Fahnestock uses the example of the ‘negative news letter in business.’ In this subgenre of business communications, a businessperson writes with ‘the overall goal of maintaining a good relationship with an addressee while denying a request.’ To this end, he or she sandwiches the bad news between a placating introduction that acknowledges the request and a conciliatory conclusion that offers a discount coupon or at least some kinds words.²⁷

In ‘Paragraphing for the Reader,’ compositionists Rich Eden and Ruth Mitchell offer some advice about teaching paragraphing that might prove useful for poetry writing instructors who want to help students make decisions about arranging their poems into strophes, stanzas, and lines.²⁸ Here’s my own version of the list, tweaked slightly so that it applies to poetry:

- (1) Students should learn to approach line breaks and stanza breaks as rhetorical. Instructors should teach them to consider audience and purpose when breaking lines, rather than breaking lines haphazardly or mechanically.
- (2) Students should practice different ways of breaking their own poems down into lines and stanzas. They should try breaking up a specific poem into short lines, long lines, alternating line lengths, and even arranging it without line breaks (as a prose poem). They should try arranging the poem in couplets, in a long stanza such as the nine-line Spenserian stanza, and with a stichic (single stanza) arrangement.
- (3) Students should consider the effects of one-line stanzas and one-word lines.

- (4) Instructors should teach students to observe and analyze the line breaking strategies and preferred stanza types of both model poets and their peers.
- (5) Instructors should encourage students to consciously imitate the line lengths and stanza types that they observe in poems by their favorite poets.

Fixed or Organic Form in Classical Rhetoric, Contemporary Composition Studies, and Business Writing

Classical discussions of rhetorical arrangement feature a tension between fixed forms and organic form that is strikingly similar to the tension between deeply entrenched camps in contemporary poetry, with one camp adamantly favoring traditional verse and the other camp staunchly preferring free verse. Holding a formalist position somewhat similar to that held by today's new formalist and expansive poets, Cicero posits that 'certain devices are best in the narration, others in the peroration.'²⁹ Also, for classical memorization techniques to work, the parts of each oration need to be arranged in a predictable order.

On the other hand, Quintilian's ideas about arrangement resemble those still being espoused by advocates of free verse, also sometimes called 'open form,' 'naked poetry,' and, in a well-known essay that Denise Levertov wrote influenced by notions of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's, 'organic form': 'Quintilian disclaims the possibility of giving arrangement advice to cover every case. Instead, the circumstances of each case will suggest a structure that should appear as naturally articulated as the human body, a comparison that perhaps begins the tradition of "organic form."'³⁰ Despite his notion of ideal forms, which has provided a guiding philosophy for adherents of fixed forms in poetry, Plato, too, hints at an idea of organic form. 'Plato believed that discourse would be arranged like a natural, living creature, with a body of component parts.'³¹ The *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* traces the notion of organic form back to Aristotle:

René Wellek and others have argued that the concept of organic form, which rejects any separation of form and content, began with Aristotle but was ignored until the 18th century, a history which may have much to do with the Platonic understanding of literary form and its attendant implication that form is originary, separable, and distinct.³²

Contemporary business and technical writing textbooks 'teach genres as predictable formats.'³³ On the plus side, this stimulates invention by

creating a rhetorical situation; on the minus side, it can be artificial and prevent awareness of actual rhetorical situations. This, too, mirrors the free verse/fixed form debate in ways. It should be noted, though, that at least in the case of business and technical writing, Fahnestock concludes that ‘the gains of a pedagogy of arrangement probably outweigh the liabilities.’³⁴

Finding the Available Means of Poetic Persuasion

Many staunch advocates of free verse have one thing in common with those traditionalists who regret or simply disregard the modernist turn toward free verse. On both sides of the dispute, there are those who refuse or fail to see a middle road. When teachers do this, they are doing their students a distinct disservice, because there is much for students to learn from both poetry written in form and in free verse.

According to poet Catherine Davis, free verse/formal verse bigotry is a relatively new phenomenon. Her early influences, she states, which included John Crowe Ransom, Robert Penn Warren, Allen Tate, Louise Bogan, J.V. Cunningham, and Yvor Winters, ‘provided me and my contemporaries with the whole spectrum, from formal to free verse, of possibilities in writing poetry. It is astonishing how little prejudice there was then about writing one kind of poetry over another.’³⁵

Unfortunately, now the separation and acrimony between the formal and free verse camps is wide indeed. The poets with the most extreme views tend to see the divide between free verse and form poetry as mirroring a political divide. In this perspective, the type of poetry one writes is an endorsement of a political philosophy and world view (either intentionally or unintentionally).

Anthony Easthope believes that contemporary poets ought to limit themselves entirely to free verse. In *Poetry as Discourse*, he ‘argues that iambic pentameter furthers bourgeois culture by creating the illusion of a single poetic speaker’ and implies that ‘iambic pentameter is complicit in the unjust, oppressive social structures that capitalist culture creates through its emphasis on individualism and discouragement of collective struggle.’³⁶ In her influential article ‘The New Conservatism in American Poetry,’ Diane Wakoski refers to formalist poet John Hollander as ‘Satan’ and implies that anyone who writes in formal poetry is a fascist.³⁷ In another influential essay, ‘Neo-Formalism: A Dangerous Nostalgia,’ Ira Sadoff picks up where Wakoski left off: ‘Poems that privilege sound and meter are conservative, then, not so much because they privilege tradition, but because they decontextualize poetry.’³⁸

Having heard Sadoff, Wakoski, Easthope, Bly and their ilk accuse poets

who write in meter of being conservative and undemocratic, Timothy Steele has hurled the charge right back at free verse poets: '[I]n one key sense, free versification is more "dictatorial" than traditional versification. I will do what I will do, the free verse poet says to his audience, and it is not yours to wonder why. He versifies by fiat.'³⁹

Of course a poem's formal structure does not make it either endorse or reject a particular ideology; this is an oversimplification that doesn't stand up to scrutiny. Regardless of the format in which a poem is written, that format does not dictate the poem's content. Easthope is incorrect in his assertion that iambic pentameter lines sound like they were written by a 'single poetic speaker'. The following lines, for example, all have distinct speaker voices: 'I'll have a burger, fries, and well, let's see / a glass of California chardonnay',⁴⁰ 'The lowly worm climbs up a winding stair',⁴¹ 'I work all day, and get half drunk at night',⁴² and, a personal favorite of mine, spoken by a frustrated student: 'But I can't write in meter, Dr Tom.' To discerning readers (and even casual ones), these lines sound as different from each other as songs by Shania Twain, Barry Manilow, Metallica, and Phish. Perhaps Easthope, given his Marxist leanings, would have embraced blank verse if he realized that it is possible to write a Marxist line of iambic pentameter. In fact, Marx himself, translated into English, slips into iambic pentameter as early as the third and fourth sentences of *The Communist Manifesto*: 'that has not been decried as communistic' and 'the opposition that has not hurled back'.⁴³ Of course, neither of these passages purports to be poetry, but they are, in fact, written in iambic pentameter. Do they 'further bourgeois culture'? Do they advance capitalism's 'unjust, oppressive social structures'? If they do, that surely wasn't Karl Marx's intention or that of his translator.

Don't tell Daniel Hoffman that formal poetry is inherently politically or socially conservative! He counters Sadoff's argument, stating: 'As for the "social agenda" implicit in formal versing, how would he [Sadoff] account for the conservative or reactionary political ideas of those who invented free verse in the first place – T.E. Hulme, D.H. Lawrence, Eliot, or Pound?'⁴⁴ As abstractions, Sadoff's comments may sound good to readers who are predisposed to agree with him, but they simply don't stand up to representative examples of free verse poetry and formal poetry written in English during the last hundred years. In 'Format and Form,' poet and radical feminist Adrienne Rich points out that many avant-garde movements of the last century were 'rebellions of new groups of younger white men (and a few women) against the complacencies and sterilities of older men of their own culture' whereas 'women, people of color, working-class radicals, lesbians and gay men' have been more apt to write in forms.⁴⁵

Some poets have argued that formal poetry is simply inferior because it is too limiting. Robert Bly contrasts 18th-century rhymed couplets that, in his view, hold content ‘prisoner through a series of jail cells’ with Isaiah, Li Po, and the *Beowulf* poet ‘riding on dragons.’⁴⁶ Bly’s argument is hyperbolic and misleading. He continues: ‘In the very next generation after Eliot and Pound, American poetry voluntarily turned itself in. Tate and Ransom went through town asking, “Does anyone know of a good jail near here?”’⁴⁷ In these statements, Bly disingenuously pretends that he has no concept of enabling restrictions in poetry, no concept of the way that formal requirements can help generate new content. He also ignores the fact that the so-called ‘fixed forms’ have never been all that fixed. Far from being jail cells, they are more like launching pads that allow for expressive variation. Or, according to poet Suzanne J. Doyle, they are like the toes of a ballet dancer:

[W]hen a ballerina doesn’t point her toes on stage she looks funny. Why? Because it defies our formal expectations and thereby creates a tension which, in this case, we dispel by laughing. And those ballerina’s toes just happen to illustrate what I consider one of the greatest advantages of working in poetic form: you have a norm, artificial as it may be, from which to deviate for dramatic effect. I love to deviate.⁴⁸

Others think free verse is nothing more than ‘chopped prose,’ and is inferior because it has no limits. While poets who write primarily in traditional forms are now a distinct minority in American poetry, there are still some who completely dismiss free verse’s relevance. I’m thinking of those who dogmatically repeat Robert Frost’s oft-quoted remark about free verse being ‘like playing tennis without a net.’ This comment by Frost seems like willful blindness, a refusal to acknowledge that, as Eliot said in an equally famous remark, ‘no verse is free for the man [sic] who wants to do a good job.’⁴⁹ Contrary to what beginning poetry writing students assume, writing free verse is more difficult, in some ways, than writing in traditional forms. Since the poet has to invent the poem’s form as well as its content, it’s like playing an experimental version of tennis after first having to paint the lines, set up the net, resurface the court, and devise a new set of rules.

Aside from Frost’s legendary jab, the most well-known twentieth century dismissal of free verse is G.K. Chesterton’s comment, “‘Free verse’? You may as well call sleeping in a ditch ‘free architecture.’”⁵⁰ It could be that Chesterton’s statement is a quibble over terminology rather than an out-of-hand rejection of free verse. If it had been presented to him as ‘unmetered poetry’ or ‘poetry in the prose mode’ rather than ‘free verse,’ and if he had

been told that its antecedents included the King James translations of Old Testament poetry such as Psalms, Lamentations, and Song of Solomon, Chesterton might have looked at the matter much differently.

Like Frost's comment about playing tennis without a net, Steele's contention is a straw man argument that doesn't acknowledge the complexities of free verse. Free verse does have a tradition; it has its own rules of thumb that have, in a way, been socially constructed by poets, editors, and readers.

It is a disservice for poet/teachers on either side of the divide to teach students their own biases, rather than teaching the conflicts, as Gerald Graff urges teachers to do.⁵¹ Polemicists on both side of the free verse/formal verse divide need to educate themselves on the type of poetry that they have hitherto rejected, for the sake of their own poetry and, for those who teach, for the sake of their students, who deserve to be more than half-educated about poetic arrangement. The poet Elizabeth Spires has a calmer head on the matter: 'To limit ourselves as poets to either form or free verse exclusively is to narrow our expressive possibilities in terms of what subjects we will write about and how that subject matter will be treated.'⁵²

For the good of their students, the diminishing number of poetry writing instructors who refuse to acknowledge free verse as poetry need to realize that there is a lot of craft to the best free verse. Their students deserve some insights into that craft. As Sadoff states rightly: 'It is intellectually bankrupt . . . to accept that unless a poem is written in a received, fixed form the art is corrupted.'⁵³

Likewise, poetry writing instructors who don't teach their students to appreciate and write in traditional forms also do their students a disservice. They rob their students not only of an overflowing toolbox of useful composition techniques but also of Shakespeare, Donne, Sir Philip Sidney, and so much more. The New Formalist poet and theorist Timothy Steele has a good point when he contends: 'It is not correct to tell [students], as seems to have been the case in many "creative writing" workshops in our universities in recent years, that meter is no longer viable.'⁵⁴ If more student poets don't learn to master accentual-syllabic meter, our culture is in danger of being cut off from the musical pleasures of most great English-language poetry of the past. We are in danger of losing the facility to understand that invaluable corpus of poetry if we don't make the effort to understand the formal decisions shaping the composition of those poems. According to Fahnestock, psycholinguists agree with me: 'Psycholinguists have established that decisions about genre facilitate comprehension. A reader's familiarity with a genre, and with its typical arrangement strategy, is a kind of background knowledge.'⁵⁵ To be good

readers, students need to understand different types of poetic arrangement. To be good writers, they need to be good readers.

We desperately need a sophisticated rhetoric of poetic arrangement, an application of Aristotle's famous definition of rhetoric as 'an ability, in each case, to see the available means of persuasion.'⁵⁶ Whereas rhetoric is concerned with changing people's minds via rational appeals, emotional appeals, and ethical appeals, poetry is concerned with moving and delighting readers. Regardless, the skilled poet is the one who is abundantly aware of the available means of making a poem and is able to select appropriately from the storehouse of available techniques. To limit oneself to only formal verse or only free verse is to deny oneself half of the available means of making a poem.

In the introduction to *The Book of Forms*, Lewis Turco makes a very interesting argument that, if accepted, could reconcile those who only write in free verse and those who swear by traditional forms. Turco argues that much of the confusion arises from the misconception that 'poetry' and 'prose' are opposites. He asserts that people have been writing poetry in the 'prose mode' for millennia, and he points to Hebrew poetry and certain Norse sagas as some of his examples. Turco argues that the 'verse mode' and the 'prose mode' have always been acceptable means of composing poetry. "'Verse,' a mode, is not equivalent to 'poetry,' a genre. To ask the question 'What is the difference between prose and poetry?' is to compare anchors with bullets. One might ask, 'What is the difference between poetry and fiction?' or 'What is the difference between prose and verse?'"⁵⁷ Understanding this is a good starting point for a rhetoric of poetic arrangement.

Arranging Poetry in the Verse Mode: Traditional Forms

In her introduction to *A Formal Feeling Comes*, Annie Finch defines formal verse as 'poetry that foregrounds the artificial and rhetorical nature of poetic language by means of conspicuously repeated patterns.'⁵⁸ Many beginners think of poetry as language with a pattern of rhymes at the end of each line. Rhyme schemes are, indeed, one type of conspicuously repeated pattern used by poets working in the verse mode. Other conspicuously repeated patterns come from counting syllables, counting stresses, and counting metrical feet.

Syllabic verse was widely practiced by poets writing in Old French. It has also been the backbone of Japanese poetry, the seventeen-syllable haiku form being the most well-known manifestation of Japanese syllabic verse. Additionally, Welsh poets developed some highly complex syllabic forms known as Cynghanedd. In English, syllabic poetry has never been

as popular as accentual-syllabic metered poetry. One exception has been the cinquain, pioneered by Adelaide Crapsey, which is sort of an English-language equivalent of the haiku. It is common for elementary school teachers to teach their students to write cinquains, but to my knowledge there aren't any contemporary poets writing and publishing cinquains with any degree of seriousness. Marianne Moore, Cid Corman, Louis Zukofsky, and Thom Gunn are a few examples of English-language poets who have worked against the grain and produced substantial bodies of work using complex syllabic systems.

Accentual, or strong stress verse, was the dominant mode of Old English (or Anglo-Saxon) poetry. Old English poems such as *Beowulf*, *Piers Plowman*, and Caedmon's 'Hymn of Creation' are highly alliterative, and they feature lines with four strong stresses each and a medial caesura in each line. W.H. Auden's book-length poem *The Age of Anxiety* is a modern example of strong stress verse. More recent examples have been written by Gwendolyn Brooks, Donald Justice, Richard Wilbur, and Dana Gioia. That said, strong stress verse, like syllabic verse, has been rare in English-language poetry.

For 400 years, until the rise of modernist free verse, the predominant mode in English-language poetry was accentual-syllabic metered verse. As the name indicates, accentual-syllabic verse combines the syllable counting of syllabic verse and the accent counting of strong stress verse. Accentual-syllabic verse emerged along with the English language. When the two currents of Old English and Old French came together to form the basis of Middle English, the two currents of Old English strong stress verse and Old French syllabic verse also came together, forming accentual-syllabic verse. Stephen Dobyns gives a brief synopsis of the origin of accentual-syllabic verse in *Best Words, Best Order*:

French poetry of the year 1000 counted syllables; Anglo-Saxon poetry counted stresses. When Chaucer began to write in the late 1370s, he was well acquainted with the French decasyllabic line, and what he developed in English was the five-stress decasyllabic line. In the sixteenth century, the admiration for the Greek meters and the desire to legitimize English meters led prosodists and poets to apply the Greek terms to the English metrical forms, and Chaucer's line became iambic pentameter.⁵⁹

In accentual-syllabic metered verse, the conspicuously repeated pattern consists of a given number of metrical feet. The major metrical feet in English each contain between one and three syllables and between zero and two stresses. They are the iamb (two syllables with a stress on the second), the trochee (two syllables with a stress on the first), the anapest

(three syllables with a stress on the third), the dactyl (three syllables with a stress on the first), the spondee (two syllables, both stressed), and the pyrrhic (two unstressed syllables).

Instructors would be well advised to have students start with alliterative strong stress verse and syllabic verse, then move on to metrical verse, until, finally, at the end of the sequence, they begin writing free verse. It makes sense for an individual poet's development to mirror the development of English-language prosody. Here's an example of syllabic verse (5-7-5-7 . . .) written by my student Nick Stewart:

Stagger

This is the last call
for the brokenhearted drunks
who will loudly weep
the regrets of their mishaps.

They will stagger out
onto the cold, dark sidewalk
with double vision
and whiskey warm breath and hope.

They will stumble, crawl,
and lurch home to sleep away
the broken promise
to stay sober tomorrow.

Here's an example of alliterative strong stress verse, written by my former student Marci Kacsi, who went on to pursue a Master's degree in creative writing at Miami University (Ohio):

Don't hug too hard
 But hardly hold her,
Give grace in a graze
 that gathers her goosebumps
In the marmalade moment
 that melts in your memory.
She's fiction and fantasy
 forged by Faulkner,
Does Daisy Miller dances
 dressed in daffodils.

When teaching students to recognize and write poems in accentual-syllabic meters, it makes sense to start by showing them how much

they already know. Dana Gioia's 'lyric poetry' exercise makes meter less daunting for students by demonstrating to them that they already possess good ears for rhythm. In this exercise, students listen carefully to a favorite song, humming along. Then they replace the lyrics with original lines of their own, matching the song lyrics syllable for syllable, stress for stress.⁶⁰ Here's an excerpt from an untitled 'lyric poem,' written by my former student Mari Stanley, who went on to earn an MFA in Creative Writing at Spalding University. Mari's poem was inspired by and patterned after 'Mrs. Potter's Lullaby,' a Counting Crows song written by Mari's favorite songwriter, Adam Duritz:

When I stood up this morning I felt my fingers fall to the floor.
I thought I'd recover them but instead I walked on through the
back door.

If this is what hands are for, then I don't want mine any more.
It's just so uncomfortable waking up to chore after chore.

Well I am a fool filtering through a rusty gutter in the rain.
My hands are bleeding but blood just blends with rust and it's so
strange
That I can't remember the last time I felt so walked-on and ashamed
Cause I know I've got no hand to wave,
Nor any finger to point the blame.

Once students have learned, from Gioia's exercise, to trust their own ears, their instructors can reinforce that lesson with an exercise called 'Hear an Iamb, There a Trochee,' which Eric Nelson wrote about in a recent issue of *AWP Pedagogy Papers*. In this exercise, the instructor gives students a list of English words that can be pronounced two ways, as iambs and as trochees. A few of the words on the list are 'present,' 'convict,' 'desert,' and 'produce.' Each of these words, in the verb form, is pronounced as an iamb. In the noun form, each is pronounced as a trochee. After students pronounce the words, first as iambs and then as trochees, they metrically scan their own full names. 'Although hearing stress – especially relative stress – can be tricky in many multi-syllabic words, they have no problem hearing the stresses – hard, soft, and in-between – in the syllables of their own names,' writes Nelson.⁶¹

A good follow-up exercise is to put students into groups and give each group a couple of stanzas to scan. It is helpful to mix in some metered speech and some rap lyrics, in order to make the point that meter is not all that remote or artificial. Also, students tend to enjoy scanning familiar passages. Eminem's 'The Way I Am' works well for this. Parts of it scan perfectly as anapestic trimeter, and Eminem exaggerates the stresses,

making the meter unmistakable. As an added bonus, students may consider their instructor a little hipper, a little less stodgy, after a lesson of this sort.

The term ‘fixed form’ seems to connote shady goings-on, as in ‘fixed fight’ or ‘fixed election.’ It also seems to imply that there is no room for new forms. Students need to be reminded that someone had to invent each of the traditional forms, and that they were passed on because poets found that they could say things in those forms that they couldn’t say any other way. It is not necessary to bog students down by teaching them that Arnaut Daniel invented the sestina, Jean Passerat invented the villanelle as we know it, Ernest Fouinet wrote the first French pantoum, and so on. It is better to show them examples of recently-invented forms, such as the paradelle, invented (initially as a joke, its title being a combination of ‘parody’ and ‘villanelle’) by Billy Collins, or the sonnenizio, invented by Kim Addonizio. Then, the instructor can put students into groups and ask each group to create a new form with its own name, its own restrictions, its own rationale. Next, as a group or individually, the students can compose the first poems ever written in their new form.

My students have invented some amazing new poetic forms. One group invented a form called 3vc which consists of four-line stanzas, each beginning with the three lines containing three syllables each. In those first three lines, every vowel must be immediately followed by a consonant, and vice versa. Another group came up with the trikuelle, which consists of three haiku, the third line of each being a refrain, similar to the refrain used in the fourth line of each quatrain in a kyrielle. Another group, led by a student named John Owen, invented the Owenian Wedge, a wedge-shaped form in which each line and each stanza is longer than the last. Like Owen, another one of my students, named Sarah, wished to try to immortalize her own name as part of the name of a poetic form, so she invented a form called ‘Disyllabic Sarah.’ (Hey, it worked for Sappho, Petrarch, Pindar, and Shakespeare.) In Disyllabic Sarah, each word must contain two syllables or less (because Sarah has two syllables). Each stanza is five lines long (because Sarah has five letters). The second and fourth lines must be exactly the same (because the second and fourth letters of Sarah are the same). Here’s an example that Sarah wrote:

In school, in work
She tries her best.
Likewise, in play,
She tries her best
To make the most of all she does.

Arranging Poetry in the Prose Mode: Free Verse

Just as it is incorrect for poetry writing instructors to deny students a solid introduction to verse in traditional forms, it is incorrect for instructors to dismiss free verse out of hand, regardless of the preference of individual teachers. Students deserve a complete education. Just as the instructor who ignores traditional prosody cuts students off from Shakespeare, Donne, Dickinson, and others, the instructor who refuses to acknowledge free verse denies students the diverse pleasures of Walt Whitman, William Carlos Williams, Robinson Jeffers, Denise Levertov, and the spatial poems of E.E. Cummings (to name a few). These poets, and many others, have written beautiful poems that could only exist as free verse. As Robert Lowell puts it: '[T]he glory of free verse is in those poems that would be thoroughly marred and would indeed be inconceivable in meter.'⁶²

It is imperative that students study traditional versification before they receive instruction in free verse. Otherwise, the work is too likely to deteriorate into sentences arbitrarily chopped into lines. In other words, the writing would be free indeed, but it would not be *free verse*. As Paul Fussell explains in *Poetic Meter and Poetic Form*: 'The "free" in free verse "has approximately the status it has in the expression *Free World*. That is, free, sort of."⁶³ The poet and teacher Michael Heffernan is fond of saying that the modernists didn't write free verse at all; they wrote 'freed verse'.⁶⁴ You can only free yourself from something if you were constrained by it in the first place. Many contemporary free verse poets don't understand this. Consequently, reading their work is as thrilling as watching Houdini unzip his jacket and take it off, rather than breaking heavy chains while submerged underwater.

Once students have gained some mastery of poetry in traditional forms, it is instructive to give them a brief historical overview of the modernist's turn away from meter. Two very different texts are helpful in this regard: 'Notes on Free Verse' by Stephen Dobyns⁶⁵ and *Missing Measures* by Timothy Steele.⁶⁶ The former celebrates the shift to free verse while the latter decries it. Both are a bit polemical, but taken together, they offer a sufficient picture.

Once students understand and have tried their hands at the various types of formal verse, they are ready for an introduction to the varieties of free verse. Types of free verse are listed and illustrated in Steele's *All the Fun's in How You Say a Thing*: (1) Whitmanian 'long-lined and syntactically repetitive'; (2) free verse that 'involves short lines that correspond to syntactical units,' with good early examples by Stephen Crane; (3) a style that 'blends the short-lined approach we find in Crane with lots of enjambment,' popularized by William Carlos Williams and others; and

(4) 'a betwixt-and-between variety that hovers intermittently around, in, and out of meter,' with a notable example in T.S. Eliot's 'Gerontion.'⁶⁷ This 'betwixt-and-between' free verse has its origins in Paul Verlaine's *verse libré*, a kind of loosened blank verse.⁶⁸

In addition to Steele's categories, we have concrete poetry, projective verse, and prose poetry. What we now call concrete poetry enjoyed popularity in ancient Greece under the name 'technopaignia,' which means 'playing around with technique.'⁶⁹ An exercise in concrete poetry can help students understand the importance of playing around with language in poetry. It can be just what the doctor ordered if the students in a given class persist in asking irrelevancies like 'Is my message coming across in these poems?' Assigning Charles Olson's 1950 manifesto 'Projective Verse' can stimulate discussions about line breaks, margins, and other typographical options available to contemporary poets. In his *Handbook of Poetic Forms*, Ron Padgett advises writers of projective verse to 'focus on letting the words fall on the page in the same way as they seem to be appearing to you. Are they coming in clusters? Then cluster them. Are they spinning out slowly, taking their time to appear? Then let them fall loosely and far apart.'⁷⁰ After students have spent a good deal of time wrestling with decisions about line breaks in free verse, instructors can introduce them to prose poems by Russell Edson, Charles Simic, Rafael Perez Estrada, Francis Ponge, and others. In addition to offering them another vehicle for their creativity, this stimulates discussion of what exactly makes something a poem. If a poem doesn't have to have meter, and if it doesn't have to have line breaks, then how do we decide that something is or isn't a poem? Coming back to concrete poetry can throw another wrench into the discussion, because some concrete poems don't even contain any words; for example, *Western Wind* contains a wordless concrete poem by Hansjörg Mayer.⁷¹

Oftentimes, contemporary free verse is marred by seemingly-arbitrary line breaks. This is understandable. It's much harder to break lines in free verse than in traditional forms. In a traditional form, the meter and the line breaks offer poets guidance about when to break their lines. Poets working in free verse don't have that luxury, so it is important for poetry writing instructors to spend some time addressing questions about when to break lines. Individual poetic lines can be 'bound together by syntactic and rhetorical structures such as parallelism and antithesis which have their own internal logic of completion.'⁷² Also, the line breaks provide poets with opportunities to play with the rhythm and the sense of a given sentence: 'Certainly in modern times, at least, it has been thought that one of the chief functions of line division is to stand in tension with or counterpoint to the divisions of grammar and sense.'⁷³ I've mentioned Olson's 'Projective Verse' essay and its ideas about line breaks. Also, the

later poems of C.K. Williams and the earlier poems of Allen Ginsberg offer models of long free verse lines. Finally, according to Stephen Dobyns, no study of free verse line breaks is complete without an examination of William Carlos Williams, Marianne Moore, and E.E. Cummings: 'These three – Williams, Moore, and Cummings – developed the line break as it is known today, and in that respect they were as influential as Pound in determining the course of contemporary poetry.'⁷⁴

Practical Classroom Applications

- Let students know that, while working on a poem's arrangement, they might find themselves also generating new material (invention) and or rethinking stylistic choices.
- Give students examples of the three subgenres of poetry: lyric, narrative, and dramatic. Discuss the different strategies for writing in each. Discuss the factors that go into deciding whether a particular poem-in-progress needs to be lyric, narrative, or dramatic.
- Discuss the roles of subject matter, ethos, and audience in determining how to arrange a given poem.
- From the progymnasmata: have student re-arrange a fable and then reflect on ways the re-arrangement affects the fable.
- Updating the progymnasmata: have students re-arrange a published poem and then reflect on the way the re-arrangement affects the poem – this can also be an invention exercise, particularly if, by toying with a poem that is haphazardly arranged, they improve the poem and find themselves rewriting it completely.
- Have students try out different strategies for arranging their own narrative poems. Have them take the same basic plot and write it out chronologically, then beginning *in medias res*, and so on.
- Proemium: Encourage students to write alternate openings to one of their poems, including a joke opening, opening with an epigraph, opening with an anecdote, and opening with a rhetorical flourish analogous to a guitarist's virtuoso licks while he is ostensibly tuning his instrument.
- Ask the students to analyze fifty (or twenty) opening lines in poems and write about their findings. Ask them to count how many poems fit each of Richard Whately's categories. Also ask them to come up with their own categories.
- Confirmatio: Give students images from other people's published poems and ask them to arrange the images (1) from weakest to strongest; (2) from most familiar to least familiar; (3) sandwiching

weaker images between stronger ones; (4) using whatever principles of arrangement occur to them.

- **Confirmatio:** Point out that the sequence of words and images in the final draft of a poem can and sometimes should differ substantially from the sequence in which the poems originally come in during the invention and early draft stages.
- **Peroratio:** Have students analyze the endings of twenty different poems and write about how well they accomplished Aristotle's four objectives and any other criteria that the students deem important.
- Teach students to approach line breaks and stanza breaks as rhetorical. Teach them to consider audience and purpose when breaking lines, rather than breaking lines haphazardly or mechanically.
- Encourage students to experiment with different ways of breaking their own poems down into lines and stanzas. They should try breaking up a specific poem into short lines, long lines, alternating line lengths, and even arranging it without line breaks (as a prose poem). They should try arranging the poem in couplets, in a long stanza such as the nine-line Spenserian stanza, and with a stichic (single stanza) arrangement.
- Discuss the effects of one-line stanzas and one-word lines, the way they add emphasis by making a line or word stand out from the rest of the poem.
- Teach students to observe and analyze the line breaking strategies and preferred stanza types of both model poets and their peers.
- Encourage students to consciously imitate the line lengths and stanza types that they observe in poems by their favorite poets.
- Introduce syllabic verse and accentual strong stress verse before introducing accentual-syllabic metered poetry.
- Introduce accentual-syllabic metered poetry before introducing free verse.
- Try Dana Gioia's 'lyric poetry' exercise. It makes students less nervous about meter and puts meter into the context of what they already know. It also helps build community in the class. Students love the show-and-tell aspect of bringing in their favorite songs.
- Try Eric Nelson's 'Hear an Iamb: There a Trochee' exercise as a way to make students comfortable identifying the different metrical feet.
- Have students invent their own poetic forms, either individually or in groups.
- Present a historical overview of the rise of free verse.
- Introduce various types of free verse, including (1) long-lined verse influenced by Whitman and by the poetic books of the Old Testament; (2) triadic, short-line verse using the variable foot, pioneered by

William Carlos Williams; (3) short-lined, heavily enjambed poetry (Tony Hoagland's poetry is full of good examples); (4) freed verse; and (5) projective verse.

- Assign prose poems and concrete poetry and discuss the ways these alter our preconceptions of what constitutes a poem.
- Assign the following essay topic: 'Choose a poem written either in meter or in free verse (or in prose, for that matter) and write an essay defending or attacking the ways in which form is used in the poem.'⁷⁵
- Use poems by C.K. Williams, Allen Ginsberg, Williams Carlos Williams, Marianne Moore, and E.E. Cummings to help stimulate discussion of different strategies for line breaks in free verse.

Notes

1. *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric and Composition*, 1996, s.v. 'arrangement.'
2. *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric and Composition*, 1996, s.v. 'arrangement.'
3. *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric and Composition*, 1996, s.v. 'arrangement.'
4. *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric*, 2001, s.v. 'arrangement.'
5. E.P.J. Corbett, *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student*, 3rd edn. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 278–279.
6. *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 1993, s.v. 'form.'
7. *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 1993, s.v. 'form.'
8. Corbett, *Classical Rhetoric*, 279.
9. Corbett, *Classical Rhetoric*, 279.
10. *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric and Composition*, 1996, s.v. 'arrangement.'
11. *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric*, 2001, s.v. 'arrangement.'
12. Corbett, *Classical Rhetoric*, 278.
13. *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric*, 2001, s.v. 'arrangement.'
14. Corbett, *Classical Rhetoric*, 282.
15. Corbett, *Classical Rhetoric*, 282–83.
16. Corbett, *Classical Rhetoric*, 283–87.
17. Corbett, *Classical Rhetoric*, 300.
18. Corbett, *Classical Rhetoric*, 301.
19. W.B. Yeats, 'Anima hominis,' *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* (London: Macmillan, 1917).
20. S. Dunn, 'Artful talk,' *Contemporary American Poetry: Behind the Scenes*, ed. Ryan Van Cleave (New York: Longman, 2003), 95.
21. Corbett, *Classical Rhetoric*, 302–06.
22. Corbett, *Classical Rhetoric*, 307.
23. Corbett, *Classical Rhetoric*, 308.
24. *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric*, 2001, s.v. 'arrangement.'
25. *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric*, 2001, s.v. 'arrangement.'
26. Corbett, *Classical Rhetoric*, 280.
27. *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric*, 2001, s.v. 'arrangement.'
28. R. Eden and R. Mitchell, 'Paragraphing for the reader,' *College Communication and Composition* 37 (1986), 429.
29. *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric and Composition*, 1996, s.v. 'arrangement.'
30. *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric and Composition*, 1996, s.v. 'arrangement.'

31. *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric*, 2001, s.v. 'arrangement.'
32. *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 1993, s.v. 'form.'
33. *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric and Composition*, 1996, s.v. 'arrangement.'
34. *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric and Composition*, 1996, s.v. 'arrangement.'
35. C. Davis, 'The air we breathed,' *A Formal Feeling Comes: Poems in Form by Contemporary Women*, ed. Annie Finch (Brownsville, OR: Story Line Press, 1994), 51.
36. K. Walzer, 'Expansive Poetry and Postmodernism,' *After New Formalism: Poets on Form, Narrative, and Tradition*, ed. Annie Finch (Ashland, OR: Story Line Press, 1999), 167.
37. J. Derbyshire, 'In the Bivouac of Life: Longfellow and the Fate of Poetry,' *New Criterion* 19 (2000), 8. On www at <http://olimu.com/Journalism/Texts/Criticism/Longfellow.htm>.
38. I. Sadoff, 'Neo-formalism: A dangerous nostalgia,' *The American Poetry Review* (Jan.–Feb. 1990), 8. On www at <http://www.writing.upenn.edu/~afilreis/88/sadoff.html>.
39. T. Steele, *Missing Measures: Modern Poetry and the Revolt Against Meter* Fayetteville: The University of Arkansas Press 1990), 283.
40. First line: written by author; Second line: Annie Finch, 'Metrical diversity: A defense of the non-iambic meters,' *After New Formalism: Poets on Form, Narrative, and Tradition*, ed. Annie Finch (Ashland, OR: Story Line Press, 1999), 119.
41. T. Roethke, 'The waking,' *The Complete Works of Theodore Roethke* (New York: Anchor, 1975), 49.
42. P. Larkin, 'Aubade,' *Collected Poems*, ed. Anthony Thwaite (1966; reprint, New York: Noonday Press, 1993), 208.
43. K. Marx and F. Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (1848; reprint, New York: Signet Classic, 1998), 49.
44. D. Hoffman, 'Wings of a phoenix,' *After New Formalism: Poets on Form, Narrative, and Tradition*, ed. Annie Finch (Ashland, OR: Story Line Press, 1999), 21.
45. A. Rich, 'Form and format,' *After New Formalism: Poets on Form, Narrative, and Tradition*, ed. Annie Finch (Ashland, OR: Story Line Press, 1999), 7.
46. R. Bly, 'Looking for dragon smoke,' *Naked Poetry: Recent American Poetry in Open Forms*, ed. Stephen Berg and Robert Mezey (Indianapolis: Bob-Merrill Company, 1969), 161.
47. Bly, 'Looking for Dragon Smoke,' 162.
48. S.J. Doyle, 'When the ballerina doesn't point her toes,' *A Formal Feeling Comes: Poems in Form by Contemporary Women*, ed. Annie Finch (Brownsville, OR: Story Line Press, 1994), 61.
49. J.F. Nims and D. Mason, eds, *Western Wind: An Introduction to Poetry*, 4th edn (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2000), 254.
50. Derbyshire, 'In the bivouac of life,' 7.
51. G. Graff, *Clueless in Academe: How Schooling Obscures the Life of the Mind* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).
52. E. Spires, 'Some notes on form,' *A Formal Feeling Comes: Poems in Form by Contemporary Women*, ed. Annie Finch (Brownsville, OR: Story Line Press, 1994), 212.
53. Sadoff, 'Neo-Formalism,' 8.
54. Steele, *Missing Measures*, 291.
55. *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric*, 2001, s.v. 'arrangement.'
56. Aristotle, *On Rhetoric*, trans. George A. Kennedy (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 36.

57. L. Turco, *The Book of Forms: A Handbook of Poetics*, 3rd edn. (Hanover: University Press of New England, 2000), 4.
58. A. Finch, ed., *A Formal Feeling Comes: Poems in Form by Contemporary Women* (Brownsville, OR: Story Line Press, 1994), 3.
59. S. Dobyns, 'Notes on free verse,' *Best Words, Best Order: Essays on Poetry*, 2nd edn (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 62.
60. D. Gioia, "Lyric" poetry, *The Practice of Poetry: Writing Exercises from Poets Who Teach*, ed. Robin Behn and Chase Twichell (New York: Quill, 1992), 184–186.
61. E. Nelson, 'Hear an iamb, There a trochee,' paper presented at the Associated Writing Programs Conference, Baltimore, MD, February 2003, 28.
62. R. Lowell, 'On freedom in poetry,' *Naked Poetry: Recent American Poetry in Open Forms*, ed. Stephen Berg and Robert Mezey (Indianapolis: Bob-Merrill Company, 1969), 124.
63. Paul Fussell, *Poetic Meter and Poetic Form*, rev. edn (New York: McGraw- Hill, 1979), 76.
64. Michael Heffernan said this during a class lecture in 1995 at Eastern Washington University.
65. Dobyns, *Best Words, Best Order*.
66. Steele, *Missing Measures*.
67. T. Steele, *All the Fun's in How You Say a Thing: An Explanation of Meter and Versification* (Athens: University of Ohio Press, 1999), 260–264.
68. Dobyns, *Best Words, Best Order*, 81.
69. Nims and Mason, *Western Wind*, 259.
70. R. Padgett, ed., *The Teacher's and Writer's Handbook of Poetic Forms*, 2nd edn (New York: Teachers and Writers Collaborative, 2000), 141.
71. Hansjörg Mayer, 'Untitled,' *Western Wind: An Introduction to Poetry*, 4th edn ed. J.F. Nims and D. Mason (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2000), 260.
72. *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 1993, s.v. 'line.'
73. *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 1993, s.v. 'line.'
74. Dobyns, *Best Words, Best Order*, 103.
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Chapter 5

Elements of Poetic Style

The Poet is of all other the most auncient Orator. No doubt there is nothing so fitte for him, as to be furnished with all the figures that be Rhetoricall, and as such do most beautifie language with eloquence & sententiousness

George Puttenham; *The Arte of English Poesie* (1589)¹

Style and voice serve as a means of seduction. They are the rites of courting. They help create the appropriate tone and ambiance and set of possibilities whereby the revelation may occur

James Tate²

Introduction: Drawing the Sword

The third canon, style (Latin *elocution*, Greek *lexis*), occupies the ‘center or core’ of the five canons (also known as ‘duties’ or ‘arts’) of rhetoric.³ If invention is a matter of getting words down on the page and arrangement consists of ordering those words in a sensible way, style is about making sure the words are readable and memorable. It’s about choosing just the right words so that the writing leaves a vivid impression on readers. Quintilian, in *Institutio oratoria*, likens ideas without style to a sword kept in its sheath.⁴ What a nice analogy! A sword kept in its sheath has potential. It’s a dormant threat, but it isn’t truly a weapon until it is drawn. Style gives writing its power. It would be fair to extend the analogy and assert that writing that lacks style, like a sword that hasn’t been sharpened, is dull, dull, dull.

According to Cicero, the three duties of the orator are to teach, to delight, and to move.⁵ If these aren’t also the duties of the poet, what are? But no poet will teach, delight, or move readers without an arresting style. More than any other genre, poetry puts a premium on language. In literary fiction, character development is typically emphasized. In genre fiction, plot comes to the forefront. In memoir writing or in journalism, faithfulness to events is the primary concern. But in poetry, attentiveness to language comes first. Cornell University professor Johathan Culler makes

this point in his book *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*, where he states the following:

Literature is language that ‘foregrounds’ language itself: makes it strange, thrusts it at you – ‘Look! I’m language!’ – so you can’t forget that you are dealing with language shaped in odd ways. In particular, poetry organizes the sound plane of language so as to make it something to reckon with.⁶

Language is important in all literary genres, but in poetry, language is the most important thing. Style, more than in any of the other canons, is concerned with language: diction, syntax, voice, tone, and effective use of figures and tropes. Often, upon coming across a striking use of language in speech or in writing, we remark on the colorful language employed by the speaker or writer. What we’re noticing is the presence of style, and more than any other kind of writer, a poet needs to have a colorful style: ‘The categories of style are called “colors” of rhetoric in several [medieval] treatises. They embellish – give “color” to – ordinary language.’⁷

According to the contemporary rhetorician Edward P.J. Corbett: ‘The classical rhetoricians taught that a person acquired versatility of style in three ways: (1) through a study of precepts or principles (*ars*), (2) through practice in writing (*exercitatio*), and (3) through imitation of the practice of others (*imitatio*).’⁸ In this chapter, I will explore each of these three approaches to style, and then I will conclude with some practical classroom applications drawn from my research.

Principles of Style: Virtues and Vices

Let’s frame this discussion of precepts or principles of style in terms of the classical notion of stylistic virtues (*virtutes elocutionis*) and their counterpart vices (*vitiae*). This concept was developed by Aristotle’s early followers and by Cicero and Quintilian.⁹

The first virtue in this classical scheme is purity/ correctness of diction and syntax. The second virtue is clarity, also known as perspicuity. The third virtue is evidence, which consists of imagery aimed at evoking pathos. The fourth virtue is propriety, also known as appropriateness or decorum. The fifth virtue is ornateness, or ornament.¹⁰ Let’s look at each of these virtues individually and consider ways to inculcate them in apprentice poets.

To instill the first virtue, purity/ correctness, Corbett recommends omnivorous reading and (more helpfully, for writing instructors), ‘conscious vocabulary-building methods like looking words up, studying lists of words, and consulting a thesaurus.’¹¹ Corbett also notes that French

schoolchildren routinely undergo vocabulary training.¹² Where can we find good word lists? Prep books for the GRE (Graduate Record Examinations)? The word power quizzes in *Reader's Digest*? And there must be other good, practical methods for writers to develop their vocabularies in a hurry. Malcolm X writes that he built his ample vocabulary by copying an entire dictionary by hand while imprisoned,¹³ but our young charges are institutionalized for only four years, and we usually only get them for a semester. We could encourage them to look up and write down the definition of every word they don't recognize during a semester's reading. I wouldn't be sure how to apply a grade incentive to something like that, though. If each student had to take an exam on his or her list, I don't see what would keep the students from embellishing the list with words that they already knew prior to the semester.

The second virtue, clarity or perspicuity, is controversial in contemporary poetry. A lot of students come into my class with the notion that the way to write a poem is to take a simple idea and distort it beyond recognition, mystifying it, defamiliarizing it, making a riddle out of it. The abundance of elliptical, post-avant, and L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry currently being published only adds to the young students' confusion. I believe the antidote is twofold. First, I like to feed the students a healthy diet of accessible poetry by folks such as Stephen Dunn, Ai, Denise Duhamel, Thomas Lux, and Bob Hicok. Second, increased clarity is one of the benefits of peer critique and one of the reasons I don't advocate eliminating critique altogether from the creative writing classroom. When students see that their ideas aren't coming across to their peers, they are more likely to consider audience when they write, and therefore they are more likely to write poetry that is 'hospitable,' as Billy Collins puts it.

The third virtue, evidence or imagery, is shared by creative writing teachers everywhere, for what creative writing teacher hasn't said 'Show, don't tell,' or some variation on that statement? To get students in the habit of writing imagistic poetry, it is helpful to begin by having them read and write haiku, a form that relies greatly on simple, resonant images. As another means of getting students in the habit of thinking and writing in images, I sometimes have my students keep a daily image journal, online. Every day they record one sensory impression. It can take the form of a sentence, a fragment, a rhymed couplet – whatever. The important thing is that the student appeals to readers' senses, rather than merely to their intellects. Here is a week's worth of image journal entries posted on Blackboard by my student Jessica Bates:

monday: his fingers squeeze around my leg, causing my flesh to rise
between his fingers

tuesday: the boy kicks a branch and it scrapes along the sidewalk

wednesday: bright blue water in the swimming pool

thursday: her nails were blood red against her white notebook
paper

friday: I cannot focus on logical positivism when the white
chest hairs are trying to escape through the top of his shirt.

weekend: In the food court the employee digs through the trash.

The daily image journal assignment is a variation on an assignment that Jack Gilbert gave in a class at Eastern Washington University in 1996, while I was in the MFA program there. Gilbert's ex-wife, the poet Linda Gregg, has assigned a similar assignment, as reported by Ted Kooser in *The Poetry Home Repair Manual*:

The poet Linda Gregg asks her students to take a close look at just six things each day. What seems like a simple discipline turns out to be quite difficult because, by habit, most of us go through our lives without paying much attention to anything. Surely it's happened to you: at the end of a day, you drive several miles home and when you get there you can't remember a thing you saw along the way. Making an effort to pay attention to what's going on around them works for Gregg's students and it will work for you.¹⁴

In classical rhetoric, the fourth virtue, decorum or appropriateness, dictates that 'the orator's words must be appropriate to the subject of the speech, to the person of the speaker, the nature of the audience, and to time and place.'¹⁵ The first key to decorum, in the classical tradition, is to understand the three levels of style and to know which one was called for in a given situation. The three levels of style (low / plain, middle, high / grand) first appeared in *Rhetorica ad Herennium*.¹⁶

Roman orators and literary artists were trained to adapt their style of speech to the genre in which they were working. The classical doctrine of stylistic decorum mandates that one should employ 'a lofty style for an eloquent subject, as in tragedy and epic; middle style for elegies; low style for satire.'¹⁷ Each style suits a particular rhetorical purpose. The low / plain style is deemed appropriate for teaching, the middle style aims at delight, and the high / grand style is useful for moving an audience. All of these three goals apply to poets as well as to orators. We can see the preoccupation of Renaissance-era poets with these goals: 'The issue of the appropriateness of language to situation was familiar to classical rhetori-

cians and was systematized in the Renaissance doctrine of the three styles: high, middle, and low.¹⁸ Instructors might consider formally discussing each style in class, providing classical and/or contemporary examples of each, and coupling these discussions with writing assignments. After the discussion of high style, each student could write fragments of a collaborative epic; after the discussion of middle style, each student could pen an elegy; and after the discussion of low style, each student could compose a satire. For a more detailed discussion of the way these three levels of style apply to poetry, I recommend Anthony Lombardy's book *Severe*.¹⁹

The second key to mastering the virtue of decorum/appropriateness is to consider voice and tone. Both terms are elusive terms for students, so let's spend a bit of time considering them here. One contemporary school of composition studies, known as 'expressionism' or 'expressivism,' puts a lot of emphasis on helping each student writer find his or her authentic voice, by which expressionists tend to mean a voice approximating speech. 'According to some compositionists who believe that an authentic voice gives a writer presence, speech represents an ideal for writing.'²⁰ Reading out loud at open mic night or in other venues can help young writers discover their voices. Also, recording and stylistically analyzing conversation can go a long way toward getting them thinking about what makes their own voices unique. Finally, in both my composition courses and my poetry writing courses, my students have produced outstanding, natural sounding essays and narrative poems after beginning by recording themselves telling a story to their peers. This assignment is a version an exercise described in depth by compositionist/folklorist Ormond Loomis, who refers to the process as 'Tell, Type, Transcribe, Transform.'²¹

Compositionists such as David Bartholomae worry that 'achieving an insider's status' in any given discourse community (which would include learning the conventions of a literary genre) leads to a 'Pygmalion effect,' in which a writer's unique voice is absorbed by the discourse community. 'Voice thus involves taking a self-aware stance to challenge authoritarian constructs of language, knowledge, and subjectivity, which often entails developing or rediscovering language practices that better reflect one's identity.'²² Poets who flaunt conventions or write parody may be seen as resisting this Pygmalion effect, trying to keep the voices of other poets from overwhelming their own voices.

Compositionist Jay Szczepanski offers working definitions of five types of voices: authentic voice ('Think in terms of fingerprints'), academic voice (Standard Written English), personal (private) voice (e.g. diary entries), and public voice (drafts shown to teachers and peers – 'I think of it as if I were speaking out loud), and other voices (childre's voices, voices of spirituality, and the voices of the various oppressed groups commonly

referred to, in literary theory, as ‘others’.²³ The private voice/public voice distinction strikes me as particularly important to make with beginning poets. ‘I write for myself,’ the beginner often says. ‘That ends when you show it to us,’ the teacher and the peer group could rightly respond.

Szczepanski has created a wealth of exercises designed to help composition students work on developing their voices, and many of these exercises could also help budding poets. In an exercise called ‘Dressing Up/Dressing Down,’ Szczepanski has students compare different writing styles to styles of dress. In one column, students write descriptions of outfits such as ‘black suit, white shirt, red tie’ and ‘sandals, shorts, polo shirt’; in the other column, students try to describe a writing style equivalent to each style of dress.²⁴ Szczepanski also has some practical advice for young writers trying to develop their voices. He recommends free writing, diary entries, and ‘compulsive email,’ – writing several emails per day to different types of friends and acquaintances.²⁵

In another essay, Szczepanski offers a collaborative exercise that can help student identify and refine their voices. In this exercise, two students collaborate on a poem, and then a third party reads the poem and identifies the shifts in voice, describing attributes of the two distinct voices in the poem.²⁶ What a terrific way to guide students toward self-awareness about their own voices! In yet another exercise developed by Szczepanski, composition students describe their voice, choosing from a list of opposite characteristics such as ‘outspoken/quiet’ and ‘swift/methodical.’ They then free write about what they value in those traits. Next, they list and free write about voice characteristics that they lack but desire.²⁷ Wendy Bishop goes so far as to suggest having students write an essay about voice. In this essay, students would list, quote, analyze, and imitate five favorite authors.²⁸ I have experimented with having poetry writing students do the exercises Szczepanski has devised as prewriting for Bishop’s essay assignment. It has been a popular and successful assignment, full of ‘aha’ moments in which students became aware of where they were and where they wanted to be in terms of developing their voices.

In ‘Consistency and Variety: Two Goals for the Poet,’ Robert Shaw explores the paradox that a poet needs to find a distinctive voice while avoiding charges of monotony. Shaw considers voice a desirable ‘consistency’ that cues readers to the fact that they ‘are reading a book by a single author, not an anthology.’²⁹ He views the concept of voice as elusive and mysterious, something found ‘after a number of years of reading and writing in which influences are shrugged off or successfully absorbed.’³⁰ His advice for young poets trying to find their own voices is to ‘read a lot, write a lot, listen to yourself, listen for yourself.’³¹ Of course the five-canonical classroom demands tons of reading and writing from students, but there

are also other, practical methods that teachers can apply to help young writers listen to themselves and for themselves. Reading responses and process memos spring to mind – discussing the qualities of voice in model poets in reading response and discussing the qualities of voice in their own poems in process memos.

Regarding variety, the second of his two goals for the poet, Shaw first recommends playing with different perspectives and angles. Think of Wallace Stevens' 'Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird' if you want a good example of a poet playing with different perspectives and angles. Writing exercises based on Stevens' blackbird are stock in creative writing classrooms, when the teachers and students aren't occupied with full-class workshop, that is. Shaw also recommends that poets write experimental poems from the point of view of animals or aliens (like Craig Raines and the other members of the British 'Martian' school of poetry).³²

Here is one of Shaw's exercises: 'Try writing in verse the description of a room as it appears to you while you stand in the middle of it; then attempt to give a description of the same interior as you look in through a window. Then try writing about it as it might appear to a fly on the ceiling or a cat curled in a chair.'³³ Here is another: '[F]ollow up your poem on, say, a birch tree by day by writing one about it by night.'³⁴

Shaw's second recommendation for poets seeking variety in their writing is to write dramatic monologues, retelling Bible stories/Homeric legends/fairy tales/folk tales and so on from different points of view, e.g. Exodus from Pharoah's point of view or the Hansel and Gretel story as told by the witch. Shaw also suggests that rewriting the same poem in several forms is another way for a poet to ensure that his or her poetry is marked by variety, rather than by monotony.³⁵

Tone is closely related to voice, and like voice, it's hard to define. We might describe the tone in a given piece of writing as serious, witty, ironic, dignified, or using any of a number of other adjectives.³⁶ Controlling a tone is relatively challenging for writers because writers have a limited arsenal of ways to indicate tonal shifts, in comparison with orators. In his essay 'The Function of Tone,' poet Stephen Dobyns warns against two tones that he sees damaging much contemporary poetry: sentimentality (forced emotion) and earnestness ('a tone meant to convince the reader of the speaker's feelings in the absence of sufficient evidence').³⁷ He seems to be arguing that a poem's tone should arise naturally, rather than being a conscious decision: 'An imposed tone such as sentimentality or earnestness is . . . a rhetorical device imposed from without to convince the reader of the value of what is within.'³⁸ Dobyns still believes that poets ought to consciously consider tone. For example, there's the careful selection of the right word: 'The synonym a writer chooses is partly determined by

the tone he or she wishes to employ.³⁹ Then there's the role of emphasis (created by rhymes, line breaks, etc.) in establishing tone.⁴⁰ Then there's Dobyns' view that establishing just the right tone is crucial to the writer's ethos: 'If the tone of the writing is strident or keeps changing unaccountably, we stop believing the writer. Credibility is based on trust.'⁴¹ All of this points to the necessity of consciously considering tone; it's not clear how that differs from Dobyns' concern that certain tonal gestures are 'imposed from without.'

The fifth virtue of classical rhetoric, ornateness or ornament, can be attained by the study of figures and tropes. 'Trope' comes from the Greek *tropeia* 'to turn,' or 'to swerve.'⁴² The word 'verse' comes from a Latin word meaning 'turn' ('of the plough, furrow, line of writing'). 'Figure' comes from the Latin *figura*, 'the made.'⁴³ 'Poet' comes from the Greek word *poiesis*, meaning 'maker.'⁴⁴ So clearly there's a deep connection between poetry and figures and tropes, going back to the ancient world.

Whereas a poetry-phobic philosopher such as Plato could view tropes and figures as dangerous tools for misrepresenting reality,⁴⁵ a poet such as Dante treats the use of figurative language as 'Truth hidden beneath a beautiful lie'⁴⁶ and asserts that figurative language could provide 'an apparent illusory meaning in order to allow you better to find or group the real and true meaning.'⁴⁷

For Nietzsche, all language is essentially figurative. He contends that when we speak of 'literal' and 'figurative,' we're really discussing the difference between 'the customary and the novel in discourse.'⁴⁸ As poets, we're all trying to 'make it new,' as Ezra Pound enjoined us to do, so naturally we're drawn to figurative language.

In the history of rhetoric, there has been a number of attempts to name as many figures of speech, and there has been a number of different taxonomies used to classify them.⁴⁹ The Tudor rhetoricians, for example, catalogued over 200 figures and tropes.⁵⁰ How many can most poets name? Can poets use figures of speech unconsciously? Maybe, but as with any technique (the butterfly stroke, a pentatonic scale, etc.), I suspect that the ability to fortuitously draw figures of speech from the unconscious arrives only after an awkward, self-conscious apprentice period.

The anonymous author of *Rhetorica ad Herrenium* laid out sixty-four figures – divided into forty-five figures of speech and nineteen figures of thought.⁵¹ Eleven of those figures of speech involve manipulating language for rhythmic/metrical effect.⁵² Ten more – the tropes – 'allow for the creativity of the rhetor; they re-assign, exploit, and create meaning.'⁵³ Introducing students to a comprehensive taxonomy such as this could help them understand the big picture, rather than merely learning to identify and use a few standard figures such as simile, metaphor, and hyperbole.

Modern linguistics has found a way to invent new figures of speech via a generative system known as the (semio)-syntactic model of rhetorical figures.⁵⁴ It looks promising.

Let's move on from the classical virtues to the classical vices. The first of these vices is the use of barbarisms, which consist of archaisms, vulgar language, neologisms, and mispronunciations. The second vice is the use of solecisms, or broken syntax. The third vice is the use of obscurity.⁵⁵ In poetry, purposeful use of either of the first two vices is treated as an acceptable form of poetic license: 'A barbarism used in poetry is called a metaplasim, and a solecism in poetry is called a scheme. Barbarisms and solecisms, then, become allowable faults when used in poetry.'⁵⁶ Now, poets are allowed to break rules, and we should teach our students how to intelligently put these vices to use. However, it's interesting to note that classical rhetoricians do not consider the third vice, obscurity, an acceptable poetic license.

Exercises in Style

Early in a new semester, it is instructive to ask students to share the latest slang expressions. This gives the instructor a chance to demonstrate that we all have the poetic impulse to say simple things in stylish ways, that not all poetry has to be about lofty things, such as skylarks, in lofty language, such as 'Hail to thee, blithe spirit!' An ancillary benefit of this exercise is that the students teach the teacher. One semester, for example, I learned that 'crunk' is an adjective that means someone is intoxicated and out of control. Also, a young person who says she hasn't done something 'in a minute' means she hasn't done it in a long time. Finally, one student reported that he and his friends use the word 'squirrel' to mean 'girl.' Notice the poetic logic of each of these. 'Crunk' is a word play, a combination of 'drunk' and 'crazy.' The phrase 'in a minute' is based on irony, and 'squirrel' rhymes with 'girl.' After letting your students unload the latest slang expressions on you, explain that the poetic impulse is closely related to the impulse to invent new slang. Both derive from the desire to refresh the language. The third canon is all about saying things in fresh, interesting ways.

A classic way to develop a writing style through writing practice is to practice writing something in a variety of ways: in different genres, from different points of view, for different audiences, and so on. I recommend sharing two texts with students as a way to prepare them for this kind of writing practice. The first is an excerpt from book one of *Copia: Foundations of the Abundant Style*, by the Renaissance-era rhetorician Erasmus. In that text, Erasmus offers a practical demonstration of the great many styles at

any writer's disposal, writing 'Your letter pleased me very much' in 150 different ways, including 'Sugar is not sugar when set beside your letter,' 'What gaiety, what applause, what exultation your letter occasioned!' and 'All else is utterly repellent compared with your letter.'⁵⁷ The second model text is Raymond Queneau's *Exercises in Style*, in which he tells the same mundane story ninety-nine times in different styles: as a dream, as a mathematical problem, as a haiku, as a prediction, as a formal letter, as a cross-examination in court, in a precise style, in a philosophical style, hesitantly, excitedly, in a biased way, saying 'you know' with every pause, and so on.⁵⁸

Winston Weathers claims that teachers must classify different types of styles and 'teach our students that certain stylistic material goes here; certain material goes there.'⁵⁹ A sampling from Queneau's book should be sufficient to get students thinking about the range of styles at their fingertips. As an exercise, Weathers recommends having students list ways of saying 'It's a beautiful day' and then classifying those different styles, using the categories provided by the instructor.⁶⁰ For poets, being able to label the styles isn't nearly as important as knowing that, at the sentence level, there are always options. After all, Erasmus doesn't label all of his ways of writing 'Your letter pleased me very much.' Just having students write 'It's a beautiful day' in as many ways as possible is a great exercise for getting students to think about their options at the sentence level.

There are a great variety of options at the paragraph level as well, as Queneau's book illustrates. To practice this, Weathers suggests having students write a paragraph about any topic and then rewrite it in another style.

If he has written about campus revolution in a militant style, we ask him to transform his composition – with the same facts, observations, data, and opinions – into the judicious style. If he has written about his flower garden in an elegant style, we ask him now to write about it in a plain style. If in a colloquial style, now in a formal style.⁶¹

Weathers insists that it's crucial for teachers to write in front of their students: 'We are an amazing lot of piano players refusing to play the piano.'⁶² He calls for at least five to ten minutes of teacher modeling per week: 'Believe me, the teacher' struggle amidst the chalk dust can become the student's education.'⁶³ Creative writing teachers are always exhorting their students 'Show, don't tell!' We should follow our advice and provide our students with models of writers at work. This leads to the next approach to style: imitation of the practice of others.

Finding an Original Style via Imitation/Emulation

A prevalent current attitude towards originality is that the truly original artist is an inspired (and usually tormented) soul who comes up with ideas completely out of blue, without drawing on the work of other artists at all. Beginning creative writing students frequently hold this attitude and are afraid that their originality will be tainted if they take their teacher's advice to read for craft, rather than merely for pleasure. On the contrary, beginners who haven't read other poets tend to sound alike, whereas those who have read widely and consciously imitated other poets tend to have distinct, interesting styles. A quick consideration of the word 'original' is enlightening in this respect. Its first definition in the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* is: 'Existing at or from the beginning or earliest stage; primary, initial, innate.'⁶⁴ The word's first known usage was in the phrase 'original sin,' which goes back to Middle English. So being original does not mean coming up with something really new and disconnected from the past; on the contrary, it means reaching back to something very old, with roots in the Garden of Eden even.

The attitude that being original means avoiding influences is part of the legacy of the Romantics, 'who gave priority in composition to genius, inspiration, and spontaneity.'⁶⁵ This is an attitude that working poets tend to shed fairly quickly once they've gotten serious about learning their craft. Like musicians, painters, and artists in other fields, most poets court influence and can usually name plenty of stylists upon whose work they are building. The fastest and best way that I know to develop an original style is through deliberate imitation of stylistic elements in model poets. For twenty-five centuries, apprentice rhetors and writers (including poets) have developed their own styles through the practice of stylistic imitation, known to the Romans as 'imitatio' and to the Greeks as 'mimesis.' Compositionist Daniel Bender defines imitation as 'reproducing the style, argument, tone, or purpose of earlier texts.'⁶⁶

A caveat: conscious imitation can only take a writer so far toward the pursuit of an original style. There has to come a point where the author locates a unique combination of stylistic elements that readers will recognize as that writer's own style. Dante claims that 'the more closely we imitate those great poets, the more correctly we write poetry,' yet in the *Divine Comedy*, he allows Virgil to guide him only as far as Purgatory; he must follow his own muse, Beatrice, into Paradise.⁶⁷

We often associate imitation with the lower primates, rather than with *Homo sapiens*. The word 'ape,' used a transitive verb, has come to mean 'to imitate, especially pretentiously or absurdly,'⁶⁸ and 'monkey see, monkey do' is a common expression. But Aristotle singles out humanity, rather than

our hairier cousin species, as the most imitative known organism. In his *Poetics*, he called humankind ‘the most imitative creature in the world.’⁶⁹ Aristotle also writes: ‘Imitation is natural to man from childhood.’⁷⁰ Indeed, my young sons, Evan and Owen, imitate me by walking in my shoes – they literally step into them and tramp around the house with self-satisfied grins on their faces. Evan and Owen also imitate the way I talk, comb my hair, brush my teeth, and shoot a basketball into their Little Tikes[®] hoop. They also imitate my wife, Ralaina. For example, whenever Owen plays with a toy that Evan wants, Evan tells him ‘I’m not happy with you,’ as he takes it away, imitating Ralaina’s scolding for severe transgressions and applying it to all of his little brother’s minor ones. How would children ever learn to talk without imitating sounds, then words, then sentences, in the contexts that the adults in their lives use them?

It’s natural to emulate those we look to as role models, in writing, just as in other aspects of life. Quintilian knew this back in the first century AD, writing: ‘[I]t is a universal rule of life that we should wish to copy what we approve in others.’⁷¹ Applying this universal rule to rhetoric, Quintilian asserts that writers and rhetors need to imitate authors working in their own genres, that they ought to use multiple authors as models, and that they ought to imitate ‘treatment of the subject,’ rather than just words.⁷²

One basic way to soak in someone else’s literary style is to simply copy passages by hand verbatim, slowly and attentively.⁷³ A slightly more advanced technique is to imitate the structure of sentences; poets and other types of writers could benefit from getting in the habit of copying sentences that strike them as structurally interesting and then reproducing the structures of those sentences without duplicating the meaning of those model sentences. Edward P.J. Corbett’s book *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student* contains several pages of well-chosen model sentences and sample imitations, which provide a good starting point for this exercise.⁷⁴

My students imitate the structure of sentences, paragraphs, and poems through an exercise that I call the ‘Mad-Lib’ poem (named after the popular children’s word game). Each student selects a favorite literary passage and erases most of the words. The students then replace those words with blanks, and underneath each blank they write the part of speech of the deleted word. Then they write something, about a completely different subject, imitating the structure of the model passage. Here is a poem called ‘Kicked Out,’ by my former student Lex Sonne, now pursuing an MFA at Columbia College in Chicago. Lex’s first draft came about from a mad-lib based on ‘Lightweight,’ a poem by Texas Poet Laureate Jack Myers.⁷⁵

Kicked Out

The one time I was kicked out of school
I wasn't thinking about coming back. Not that
being a bad ass catholic, in a classroom of
rednecks was so inviting, I couldn't take the fullness
of the past.

For the past is a complex problem
whose meaning is described in pain.
It's the fear of an empty room
with the rock of a prison around.
The strong mind of a child
who cries I am frightened and I am alone.

So I fight an old woman down like an orange
smashed in my palm. The woman hits my emotions
like cocaine. Everyone cries and cries for the kid
in the corner. Here's to the kid, to that bitch
of a woman who scarred him through ignorance.
Here's to all the happy kids in the world
walking around without wounds.

In 'Teaching Style: A Possible Anatomy,' Winston Weathers outlines a four-step format for imitation exercises: recognize, copy, understand, and imitate creatively.⁷⁶ This is basically the format that Daniel Alderson recommends in his poetry writing textbook, *Talking Back to Poems*, which is entirely devoted to stylistic imitation. Alderson provides model poems and asks students first to copy the poem by hand, then to write down what they notice about issues such as the poem's sound effects, its imagery, and its use of figurative language. The following is an example of how a talk back imitation can work. After copying a poem by Campbell McGrath by hand and writing out her observations about techniques used in the poem, my student Candice Hayes penned her poem in stylistic imitation of McGrath's poem. Here are Candice's notes about McGrath's 'Capitalist Poem #5,'⁷⁷ along with the poem that she wrote in response to it.

Each line is one sentence, except for the last two which make one sentence, tying for the longest sentence (12 words) with the line above, if you count \$1.39 as one word. They are all simple sentences, like telling a story to an elementary school student, except for the last sentence, they might not understand social injustice quite yet. They're also all capitalized, proper punctuation but with very few

commas or any other sorts of punctuation. The sentences are very dry, which kind of makes me think of how a brain-washed crazy serial killer drug addict might talk. Or a kindergartener's story book with one sentence on each page and big, chunky, colorful pictures. I think I'll write like the kindergartener's story, it's a lot more pleasant than serial killers.:) Or I could somehow intertwine the two, hmmm . . . we'll see how it goes.

A Poem about Blake's Mommy

Candice Hayes

My best friend, Blake, his mommy was at the hairdresser's.
She was getting a haircut.
The hairdresser washed her hair.
She had it trimmed.
It was late in the day; she was the last customer.
She had it curled.
Her hair was always very pretty.
She had her hair curled every week.
She had her hair trimmed every month.
The hairdresser, he was very fond of Blake's mommy.
She was always the last customer of the day.
It was always Friday: weekly, and monthly.
He always used scissors or a curling iron.
Trimmed or curled or both, he always washed.
Blake said his mommy cried a lot.
He said they watched the baby stick,
and the little bubble turned blue,
almost as dark as that shiner on her eye, Blake said.

As a tool for developing a rhetorical style, imitation goes back as least as far as the 5th century BC, when the Greek sophist Gorgias penned his *Encomium of Helen* as an imitation of a section of Homer's *Iliad*.⁷⁸ Both of the principle characters in Plato's *Phaedras* are depicted imitating a written copy of a speech.⁷⁹ In Isocrates' school, which provided a template for centuries of rhetorical instruction, 'the students' chief occupation seems to have been writing speeches or essays on subjects suggested by Isocrates, imitating his thought and style'.⁸⁰ The Roman schools taught students various techniques for imitating texts. One method was to translate texts from Greek to Latin (and vice versa) as a way to learn the finer points of sentence structure.⁸¹

While it was rhetoricians who first practiced stylistic imitation as a way

to become more eloquent, ancient poets and writers of treatises on poetics very quickly saw the benefits of the practice. ‘Its [imitation’s] origin was rhetorical but it ended by spreading impartially over prose and poetry.’⁸² For example, in lines 268–269 of his *Ars Poetica*, Horace recommends stylistic imitation of Greek models.⁸³ Additionally, in Chapter 13 of *On the Sublime*, Longinus refers to ‘imitation and emulation of great writers of the past’ as a ‘road to sublimity’.⁸⁴ Finally, in *Poetics*, Chapter 4, Aristotle ‘attributes the origins of poetry to the fact that imitation is a natural human activity and is pleasurable’.⁸⁵

The use of stylistic imitation in English-language pedagogy dates back at least as far as Roger Ascham’s 1570 *Scholemaster*.⁸⁶ One popular method in Elizabethan schools, similar to that used in Roman schools, was the ‘double translation’: translating an English text into Greek, into Latin, and then back into English.⁸⁷ There are now computer programs, such as on babelfish.com, that will perform this type of double translation. A fun exercise might be to have students put one of their own poems through such a program and then analyze the word choice, word order, and emphasis in the two English versions of the poem.

Another fun exercise, pioneered by objectivist poet Louis Zukofsky and passed on by adventurous contemporary poets such as Charles Bernstein, David Melnick, and Pamela Alexander, is the ‘homophonic translation,’ in which the poet ‘translates’ a foreign language poem using English words that sound similar to the foreign language words, without any attempt to translate meaning. According to Bernstein, this exercise ‘allows for (fairly wacky) explorations of English syntax’.⁸⁸ The conscious imitation of the sounds from someone else’s poem can also make students more aware of sound effects and their use in poetry.

Elizabethan-era teachers commonly taught their pupils the fine points of diction, emphasis, figurative language, and genre distinctions by having them write prose paraphrases of poetry.⁸⁹ Shakespeare’s plays, the crown jewels of Elizabethan literature, reversed this technique: they were blank verse amplifications of stories originally penned in prose. Figuring that if it’s good enough for Shakespeare it’s good enough for me, I wrote a handful of poems in which I ‘translated’ prose poems from Charles Simic’s Pulitzer-winning book *The World Doesn’t End* into complex verse forms.

A more common exercise in today’s creative writing classes is to have students take one of their own free verse poems and revise it using a fixed form. An interesting variation might be to then have the students put the poem back into free verse, noticing the residual effect of the formal exercise on the style of the final draft. Ben Franklin did something similar while he was teaching himself to write: he ‘translated’ articles from a publication called *The Spectator* into verse and back into prose.⁹⁰

Franklin did well to model his style on the various writers publishing in *The Spectator*, because by doing so, he avoided the pitfall of modeling his style excessively on the style of an individual model. The danger of excessively imitating a single model is that it will lead to a derivative style, as Bender makes clear: '[E]xcessive admiration for an author often invites the attempt to follow the illustrious original too closely. The result is a loss – more precisely an abdication – of the individual's individuality.'⁹¹ But if imitation is as natural for humans as Aristotle suggests, the derivative poet, paradoxically, will be the one who fails to imitate consciously and purposefully, and ends up imitating models willy-nilly, without thought. In Bender's words: 'The irony of avoiding conscious imitation . . . is that one remains unconsciously – or semiconsciously – imitative. The act of imitating begins long before a person is interested in formal, conscious effects of language.'⁹² Similarly, a common theory in pop psychology is that children of abuse imitate the abusive behavior visited on them unless they deal with the abuse and consciously select a more positive parenting style.

James J. McAuley, the head of my MFA thesis committee, made this point about failing to consciously imitate in an amusing classroom lecture. McAuley, an Irish poet, told his students that when his first book was published, literary critics in Ireland savaged it, claiming that the poems were too derivative of models such as Seamus Heaney, Ciaren Carsen, and Paul Muldoon. At the time, McAuley hadn't read those poets much at all, and he certainly hadn't consciously imitated them. So he read these poets deeply, looking for similarities between their poems and his first book. Meanwhile he wrote his second book, freely imitating these models. After the book came out, McAuley told us, the critics said 'Hallelujah! McAuley has finally found his own voice!'⁹³ So prior to consciously practicing stylistic imitation of these eminent Irish poets, McAuley was guilty of unconsciously imitating them, probably in predictable ways that Irish critics had seen over and over from younger Irish poets. But after he consciously imitated his favorite aspects of each poet and fused them in his own way, he had a style that the critics could rightly describe as original.

The point is to consciously, purposefully imitate admired traits in a variety of models in order to create a new style that is a unique synthesis of the traits the author most admires in these models. 'This movement from "person" as determinate being to person as collocation of mediated and internalized selves marks the desired end of the academic training in literary and rhetorical imitation,' writes Bender,⁹⁴ who also argues that in addition to helping a writer form an original style, it can help that writer adroitly adjust tone and diction in order to address a variety of different audiences: 'A student trained to imitate models, to speak in different ways, could conform language and reasoning to the capacities of different

audiences, and thus create that consubstantiality between speaker and audience, the rhetorically created sense of community.⁹⁵

While most writers choose to imitate models whose styles they admire and wish to emulate, another form of imitation is what Bender refers to as 'adversarial' imitation, an attempt to 'outdo' a model.⁹⁶ In *The Anxiety of Influence*, Harold Bloom 'reverses the possibilities of imitation of tradition by mapping out tradition as a battleground in which writers continually attempt to shake off or repress those precursors who would take away their freedom.'⁹⁷ One of my students, Brandon Temple, wrote a sestina that was a kind of friendly adversarial imitation of 'The Shrinking Lonesome Sestina' by Miller Williams. In Williams' sestina, every stanza is a little shorter than the previous one, until the sixth stanza consists entirely of the end words, or teleutons, that the form dictates be repeated at the end of each stanza. Williams cleverly chose six teleutons that could form a complete sentence.⁹⁸

Brandon, tickled by Williams' inventiveness, challenged himself to one-up Williams. If Williams chose six teleutons that could join together to form a sentence, Brandon would choose six words that (with some poetic license) could form two different sentences, while still following the strict arrangement dictated by the form. The first stanza of Brandon's sestina, 'Eternal Arguments in Heaven and Hell,' reads as follows:

'Life,
breed
light.'
'Death,
bring
night.'

The sixth stanza reads:

'Breed
death
tonight!'
'Bring
alight
life.'

In an article called 'Versions of Imitation in the Renaissance' G.W. Pigman refers to this method of imitating models by wrestling with them or trying to one-up them as 'eristic imitation.' Pigman's other two categories are 'following, whereby the imitator reproduces the text with only minor adjustments in language, tone, or organization,' and 'transforma-

tion' (think of film adaptations such as 'West Side Story and '10 Things I Hate About You').⁹⁹

Full-blown stylistic imitation could begin in introductory literature classes. Imitation can help literary students make sense of abstractions such as tone. It can also prepare those who hope to go on to take classes in creative writing. In my literature classes, I often have my students write parodies, paraphrases, and other forms of imitations in order to read more closely, more actively, and with a better understanding of the decisions that poets and other literary artists make during the process of composition. Winston Weathers has proposed an approach to stylistic analysis for use in the literature classroom. He prescribes 'the creative analysis of literary texts,' by which he means looking for patterns in the sentence structures, such as opening prepositional phrase/subject/compound predicate – closing prepositional phrase, used by any given author. 'Let the student name it: the D.H. Lawrence construction, the Hemingway verb, the Faulkner paragraph . . . it is a chance to make discoveries about style that have not, amazingly, already been made.'¹⁰⁰

Practical Classroom Applications

- Virtue #1: Purity/Correctness – Help students build their vocabularies by studying lists of words.
- Virtue #1: Purity/Correctness – Have students look up and write down the definitions of every word they come across during the semester that they don't recognize. As an incentive, teachers might offer extra credit to the student who finds the most words that no one in the class knew before, provided the student can show that he or she got the words from literary sources, rather than from dictionaries. This would also be a great incentive for students to read beyond the assigned texts.
- Virtue #2: Clarity/Perspicuity – Have the students read and discuss accessible contemporary poetry.
- Virtue #2: Clarity/Perspicuity – In the small group workshops, advise students to let each other know when drafts of poems leave them confused.
- Virtue #3: Evidence/Imagery: Have students read and write haiku.
- Virtue #3: Evidence/Imagery: Have students keep a daily image journal.
- Virtue #4: Decorum/Appropriateness – Introduce students to the three levels of style and their uses. Give them classical examples of each along with writing assignments.
- Virtue #4: Decorum/Appropriateness – Require students to perform

their poetry at an open mic or in another venue (such as a public reading by the entire class at the end of the semester) as a way to help each student discover his or her own voice.

- Virtue #4: Decorum / Appropriateness – Have students record and stylistically analyze conversation as a way to get them thinking about what makes different voices unique.
- Virtue #4: Decorum / Appropriateness – Have students tell a personal anecdote to members of their group while a tape is running. Then have them transcribe the recording and transform it into a narrative poem. This should help them approximate their natural speaking voices in their writing.
- Virtue #4: Decorum / Appropriateness – Have students write parodies as a way to resist the ‘Pygmalion effect’ that may occur among initiates in any given discourse community.
- Virtue #4: Decorum / Appropriateness – Assign Jay Szczepanski’s ‘Dressing Up/Dressing Down’ exercise as a way to make students aware of different types of voice.
- Virtue #4: Decorum / Appropriateness – Recommend that students keep diaries, free write, and use email as ways to develop their voices.
- Virtue #4: Decorum / Appropriateness – Have students collaborate on a poem, and let a third student read the poem and identify shifts in voice, describing the two voices in the poem.
- Virtue #4: Decorum / Appropriateness – Have students describe their own voices, choosing from a list of opposite characteristics such as ‘outspoken/quiet’ and ‘swift/methodical.’ Next, have them free write about what they value in those traits. After that, have them list and free write about voice characteristics that they lack but desire.
- Virtue #4: Decorum / Appropriateness – Have students write an essay about the literary voices that they admire.
- Virtue #4: Decorum / Appropriateness – Assign reading responses in which students discuss the qualities of voice in poems that they admire.
- Virtue #4: Decorum / Appropriateness – Assign process memos in which students discuss the qualities of voice in their own poems.
- Virtue #4: Decorum / Appropriateness – Have students write experimental poems from the point of view of animals or aliens.
- Virtue #4: Decorum / Appropriateness – Have students write several descriptions of the same room, using a different perspective in each description.
- Virtue #4: Decorum / Appropriateness – Try an exercise in which

students write about the same place as it appears at different times of day or during different seasons.

- Virtue #4: Decorum/Appropriateness – Have students write dramatic monologues, retelling canonical stories from different points of view.
- Virtue #4: Decorum/Appropriateness – Have students rewrite the same poem in several forms.
- Virtue #5: Ornateness/Ornament – Introduce students to a large list of tropes and figures, such as the ones in *Rhetorica ad Herennium* that have to do with creativity and rhythmic/metric effect. Give them examples of each, and have them write their own examples of each.
- Vices/Metaplasms/Poetic License – Assign writing exercises wherein students experiment with the use of archaisms, vulgar language, neologisms, mispronunciations, and broken syntax.
- Exercitato – Have students brainstorm their favorite slang expressions. Then relate the impulse to invent slang terms with the impulse to write in a new and varied language.
- Exercitato – Share excerpts from Erasmus' *Copia: Foundations of the Abundant Style* with your students, and then have them try to write a single sentence in as many different styles as possible.
- Exercitato – Share excerpts from Raymond Queneau's *Exercises in Style* with your students, and then have them try to write a paragraph in as many different styles as possible.
- Exercitato – Write in front of your students. Show, don't tell!
- Imitatio/Mimesis – Have students copy poems verbatim, slowly and attentively.
- Imitatio/Mimesis – Have students imitate the structure of sentences that please them (without duplicating the meaning of those sentences).
- Imitatio/Mimesis – Assign poetic 'Mad-Libs.'
- Imitatio/Mimesis – Assign 'Talk-Back' poems.
- Imitatio/Mimesis – Have students put one of their own poems through a computer program such as on babelfish.com and then analyze the word choice, word order, and emphasis in the two English versions of the poem.
- Imitatio/Mimesis – Assign homophonic translations.
- Imitatio/Mimesis – Assign prose paraphrases of poetry.
- Imitatio/Mimesis – Assign poetic amplifications of prose.
- Imitatio/Mimesis – Have students rewrite one of their own free verse poems, using a fixed form. Then have them write another free verse version of the same poem.
- Imitatio/Mimesis – Assign an eristic (or adversarial) imitation.

Notes

1. *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric*, 2001, s.v. 'style.'
2. J. Tate, 'Live yak pie,' *American Poetry Review* 26, (5) (1997), 12.
3. *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric*, 2001, s.v. 'style.'
4. *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric*, 2001, s.v. 'style.'
5. *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric and Composition*, 1996, s.v. 'style.'
6. J. Culler, *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 28.
7. *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric*, 2001, s.v. 'style.'
8. E.P.J. Corbett, *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student*, 3rd edn. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 382.
9. *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric*, 2001, s.v. 'style.'
10. *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric*, 2001, s.v. 'style.'
11. Corbett, *Classical Rhetoric*, 384–388.
12. Corbett, *Classical Rhetoric*, 468–474.
13. Corbett, *Classical Rhetoric*, 462–463.
14. E. Kooser, *The Poetry Home Repair Manual* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), 93–94.
15. *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric*, 2001, s.v. 'style.'
16. *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric*, 2001, s.v. 'style.'
17. *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 1993, s.v. 'style.'
18. *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 1993, s.v. 'style.'
19. A. Lombardy, *Severe* (Cincinnati, OH: WordTech Editions, 2004).
20. *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric and Composition*, 1996, s.v. 'voice.'
21. Ormond Loomis, 'From oral narratives to written essays,' *The Subject Is Writing*, ed. Wendy Bishop (Portsmouth: Boynton/Cook, 2003), 53–61.
22. *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric and Composition*, 1996, s.v. 'voice.'
23. Jay Szczepanski, 'Hearing voices: Yours, mine, others,' *The Subject Is Writing*, ed. Wendy Bishop (Portsmouth: Boynton/Cook, 2003), 211–212.
24. Szczepanski, 'Hearing voices,' 215.
25. Szczepanski, 'Hearing voices,' 217.
26. Jay Szczepanski, 'Hint sheet G: Identifying, improving, and developing voice,' *The Subject Is Writing*, ed. Wendy Bishop (Portsmouth: Boynton/Cook, 2003), 256.
27. Szczepanski, 'Hint sheet G,' 256.
28. Szczepanski, 'Hearing voices,' 219.
29. R. Shaw, 'Consistency and variety: Two goals for the poet,' *Writer* 109, (12) (1996), 14.
30. Shaw, 'Consistency and variety,' 14.
31. Shaw, 'Consistency and variety,' 14.
32. Shaw, 'Consistency and variety,' 15.
33. Shaw, 'Consistency and variety,' 15.
34. Shaw, 'Consistency and variety,' 15.
35. Shaw, 'Consistency and variety,' 16.
36. *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 1993, s.v. 'tone.'
37. Stephen Dobyns, 'The function of tone,' in *Best Words, Best Order*, 2nd edn. (New York: Macmillan, 2003), 162–163.
38. Dobyns, 'The function of tone,' 164.
39. Dobyns, 'The function of tone,' 155.
40. Dobyns, 'The function of tone,' 164–165.

41. Dobyns, 'The function of tone,' 157.
42. *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, 5th edn, s.v. 'trope.'
43. *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 1993, s.v. 'figure, trope, scheme.'
44. *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, 5th edn, s.v. 'poet.'
45. *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 1993, s.v. 'figure, trope, scheme.'
46. *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 1993, s.v. 'figure, trope, scheme.'
47. *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 1993, s.v. 'figure, trope, scheme.'
48. *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric and Composition*, 1996, s.v. 'figurative language.'
49. *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric and Composition*, 1996, s.v. 'figures of speech.'
50. *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 1993, s.v. 'style.'
51. *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric and Composition*, 1996, s.v. 'style.'
52. *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric and Composition*, 1996, s.v. 'style.'
53. *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric and Composition*, 1996, s.v. 'style.'
54. *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric*, 2001, s.v. 'figures of speech.'
55. *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric*, 2001, s.v. 'style.'
56. *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric and Composition*, 1996, s.v. 'style.'
57. Erasmus, *Copia: Foundations of the Abundant Style, The Rhetorical Tradition: Readings from Classical Times to the Present*, 2nd edn, ed. Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg (Boston: Bedford/St Martin's, 2001), 608.
58. Raymond Queneau, *Exercises in Style*, trans. Barbara Wright (New York: New Directions, 1981).
59. W. Weathers, 'Teaching style: A possible anatomy,' *College Composition and Communication* 21 (1970), 147.
60. Weathers, 'Teaching style,' 147.
61. Weathers, 'Teaching style,' 147–148.
62. Weathers, 'Teaching style,' 148.
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64. *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, 5th edn, s.v. 'original.'
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66. *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric and Composition*, 1996, s.v. 'imitation.'
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68. *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, 5th edn, s.v. 'ape.'
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70. *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric and Composition*, 1996, s.v. 'imitation.'
71. *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric and Composition*, 1996, s.v. 'imitation.'
72. *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric*, 2001, s.v. 'imitation.'
73. Corbett, *Classical Rhetoric*, 475.
74. Corbett, *Classical Rhetoric*, 495–500.
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76. Weathers, 'Teaching Style,' 346.
77. Campbell McGrath, 'Capitalist poem #5,' *Contemporary American Poetry: Behind the Scenes*, ed. Ryan Van Cleave (New York: Longman, 2003), 180.
78. *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric*, 2001, s.v. 'imitation.'
79. *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric*, 2001, s.v. 'imitation.'
80. *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric*, 2001, s.v. 'imitation.'
81. Corbett, *Classical Rhetoric*, 461.
82. *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 1993, s.v. 'imitation.'
83. *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric*, 2001, s.v. 'imitation.'

84. Longinus, *On the Sublime*, *The Rhetorical Tradition: Readings from Classical Times to the Present*, 2nd edn, ed. Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2001), 355.
85. *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric*, 2001, s.v. 'imitation.'
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87. Corbett, *Classical Rhetoric*, 461.
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89. Corbett, *Classical Rhetoric*, 461.
90. Corbett, *Classical Rhetoric*, 463.
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100. Weathers, 'Teaching style,' 146.

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Chapter 6

Poetry Writing Instruction and the Forgotten Art of Memory

Mnemosyne [Memory], said the Greeks, is the mother of the Muse.'

Francis A. Yates, *The Art of Memory*

Memory is each man's [sic] poet-in-residence.

Stanley Kunitz, quoted in *Kansas City Star*, February 16 2003

Memory takes a lot of poetic license.

Tennessee Williams, *The Glass Menagerie*

Elixirs of Amnesia

All of rhetoric's five canons — including the fourth canon, memory — can be fruitfully employed in poetry writing instruction. In fact, a return to the serious study of the art of memory would benefit writers and scholars in all fields and at all levels. Boncompagno da Signa was right, suggesting, back in 1235, 'that memory did not belong to rhetoric alone but was useful for all subjects.'¹

Memory received considerably more emphasis in the rhetoric of oral cultures than it has in written ones. 'In the ancient world, devoid of printing, without paper for note-taking or on which to type lectures, the trained memory was of vital importance.'² In fact, memory was once so central to rhetorical theory and practice 'that the whole edifice of rhetoric developed by Greek and Roman theorists rested on the ability to remember.'³ Though scores of treatises on memory were written during the Middle Ages, after the Renaissance, memory took a decided back seat to some of the other canons. Plato foretells the decline in interest in memory in *The Phaedras*, where he advances the notion that writing would weaken memory and wisdom. He refers to writing as 'an elixir not of memory, but of reminding,' offering rhetors 'the appearance of wisdom, not true wisdom.'⁴ If Plato were to witness the information explosion created by the World Wide Web,

he would likely feel as if his worst suspicions were more than confirmed. Much more than the print that Plato encountered with distrust, the Internet has been an engine of amnesia; we're bombarded with information, but we neither possess nor value memory to the degree that many of our predecessors did, so all of that information slips through our fingers as soon as our fingers leave the keyboards and our eyes leave the monitors.

As William N. West states in his entry on memory in the *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric*:

After Descartes, memory as a part of rhetoric fell into disregard, and in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries it existed on the fringe of rhetorical theory, enduring in guides to elocution and recitation. Nowadays, mnemonics is principally taught as part of foreign language study and in self-help books.⁵

Poetry writing teachers could stand to seek some tips from those foreign language instructors, and maybe even from some of the self-help books. And what about drama departments? Surely actors and acting coaches have developed systems for facilitating the hard work of memorizing scores and sometimes even hundreds of lines that need to be performed with perfect timing and intonation.

Connecting Poetry Writing Students to the Oral Tradition

In Hesiod's 9th-century BC poem *Theogony*, he identifies the muses as the daughters of memory, who enabled him to recite his verses.⁶ It is common knowledge that the Greek epics such as *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad* were oral tales recited from memory long before they were written down. Since poetry, for much of its history, existed primarily as an oral art, poets who wish to connect deeply with the tradition would do well to develop the ability to store vast amounts of language in their heads while striving to find ways to make their own work more memorable.

There are always a few groans at the start of every semester when my students learn that they will be expected to memorize forty or eighty lines of published poetry in addition to memorizing works of their own before a semester-ending class reading. Many poetry writing students resist the notion that they need to read the work of other poets, let alone memorize it. Then there's the institutional resistance; many educators consider rote memorization of any kind a 'long-ago discredited tradition.'⁷ Perhaps those educators would change their minds if they could see the way my students change their minds after they discover the pleasure of committing favorite poems to memory, after they discover what former US Poet Laureate Robert Pinsky, in an article published in the *New York Times Book*

Review, refers to as ‘the pleasure of possession – possession of and possession by.’⁸

In ‘A Lost Eloquence,’ an op-ed piece published in the *New York Times* in December, 2002, Carol Muske-Dukes remembers the resistance Columbia University graduate students put up when the late Russian poet Joseph Brodsky announced that they would be memorizing poetry as part of his poetry workshop. According to Muske-Dukes, some of the students initially said they would boycott the assignment, but once they allowed themselves to give it a shot, they were reciting poems by Auden, Bishop, and others ‘with dramatic authority and real enjoyment. Something had happened to change their minds. The poems they’d learned were now in their blood, beating with their hearts.’ Muske-Dukes also recalls her own students’ reluctance to a similar assignment, remembering in particular one student who initially ‘loudly resisted what she called a boring exercise’ but ended up memorizing several great poems and saying ‘I own these poems now.’ To make the whole process less daunting, Muske-Dukes asks students if they ‘know the lyrics of “Gilligan’s Island” or “The Brady Bunch.”’ They concede the point that they are certainly capable of memorizing something that’s catchy and / or enjoyable for them.⁹ Students who can memorize TV jingles, rock and rap lyrics, and baseball statistics can also memorize poetry. Many students and members of the populace have already committed more poetry to memory than they realize, according to Pinsky, who states ‘Even a crowded elevator could probably collaborate to produce a fairly good-sized anthology of interesting verse.’¹⁰

In ‘Memorization of Poetry: Good or Bad?’ Marlow Ediger discusses the importance of memory in Vedic culture and the use of prosody as a means to aid memory: ‘[I]t was felt that in order to memorize the sacred text of the Vedas and appreciate their subtleties of rhyme, a knowledge of prosody was necessary.’¹¹ Perhaps a background in English prosody makes it easier to memorize poetry. It would be interesting to test a class’s ability to memorize at the beginning of a semester and then again after they’ve had some instruction in rhyme and meter.

The use of rhyme and meter as aide-memoire has been well documented. The poet Donald Justice covers the topic very well in his essay ‘Meters and Memory,’ in which he asserts that ‘Often enough rhymes are more effective mnemonically than meters, and occasionally other devices may prove to be.’¹² The other devices that Justice mentions include anaphora, refrains, and parallelism – all of which can certainly aid memory. But a brief consideration of the place system of memory, which I will describe shortly, makes it clear that striking images go even further toward making a poem memorable than either rhyme or meter.

In his essay, ‘The Art of Memory Reconceived: From Rhetoric to Psy-

choanalysis,' Patrick H. Hutton discusses the work of the 18th-century philosopher Giambattista Vico, who perceives a direct correspondence between ancient poetic practice and the ample memories that many of the ancients possessed. Vico's view, which a lot of my research bears out, is that it was the vivid imagery of this poetry, more than its rhythms or sound effects, that made it memorable and, in fact, memory enhancing.

The key to understanding the nature of memory, Vico contends, is derived from the direct correspondence between image and idea in primitive poetic language. 'In the beginnings of civilization, image and idea were one. Primitive peoples possessed robust memories because of the inseparable association they made between images and ideas in their comprehension of the world.'¹³

Helping Students Draw on Memory to Write Better Poems

In addition to setting aside time to teach students to memorize poetry and to write poems that are strikingly memorable, poetry writing instructors could also devise exercises designed to help their students mine their own memories for material that they can use in original poems. In 'Poetry and Memory,' an article published in *The Writer*, James Applewhite describes the act of writing a poem as 'an act of memory' and boldly claims: 'Memory in the widest sense governs all I do as a writer, since words, along with the skills acquired for relating them, are stored there.' Without a strong sense of the past, argues Applewhite, we can have no understanding of the present. As he puts it, '[t]o see a tree as a tree is an act of pattern recognition requiring the past.'¹⁴

A famous and forceful dissenting view comes from another former US Poet Laureate, Billy Collins, in his essay 'My Grandfather's Tackle Box: The Limits of Memory-Driven Poetry,' published in *Poetry* in August, 2001. In that essay, Collins makes clear his distaste for 'poems that are primarily driven by the engines of memory rather than the engines of the imagination.' After all, quips Collins, 'Milton never wrote a poem about his mother.'¹⁵ But does there really need to be such a dichotomy between memory and imagination in the composition of poetry? Think of the Tennessee Williams epigraph at the beginning of this chapter: 'Memory takes a lot of poetic license.' In order to imaginatively shape something into a poem, sometimes it's helpful to dig deeply into remembered events, which provide the material for the poet's imagination to shape.

Additionally, for students to understand modern and contemporary poetry, which is often primarily memory-driven (works by Allen Ginsberg, Sylvia Plath, Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton, Gregory Orr, and Philip Levine leap immediately to mind), they should take a stab at writing poetry

in that mode themselves. I like to begin my classes with an invention exercise that I call ‘Causa Prima’ or ‘First Cause.’ I read my students Mark Jarman’s poem ‘Ground Swell,’ in which he recalls an incident from his youth (the death, in the Vietnam War, of an older boy from his neighborhood who had befriended him) that he considers the beginning of his journey as a poet. Then I ask them to search their memories for their own ‘ground swell,’ a moment where they entered into a more adult awareness of the world and knew that they wanted to address it through writing, a moment, in Jarman’s words, ‘where things began to happen and I knew it.’¹⁶ Here’s an example of a successful memory-driven poem that one of my students, Erin Greenwell, wrote in response to that assignment:

You and Me, and Memories of Bradley

You asked me
to fall into my past
as though it
were full of happy memories
of slides and lollipops.

to search through it,
down into its
decaying piles to find
a single moment.

when I knew
I was a writer.

when my emotions
were too much,
too real.

when my life was more
than it had even been.

so you asked me to reach
in and pull out
my ground swell.

my burgeoning moment,
Bradley’s dying moment.

the moment that
that semi of
bourbon didn't stop.

the moment when the ground
was swollen with him.

There exists an abundance of exercises and prompts geared toward getting student poets to draw on their memories. For example, in *Thirteen Ways of Looking For a Poem*, Wendy Bishop invites students to '[I]list ten instances when you felt a moment of exquisite happiness. Free write on two of those occasions, trying to catch the physical details: where were you, what were you wearing, who else was there, what was occurring, why was the happiness unexpected or expected, and so on.' In another prompt, Bishop asks students to list up to ten family stories and then write a poem in quatrains about one of those memories.¹⁷ David Starkey's exercise 'Rearranging Memory' asks students to write an autobiographical prose poem consisting of a number of sentences corresponding to their current age (e.g. twenty-one sentences if the student poet is twenty-one years old), juxtaposing the memories without clear transitions.¹⁸

The Place System (or Loci Mnemonic)

The dominant memory system in classical, medieval, and Renaissance rhetoric was the place system, or 'loci mnemonic,' an image-based system said to have been discovered, or invented, by a poet. The various claims regarding the potency of this method are so astounding that anyone with a serious interest in improving his or her memory would surely take note. For example, the Greek philosopher Seneca the Elder could reportedly parrot back up to two hundred disconnected lines of poetry provided by audience members. According to the legend, he could repeat them forwards, backwards, or in any other prescribed order.¹⁹ Quintilian describes a man 'who could watch a full day's auction, and at the end of the day name all the articles sold, the buyers, and the prices.'²⁰ In *Hippias Major*, Plato has the sophist Hippias of Elis claim 'that he has a technique for repeating fifty names after a single hearing.'²¹ Hippias also reportedly could recite genealogies with equal aplomb.²² Not too shabby. In fact, for poets eager to memorize their own work or the work of others, and for students trying to prepare for an exam, it seems downright nifty.

Both Quintilian and Cicero credit Simonides, 'a professional praise poet,' with inventing or discovering this mnemonic method. They claim that Simonides had been hired to perform at a dinner hosted by a wealthy nobleman named Scopas, but Scopas didn't like the poem Simonides

recited because it involved some mythical figures, Castor and Pollux. Apparently Scopas didn't like sharing the limelight, even with imagined characters. He announced that he would only pay Simonides half of the agreed-upon amount, since only half of the poem was devoted to praising him, and he sarcastically suggested that Simonides should collect the other half from Castor and Pollux themselves. A pair of young men urged Simonides to leave the building, and as soon as he did so, the building collapsed, killing Scopas and all of his guests. When the relatives of the dead were unable to recognize their mutilated bodies, Simonides was able to help them sort out the bodies for burial because he remembered where everyone had been seated. This experience led Simonides to invent the place system.

Basically, the place system is built on two sets of mental images. The first step is to pick a favorite place, preferably a large church, or maybe a castle, and get to know every square inch of a place. Picture a young monk painstakingly walking through a monastery, paying attention to every crack in the bricks, every speck of dust, every tint in the stained glass. Once this place is burned into the memory, it becomes a kind of template, a place where our monk will mentally 'put' images representing a speech, a poem, or anything else that he wishes to commit to memory. Then if he needs to memorize, say, a lengthy psalm, he comes up with other images to represent the different parts of the psalm, and he superimposes those images in corresponding places in the large place previously burned into the memory. For example, he'll superimpose an image that stands for the opening verses of the psalm at the entrance of the building, and so on. While reciting the psalm, our monk would imagine walking from room to room in the place where the images representing the various verses have been stored.

I use a monk as my example because, as we will see, this mnemonic flourished in the Middle Ages primarily as a way to aid people in the memorization of sacred texts, but its use certainly wasn't limited to monks and professional rhetors. Evidence exists that, during the middle ages, common people were instructed in mnemonics as a means to memorize ethical treatises.²³ Also, the place system was popular with Elizabethan poets.²⁴ Sir Phillip Sidney praises it in *A Defense of Poetry*.²⁵

So that's a rough definition of the place system. Let me supplement my explanation with a couple of quotes that might clarify it a bit. Frances Yates states:

It is not hard to get hold of the general principles of this mnemonic. The first step was to imprint on the memory a series of loci or places . . . This done, as soon as the memory of the facts requires to be revived, all

these places are visited in turn and the various deposits demanded of their custodians.²⁶

So it's a two-step process, consisting of two sets of images. One set of image represents the text that one wishes to commit to memory; the other set of images provides a storehouse, a way to hold the first set of images in one's mind. Richard Sorabji, author of *Aristotle on Memory*, puts it this way:

A person must first form images in his mind of these places (the buildings and their interiors) . . . When he wishes to memorize the points in a speech, he will form a second set of mental images symbolizing the points. The image symbolizing the first point must be superimposed on the image of the first place, that symbolizing the second on the image of the second, and so on.²⁷

On the Big, Obvious Criticism of the Place System (or Loci Mnemonic)

It all sounds incredibly difficult, I know. In 'The Art of Memory Reconstructed: From Rhetoric to Psychoanalysis,' Patrick H. Hutton brings up the obvious criticism of the place system. 'Some . . . question whether the systems themselves might not be more difficult to remember than the facts to be committed to memory.'²⁸ This is a fair complaint. It's important to note, however, that this system doesn't entirely require you to re-invent the wheel each time you have to memorize something. The initial work, that of burning the impression of a large building or other place into one's memory (what Yates calls 'formation of the *loci*'), only happens once. That place then becomes the storehouse for all kinds of memories.

It's like a chalkboard that you write on; when you want to consciously memorize something new, you simply erase what is currently on the chalkboard (so to speak) and draw the new images in their place. 'The same set of background places can subsequently be used for memorizing a different speech, or a poem, or a set of fifty names.'²⁹ So one must be painstaking in this first stage. As Yates puts it: 'The formation of the loci is of the greatest importance for the same set of *loci* can be used again and again for remembering different material.'³⁰

Regardless of the difficulty of forming the loci and devising sets of images to correspond with texts, if some of the claims for this system prove to be true, it's certainly worth the preliminary work. As Yates wrote: 'There is no doubt that this method will work for anyone who is prepared to labor seriously at these mnemonic gymnastics.'³¹

Some More Information about the Place System (or Loci Mnemonic)

Unfortunately, a point-by-point 'how to memorize using the place system' manual doesn't exist. The authors of the ancient texts seem to have taken it for granted that their readers were familiar with other texts that no longer exist. However, in my research I was able to find a number of tips, which seem to fall into two categories: how to choose the loci and how to choose the images to superimpose over the *loci*.

The most common suggestion for creating a loci is to make sure that it is based on a large place, such as a cathedral or a castle, that you can access regularly and often enough to get to know the place thoroughly. However, alternative suggestions are to base the loci on an imagined place, a street, or even on the arrangement of stars in the sky. Metrodorus of Scepsis is credited with inventing the first celestial memory system – based on astrological systems of his time. According to Quintilian, Metrodorus found 360 places in the zodiac on which to hang impressions. So first he hung the stars, so to speak, and then he would hang words and images from those stars.³² The common denominator between a loci based on a zodiacal system and one based on a building is that the loci must be a large place. This ensures that a lot of memories can comfortably fit there.

Soviet psychologist A.R. Luria's *The Mind of a Mnemonist: A Little Book about a Vast Memory* chronicles the case of Shereshevskii, a 20th-century professional mnemonist who intuitively hit upon a sort of place system of his own. Shereshevskii used Gorky Street in Moscow to help him memorize infinitely long lists. Again, the common denominator is that he chose a long street where he could mentally store a large number of images.

A street of houses is something one can scan through very rapidly. Moreover, one can run through the street in either direction, and hence can recall the things memorized in the original, or in the reverse order. This is an advantage mentioned in the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, and by Luria. It also accounts, no doubt, for Seneca having been able to recite his two hundred unconnected lines of verse in reverse order.³³

In his 1491 memory treatise, *The Phoenix*, Peter of Ravenna offers some practical advice about applying the loci mnemonic. He suggests using quiet places such as unfrequented churches and using memory images that resemble friends and relatives.³⁴ Another common piece of advice is that the loci should be well-lit, so that the images are sharply illuminated

in the mind. Shereshevskii, for one, required well-lit images, or he would mentally conjure a streetlamp to brighten them.³⁵

According to Aristotle, all thinking requires images, so naturally he endorses the place system and its reliance on images. In his explanation of how memory functions, he uses the analogy that events are stored in memory the way images are imprinted in a wax tablet. '[H]e would not admit the possibility of thinking over or recounting a scene without imagery, since in his view all thought and speech involves imagery.'³⁶ The implications for poets are obvious. Poetic modernism, led in part by the imagist movement of Ezra Pound, Amy Lowell, and others, was largely an insistence on the preeminent value of imagery over other poetic images. In light of this tradition of emphasizing imagery as a means to store memories, perhaps it makes sense to understand the imagist movement and Pound's subsequent movement, vorticism, as efforts to create poetry that was unforgettable, poetry that would fix itself in the mind of readers and stay there.

An important mnemonic technique specifically recommended for memorizing poetry was the principle of 'sound resemblance,' which simply means selecting an image that is described in words that sound like the line of verse and to superimpose that image over an appropriate section of the loci.³⁷ For example, in order to memorize the opening line of Theodore Roethke's poem, 'The Waking,' which begins 'I wake to sleep and take my waking slow,' I would conjure up an image of myself slowly using a rake to brush the wool on two sheep; the image, translated into words, is 'I rake two sheep and take my raking slow.'

Finally, probably the most common advice regarding selecting memory images to superimpose over the loci is to make them outlandish, bizarre, and vivid, because unusual images stick in the mind better than common ones. For example, in *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, 'we are advised to use an image of testicles to represent, punningly, the witnesses ("testes") in a lawsuit.'³⁸ What a striking, memorable image! I know I personally will never think of witnesses in a courtroom the same way again. Later, echoing the anonymous author of *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, Thomas Aquinas writes, in his *Summa Theologiae*, that images used to enhance memory 'should not be too familiar, because we wonder more at unfamiliar things and the soul is more strongly and vehemently held by them.'³⁹

Due to its reliance on uncommon images, Yates speculates that the place system had (and still could have) its generative functions: 'The art of memory was a creator of imagery which must surely have flowed out into creative works of art and literature.'⁴⁰ According to Yates, in a 1562 Italian translation of Johannes Romberch's *Congestorium Artificiosae memorie*, Ludovico Dolce puts forward the notion that Dante's *Comedia* is

among other things, a place memory system. Yates even speculates that memory systems, used as invention techniques for generating creative work, account in part for the ‘grotesque’ and ‘idiosyncratic’ style of much medieval art. She asks: ‘Are the strange figures to be seen on the pages of manuscripts and in all forms of medieval art not so much the revelation of a tortured psychology as evidence that the Middle Ages, when men had to remember, followed classical rules for making memorable images?’⁴¹

So while teaching student poets how to memorize poems, we can simultaneously teach them, in a real way, something about how to produce them. For example, recently I visited my grandfather, who took great pride in his classic car, a 1955 Studebaker. Not being a car person myself, I struggled to remember what type of car he had. So I applied the principle of sound resemblance, concocting an image of my grandfather, wearing a cooking apron and a baker’s large white hat, sitting in the driver’s seat of the car with a beautiful young woman in his lap and another on his arm. From this image of my grandfather as a ‘studly baker,’ I’ve been able to remember the make of the car. This strange image could potentially serve as the premise for a fanciful poem. The image becomes particularly odd, and memorable, if I follow Peter of Ravenna’s advice and imagine parking the car in the aisle of a quiet church. The make of the car is indelibly imprinted on my brain, and now I have some images incongruously juxtaposed, for possible use in a new poem.

Alternatives to the Place System

Although the place system, or loci mnemonic, seems to have been the dominant mnemonic system in the golden age of the art of memory, many found it daunting, even unnecessarily complicated. Some must have been turned off at the prospect of having to memorize every inch of a large, well-lit building that could function as a loci. Others might have balked at the task of creating and then conjuring a set of images that punningly or otherwise represented the words in a speech or a poem. And who could argue with those who saw the whole process as circular, who might have summarized the place system as a suggestion that the way to memorize something is to first commit something else to memory? Surely, some reasonable people viewed the process as daunting. Their objection might have been something along these lines: ‘if our memory is poor in the first place, how can we be expected to commit two sets of images to memory, and if we’re capable of committing two complex sets of images to memory, surely we could just memorize our poems or speeches without going through all the hassle.’ So, in addition to the place system, there arose a

number of alternative memorization techniques that were more commonsensical, though perhaps more humble in their claims for success.

The sophist Dialexeis, writing in 400 BC, which was before the place system seems to have been formally codified, recommended using familiar images to remember names and abstractions. For example, the Greek letters for the name 'Chrysippus' very nearly spell 'gold horse,' and Dialexeis suggests exploiting that by picturing a golden horse as a means to remember the name Chrysippus.⁴² An equally commonsensical, if not more commonsensical, suggestion of his is to diligently repeat out loud the thing you're trying to memorize: 'Repeat again what you hear; for by often hearing and saying the same things, what you have learned comes complete into your memory.'⁴³ This strikes me as particularly useful advice to students who are trying to memorize poetry, their own or that of others.

Quintilian offers the simple advice of visualizing lines on the notepad after copying.⁴⁴ His suggestions, which 'were to become the traditional pedagogical techniques for enhancing recall,'⁴⁵ also include reading aloud, focused concentration, paying attention to arrangement, learning a text in manageable chunks, taking notes on difficult sections (I personally have found that simply underlining material helps cram it into my memory), and using 'the same tablets on which you wrote the speech to commit it to memory.'⁴⁶ This doesn't sound like it could have the miraculous results that proponents of the place system sometimes promised, but it does sound like a basic nuts and bolts system to pass on to students.

In her book, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture*, Mary Carruthers introduces the term 'grid memory' to describe another alternative art of memory. It bears similarities to the place system, but it is simpler. It was taught to schoolboys while more advanced pupils used the place system. In *De tribus maximis circumstantiis gestorum*, reprinted as an appendix in Carruthers' book, 12th-century educator Hugh of St Victor advises his pupils to 'mentally construct a number line and practice moving quickly to each of the numbers in any order.' Next, the pupils associate a number with the opening of a psalm, condensing the psalm to a verbal summary, rather than condensing it into an image as a practitioner of the place system would. He advises pupils to then create a similar number line, at right angles with the first, containing each of the verses in a psalm. The desired result of this method is that the pupil would ultimately be able to recite any psalm in any order. A couple of his simpler suggestions are (1) to memorize 'the faces and habits' of people who teach you things, (2) remembering the places where you learn them, (3) keeping in mind what was happening when you learned it (what season it was, for instance).⁴⁷

Contemporary Memory Techniques

In *Teaching Memory Improvement to Adults*, Janet Fogler, MSW, and Lynn Stern, MSW offer a wealth of practical, up-to-date advice that teachers can pass on to students seeking techniques for memorizing poems. In one passage, Fogler and Stern echo and amplify Hugh of St Victor's 13th-century insights about memory being state dependent, which basically means that it's easy to remember something when you're in approximately the same mood you were in when you were first learned it. One's external environment plays a factor too. It's easier to recall something if you return to the same room where you first heard it.⁴⁸

Elsewhere, Fogler and Stern suggest that simply writing things down can aid memory.⁴⁹ Here is one practical tip for students trying to memorize poems. Fogler and Stern also explore the use of narrative as a way to aid memory. For example, in order to remember the name of Mary's boyfriend, Cole, they recommend devising a story about Mary and her little lamb meeting Old King Cole.⁵⁰ They also recommend chunking items into groups (e.g. stanzas or groups of lines). Their example of this is the alphabet song that children learn, which breaks into five natural rhythmic units.⁵¹ Not only could this tip help students memorize poetry, it could also help them arrange their own poems in a way that is more memorable, and it could give them a new way to think of stanza breaks.

Fogler and Stern also recommend associating new information with other information that has already been committed to memory: 'Whether we are aware of it or not, new information is encoded by connecting it with other well-known and relevant information that already exists in long-term memory'⁵² (examples: 'lefty loosey; righty tighty' or 'Prozac will get you back on track').⁵³ It is interesting to note the use of rhyme and alliteration in these association techniques. It is also interesting to note that mnemonic acronyms such as 'homes' (for the Great Lakes – Huron, Ontario, Michigan, Erie, Superior) and 'Jesus Christ Made Seattle Under Protest (for the streets in downtown Seattle – Jackson, James, Columbia, Cherry, Marion, Madison, Seneca, Spring, Union, University, Pike, and Pine) are related to the acrostic, a form of poetry.

Fogler and Stern's book contains a number of exercises, some of which poetry writing instructors could easily adapt to the needs of their classes. For example, on pages 67–68 there is an exercise called 'Active Observation,' which asks students to pay close attention to the details in a picture and then, with the picture covered, answer some questions about it. They write: 'Active observation is the process of consciously paying attention to the details of what you see, hear, or read.'⁵⁴ Therefore, the practice of close reading and discussion of a poem can help students memorize that poem.

If students are memorizing poems not discussed in class, or if they are memorizing their own work, the instructor could direct them to discuss the fine details of the poem with a classmate or friend as preparation for memorizing it.

Conclusion

Poetry writing teachers would do well to devote a fraction of their class time to (1) helping students memorize their own poetry and poems by others, (2) helping students consciously think of ways to make their own poems more memorable, and (3) helping students find ways to tap their memories while composing new work. Require students to memorize a poem or two of their own choice as part of their grade.

Practical Classroom Applications

- Require students to perform one or two of their poems from memory at the end of the semester, either in front of the class or as part of a public reading.
- Make these requirements less daunting by showing students not only how much they already know from memory: song lyrics, lines from movies, etc., but also pattern recognition, e.g. the knowledge that a car driving up to you is a red convertible Corvette depends on memory of what red looks like, what 'convertible' means, and how a Corvette's shape and look differs from that of other cars.
- Spend some time on prosody, which should provide students with deeper understanding of poems they come across, as well as an arsenal of poetic mnemonic techniques.
- Urge students to use vivid, unusual imagery in their poems, and suggest that they look for this quality when selecting poems to memorize.
- Have students copy poems by hand and then try to make mental images of the pages containing those poems.
- Have students read poems aloud several times while trying to memorize them.
- Encourage students to read poems closely and discuss them en route to memorizing them. When it's feasible, lead detailed discussions of the poems students will be asked to memorize.
- While there obviously isn't time in a semester-long poetry writing class for students to master the place system or the grid memory, teachers can introduce those ideas in a lecture. Perhaps some students will be so inspired by the claims made by proponents of the place system that they'll learn the system in their own time. Regardless, teachers can extract a variety of useful principles from these systems,

such as breaking texts down into manageable units and memorizing those, assigning mental images to lines of poetry using the principle of sound resemblance, assigning outlandish mental images to words or lines they wish to remember, and showing them how to condense lines and stanzas into verbal summaries.

- Teach students to break poems down into natural rhythmic units and memorize the units one at a time. As a way to make their own poems more memorable, teach them to break lines and stanzas at natural rhythmic stopping points.
- Have students memorize poems in the same external environment (the classroom) where they will be tested on their memorization of these poems; also encourage them to induce the same mood while testing as they had while memorizing, as memory is state dependent.
- Put students into groups and have them brainstorm acronyms and similar associative techniques.
- Have students draw on their own memories by writing about photographs, through my 'Causa Prima' exercise, Starkey's 'Rearranging Memory' exercise, Bishop's exercises using family stories and happy memories, or other assignments designed to get students to write from the 'engines of memory.'
- Seek further advice on training students' memories from colleagues in the departments of drama and foreign languages.

Notes

1. F.A. Yates, *The Art of Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1066), 89.
2. Yates, *The Art of Memory*, 4.
3. *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric*, 2001, s.v. 'memory.'
4. Plato, 'The Phaedras,' *The Rhetorical Tradition: Readings from Classical Times to the Present*, eds Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg (Boston: Bedford/St Martin's, 2001), 138–168.
5. *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric*, 2001, s.v. 'memory.'
6. *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric*, 2001, s.v. 'memory.'
7. Carol Muske-Dukes 'A lost eloquence,' *New York Times*, December, 29, 2002, sec. 4, 9.
8. Robert Pinsky, 'A man goes into a bar, see, and recites: "The quality of mercy is not strained"' *New York Times Book Review*, September, 25, 1994, 15–16.
9. Muske-Dukes, 'A lost eloquence.'
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11. Marlow Ediger, 'Memorization of poetry: Good or bad?' *Journal of Instructional Psychology* 24 (4) (1997), 273–277.
12. Donald Justice, 'Meters and memory,' *Twentieth-Century American Poetics: Poets on the Art of Poetry*, ed. Dana Gioa, David Mason, and Meg Schoerke (Boston, McGraw-Hill, 2004), 250.
13. Patrick H. Hutton, 'The art of memory reconceived: From rhetoric to psychoanalysis,' *Journal of the History of Ideas* XLVIII (3) (1987), 371–392.

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17. Wendy Bishop, *Thirteen Ways of Looking for a Poem: A Guide to Writing Poetry* (New York: Addison Wesley Longman, Inc., 2000), 234.
18. David Starkey, *Poetry Writing: Theme and Variations* (Chicago: NTC/Contemporary Publishing Group, Inc., 2000), 176.
19. Richard Sorabji, *Aristotle on Memory* (Providence, NJ: Brown University Press, 1972). 16.
20. Sorabji, *Aristotle on Memory*, 22.
21. Sorabji, *Aristotle on Memory*, 22.
22. Yates, *The Art of Memory*, 30
23. Yates, *The Art of Memory*, 90.
24. Yates, *The Art of Memory*, 282.
25. Yates, *The Art of Memory*, 284.
26. Yates, *The Art of Memory*, 3.
27. Sorabji, *Aristotle on Memory*, Preface.
28. Hutton, 'The art of memory reconceived,' 371.
29. Sorabji, *Aristotle on Memory*, 24.
30. Yates, *The Art of Memory*, 7.
31. Yates, *The Art of Memory*, 3.
32. Yates, *The Art of Memory*, 39.
33. Sorabji. *Aristotle on Memory*. 24.
34. Yates, *The Art of Memory*, 112–114.
35. Sorabji, *Aristotle on Memory*, 23–25.
36. Sorabji, *Aristotle on Memory*, 9.
37. Yates, *The Art of Memory*, 14.S
38. Sorabji, *Aristotle on Memory*, 3.
39. Yates, *The Art of Memory*, 74.
40. Yates, *The Art of Memory*, 91.
41. Yates, *The Art of Memory*, 104.
42. Yates, *The Art of Memory*, 30.
43. Yates, *The Art of Memory*, 29.
44. Yates, *The Art of Memory*, 29.
45. *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric and Composition: Communication from Ancient Times to the Information Age*, 1996, s.v. 'memory.'
46. *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric*, 2001, s.v. 'memory.'
47. Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 261–266.
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49. Fogler and Stern, *Teaching Memory Improvement to Adults*, 72.
50. Fogler and Stern, *Teaching Memory Improvement to Adults*, 78–79.
51. Fogler and Stern, *Teaching Memory Improvement to Adults*, 80.
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53. Fogler and Stern, *Teaching Memory Improvement to Adults*, 61.
54. Fogler and Stern, *Teaching Memory Improvement to Adults*, 66.

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Chapter 7

Delivery: Bringing the Words into the World

Delivery in the Rhetorical Tradition

Delivery ('pronuntiatio' or 'action' in Latin rhetoric, 'hypokriseis' in Greek rhetoric), is, along with memory, one of the two 'problem canons,' so called because they seem more applicable to oratory than to written composition.¹ While it is indeed challenging to teach essay writing using canons that were developed for teaching speechmaking, when it comes to poetry writing, instruction in both written and oral delivery is essential, since poetry is an oral/aural art as well as a written one. If young Sappho's teachers thought delivery was important, teachers of would-be future Sapphos certainly ought to address it.

Many of the Greek and Roman rhetoricians did, in fact, hold the fifth canon in high esteem. For example, Demosthenes, a contemporary of Aristotle, refers to delivery as 'the first, second, and third most important aspect of a speech.'² Aristotle himself treats delivery as central to rhetoric and his writings include advice about volume, pitch, and rhythm.³ The anonymous author of *Rhetorica ad Herennium* also addressed delivery, deeming volume, stability, and flexibility of voice as its key aspects. Quintilian, too, acknowledges the importance of delivery, and he stresses the importance of thoroughly understanding one's material, which he considered an essential first step toward an effective delivery.⁴

Cicero refers to delivery as 'the most important aspect of a speech.'⁵ He also warns of what could happen when thoughtful people lack skill in delivery and when lesser thinkers do have the skill: 'without it, a speaker of the highest mental capacity can be held in no esteem; while one of moderate abilities, with this qualification, may surpass even those of the highest talents.'⁶ This wisdom has aged well, as it could easily be applied to many academics at conferences and university-sponsored readings (on one hand) and some performance poets and spoken word artists (on the other hand).

In the Roman Empire, the final stage of a rhetorical education was known as 'declamation.' Generally the teacher would provide a general thesis such as 'Marriage is healthy for a young man,' a hypothesis such as 'Bill should ask Shannon to marry him,' and some details ('colores') to make the hypothetical situation more complex, interesting, or familiar.⁷ A common declamation exercise was 'prosopopoeia,' in which the student declaimed in the voice of a mythological or historical personage at some critical point in life.⁸ Here is a contemporary variation, a prosopopoeia by one of my students, who imagines a historical figure in conversation with a contemporary one:

Kevorkian Asks About Beauty
by Claudette Johnson

Jack Kevorkian asks what it means
to see beauty.

Galileo tells him to investigate the veins
of a leaf like a scientist.
Inspect God's most forgettable hands
and tell it you're sorry, he says.

Breath comes so easy for you, Jack, while
the leaf dedicates its whole life to giving
you that breath, always expelling sunrays
turned to oxygen. Just for you.

In this moment
Kevorkian sees the beauty of webbed fingers
sucking in the breath he exhales,
how one body is given life
so he can thrive in his own.

In addition to assuming the voice of a historical figure, Galileo, in some lines, Claudette also offers advice to a famous real person, Jack Kevorkian. This exemplifies a type of declamation, practiced in Roman grammar schools, known as the 'suasoria.' More advanced students moved on to another kind of declamation known as 'controversia.' These students were given fictitious, vexing courtroom situations and asked to come up with imaginative, convincing arguments for one side or the other. Declamation moved from the academies to the public arena, where it was a popular form of entertainment. Because of its combined emphasis on reason and imagination, declamation has obvious implications for poets, and it could

be a source for writing exercises that lead to audience awareness while addressing topics of public interest.⁹ Poetry writing instructors could profitably adapt forms of prosopopoeia, suasoria, and controversia as aids to both invention and delivery.

It is important not to overemphasize delivery. A quick look at the history of rhetoric can show what happens when delivery takes precedence over the other canons. Beginning in 1780, with the publication of Thomas Sheridan's pronunciation dictionary, the elocution movement of the 18th and 19th centuries consisted of scholars who 'concentrated almost exclusively on the art of delivery' but 'still regarded themselves as rhetoricians'.¹⁰ Students of elocution received training in 'bodily gestures, voice management, pronunciation, and vocal production (the actual formation of the sounds of speech)' and in 'the five properties of voice—pitch, quality, force, abruptness, and time'.¹¹ One of the key figures in this movement, Michel Le Faucher, prescribed seventeen specific rules for use of the hands during a speech.¹² While the leading figures of the elocution movement helped resurrect a rhetorical canon that had been neglected, they in turn neglected all of the other canons, which led to a very reductive view of rhetoric. Sheridan in particular 'reduced the ancient art to matters of voice and gesture alone,' 'helped reduce rhetoric to one dimension,' and basically laid the groundwork for our contemporary lay definition of the term 'rhetoric' as 'empty, meaningless speech'.¹³ Similarly, poetry writing students who receive a lot of training in delivery and not much training in the other canons end up being spoken word artists whose writings don't translate well to the page.

Written Delivery in Composition Studies

Some compositionists view layout and typography as modes of delivery analogous to voice and gesture.¹⁴ Can instructors make this connection for students, help them better understand one via attention to the other? In 'Actio: A Rhetoric of Written Delivery (Iteration Two)', Robert J. Connors discusses written delivery primarily in terms of manuscript preparation and book production. He writes: 'The canon of delivery has to do simply with the manner in which the material is delivered. In written discourse, this means only one thing: the format and conventions of the final written product as it reaches the hands of a reader.'¹⁵ Similarly, in an essay called 'The Ethics of Delivery', Sam Dragga defines written delivery as 'the displaying of typographic and illustrative characteristics on a page or screen'.¹⁶

In his essay, Connors discusses font choice at length. He proposes a continuum from 'most readable' (Century Schoolbook and Times Roman)

to ‘most visually memorable’ (*Courier*).¹⁷ Additionally, he discusses paper selection, typography, and layout.

Poetry writing instructors can emphasize typography and layout by devoting class time during the last week of the semester to producing a class book in which students choose favorite poems from the semester, select paper and fonts, design a front and back cover, name, collate, and staple the book. Instructors can cover similar ground by putting out webzines with rotating student editorships.

Connors goes on to state: ‘[T]he realm of *actio* [delivery] is the realm of *ethos* [ethical appeal] much more than of *logos* [logical appeal] or *pathos* [emotional appeal].’¹⁸ Elaborating on this concept, he refers to manuscript format as the print equivalent of ‘dress, hygiene, and such.’¹⁹ It’s a good point. I don’t know if speech instructors spend any time discussing dress and hygiene, but it seems reasonable for poetry writing instructors to devote some time to discussions of manuscript format and some tips on how to write effective cover letters to editors.

Manuscript preparation and delivery can be discussed in passing in a traditional poetry workshop, but the five-canonical method frees up time to go into more detail and perhaps give students a competitive advantage. As Connors writes: ‘Like speakers, who are scrutinized as soon as they walk onto the platform, writers are being sized up as soon as their manuscripts fall from a manila envelope or are pulled from a pile.’²⁰ So teachers using this method can spend a fraction of their class time (which would otherwise be swallowed by full-class draft-critique sessions) addressing these nuts-and-bolts manuscript preparation issues.

Oral Delivery in the Poetry Interpretation Event at Contemporary High School and Intercollegiate Forensics Competitions

Poetry writing instructors and their students can learn a lot about delivery by observing their school’s forensics team in action. Although the competitors at a forensics meet give interpretative performances of poems by other people, rather than their own original compositions, poets who wish to master the art of delivering their own poetry can pick up tips from them. *The Rostrum*, a publication distributed to forensics programs nationwide, is chock full of material that could be useful to poetry writing instructors who are preparing a unit on delivery. A typical issue might contain voice and diction exercises, tongue twisters (for practice with enunciation), tips on how to relax before an audience, tips on posture, and even advice on how to turn the page in a book or notebook to maximum theatrical effect. For example, in an article called ‘Poetry as a Supple-

mental Event: A Unique Learning Opportunity,' Rhonda Lee Pool offers advice on how to choose a poem for a public reading and emphasizes the importance of knowing the poem backwards and forwards before reading it in public. Pool offers various suggestions on how to connect with an audience, my favorite being her exhortation to say the words with authority and conviction: 'If the speaker is truly thinking the meaning during his or her presentation, then we as an audience are able to vicariously discover the message of the poetry through the speaker's credible presentation.'²¹

In 'Oral Interpretation of Literature: Prose and Poetry Reading,' another article published in *The Rostrum*, Tony Figliola offers advice on how to get a poem's imagery and rhythm across on stage, and he makes suggestions on different ways to present free verse and metered poetry. Figliola correctly perceives that every word in a poem must count: 'A poem brimming with imagery must be read with special attention to every single detail, even if it means coloring – varying, emphasizing – every word in some way.' Figliola also stresses the importance of providing effective segues between poems and selecting compatible poems for a reading. In his terms, an interpretive reader must 'establish the argument of the program.'²² As a poet who is also interested in rhetoric, I am drawn to the idea of a reading having an argument. A poet who is attuned to his or her audience will have specific designs on how the poems in a set will affect the audience, and part of a reading's impact results from the interplay between the different poems selected for the occasion.

In 'Interpretation of Poetry,' also published in *The Rostrum*, Ruby C. Krider offers suggestions on pacing, reading a persona poem in character, and other issues. At one point, she suggests that performers pause for maximum clarity, rather than at line breaks. 'Far too often I hear readers breaking ideas, thinking it a must to pause at a line's end.' Dead poets would roll over in their graves if they knew that young people were being told to ignore line breaks when reciting their works. In fact, this advice is bad enough to make living poets want to die and be buried, just so that they, too, can roll in their graves. Sure, a poem might be clearer to listeners if an interpreter pauses at the end of a phrase, rather than at the end of a line, but that ambiguity is part of the poem. Krider is telling interpreters to revise poems rather than interpret them. Krider's arguments are convincing and useful when she discusses ways to present the 'character' and 'color' of each word: 'If you are describing something that is smooth, stretch the "oo" sound to make the word convey something that is smooth as velvet.'²³

These are just a few sample tips from the forensics world. Poetry writing instructors who wish to encourage their students to consider delivery

could profitably take their students to a forensics competition, as a class, have everyone take notes, and then compare notes during the next class session. Additionally, poetry writing instructors would do well to investigate publications such as *The Rostrum*, seeking ideas that will help them teach the art of delivery to their students.

Poetry in the Oral Tradition

Poetry has a tradition that greatly pre-dates Gutenberg, and poetry writing teachers who neglect the oral tradition are telling their students much less than half of the story. In a 2002 *American Scholar* article entitled ‘The Raised Voice of Poetry,’ James Fenton defines poetry as ‘language to which a special emphasis has been given,’ either on the page via typographical features and arrangement into lines and stanza breaks or via ‘the traditional means’ including (1) raising the voice to be heard; (2) raising the voice to demonstrate the beauty and power of the word; (3) chanting; (4) reciting rhythmically; (5) using rhymes; (6) setting the poem to music; and (7) music and singing in unison, as in drinking songs.²⁴ Note the oral nature of Fenton’s traditional means of emphasizing language in poetry.

Performance poetry promoter Bob Holman suggests that today’s performance poetry has its precedents in the oral poetry of Homer, African griots, American Indian shamans, China’s *The Book of Songs*, Dada, and futurism. His taxonomy of performance poetry includes (1) music and poetry; (2) sound poetry / multivoice; (3) dub poetry (a reggae poetics); (4) slam; (5) cowboy poetry; (6) audio, film, and video poetry; (7) American Sign Language; (8) trance; (9) personae; and (10) web poetry.²⁵

According to the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, there are three genres of oral traditional poetry: ritual, lyric, and narrative. Ritual poetry consists of the following subgenres: (1) incantation; (2) lullabies; (3) wedding ritual songs; (4) laments; (5) songs for special festivals; (6) praise poems (eulogies). Narrative poetry breaks down into two categories: epic and ballad. Lyric poetry consists of love songs, mainly.²⁶ Some traditional and contemporary settings for performance poetry include literary salons, Victorian after-dinner readings, workshops, ceremonial occasions, also radio / television broadcasts, recordings, and videos.²⁷

It should be clear from all this that poetry readings are nothing new. Similarly, the poetry slam, ‘invented’ by Marc Smith at Chicago’s Green Mill tavern, is really just a contemporary twist on an old tradition. The slam is simply a new version of something very old, with a new name and style. Agonistic, head-to-head poetic contests, complete with judges, comprise a strand of oral poetry that goes back to the ancient world. One characteristic of poetic contests is that participants often ‘duel or debate’

and make *ad hominem* attacks on each other – think of rap ‘battles’ as seen in the film *Eight Mile*.²⁸ Similar off-color poetic bouts take place in contemporary Turkey and Guatamala, and in Greenland, the Inuit people ‘resolve quarrels through drum-and-song duels adjudicated by the tribe’.²⁹

There are ancient Greek, Arabic, and Celtic legends about supernatural verse bouts between poet-magicians capable of inflicting ‘a range of woes from the raising of blisters to death’ by the sheer force of the spoken word. In the 5th century BC, at the annual festival of Dionysus, verse dramatists such as Aeschylus and Euripides duked it out, as portrayed by Aristophanes in *The Frogs*.³⁰

In the medieval period, poetic contests seem to have abounded. Some are described in Eddic epics, and Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* can be read as ‘a full blown peregrine poetic contest with some thirty contestants, a judge, and a prize’.³¹ Then there were the Scottish ‘flytings’ of the 15th and 16th centuries, which consisted of agonistic poetry contests between noted poets (something similar to the Taos Heavyweight Poetry Championships or the annual Super Bowl of Poetry in Auburn Washington). Flytings were likely put on as court entertainment. But I personally wouldn’t have been entertained by the most intense poetry contests on record, the 13th-century ‘Wartburgkrieg,’ in which five poets would face a magician in a riddle competition, ‘with death as the penalty for losing’.³²

Another type of popular poetry competition was the bout-rimés, invented by the 17th-century Parisian poet Gilles Ménage. In a bout-rimés, poets were provided with a set of rhyming words and a fixed rhyme scheme, such as a Petrarchan sonnet, and challenged ‘to write a poem incorporating the given rhyme words so as to achieve effects as witty as they are seemingly uncontrived’.³³ Bouts-rimés competitions were held in England and Scotland as well as in France. They were popular with the Parnassians, a group of 19th-century French poets who considered facility with rhyme the most important skill a poet could have. Like today’s poetry slams, performances by the Parnassians were sometimes attended by vocal hecklers; teenage hooligan and wunderkind poet Arthur Rimbaud is said to have shouted ‘merde, merde, merde’ during one reading by some of the leading Parnassians.

I know that C.S. Lewis never attended a poetry slam. Probably not an open mic, either. However, he did take in enough poetry readings to declare that all performance poets were either minstrels (who impose a sing-song rhythm on their poems when they read them out loud) or actors (who tend to be flamboyantly expressive when they perform).³⁴ I’ve seen both types represented at poetry readings. There’s a popular reading style in which the poet treats each line like a question, putting the emphasis at the end, e.g. ‘I taste a liquor never brewed?’ (Lewis’ ‘minstrels’). Then

there are those performers whose gestures are all big and exaggerated and whose voices are loud and dramatic (Lewis's 'actors').

These two categories hardly cover the full spectrum of poetry performances going on now. There are deadpan poets like Hal Sirowitz, for example. And just as there are prop comics, there are prop poets. Once, at a reading at The Ditto Tavern in Seattle, I watched construction worker/poet named Stephen Thomas build a podium while he introduced his poem. Another time, in New York's East Village, I saw a poet recite a poem while setting up and subsequently smashing a stack of milk bottles.

Which brings me to another type of performing poet not represented in Lewis' categories: the poet who relies on costuming. San Francisco poet A.D. Winans writes: 'I've seen too many poets use gimmicks to hide bad poetry. The most immediate example that comes to mind is PETER PUSSY DOG who used to read on stage wrapped in Aluminum paper and Christmas decorations (lit bulbs included).'³⁵ Then there are poets who read from behind (literal) masks. I knew a poet in Seattle who used to wear a papier mâché mask while performing her works. Also, one time I was in New York City for MLA interviews, and the Bowery Poetry Club held a 'MLA party' with open mic, at which poetry club regulars and academics in search of jobs alike were required to wear grotesque masks while reading their poems.

Poetry writing students who are aware of poetry's past and present – including its oral history and current practice as an oral art – will be better equipped to find a suitable direction for their own work than workshop students whose main barometers are the rough drafts of their classmates. Teachers might do well to (1) have students reenact some of the more exotic means of poetic delivery as a way to connect with the oral tradition; (2) put students in groups and have them brainstorm ways to perform their favorite canonized (or un-canonized) poems; (3) take their students to public readings; (4) bring seasoned performance poets into the classroom as guest lecturers; (5) hold a class poetry slam; (6) show films of poetry readings; (7) have the students hold a public reading. Once peer critique is removed from the center of the poetry writing classroom, there is ample time for all of this.

Why Should Poetry Writing Teachers Teach Delivery?

Dana Gioia, in his famous polemic 'Can Poetry Matter?' recommends that poetry teachers at all levels spend more time on performance and less on analysis.³⁶ This was also the rationale behind Billy Collins's 'Poetry 180' project, which provided public schools with poems to read every day over the intercom, with no discussion or analysis. In *Something Is Going*

to Happen, Allan Wolf claims that performance increases engagement and understanding of poetry, that '[s]tudents must carefully consider the language and meaning of a poem in order to determine how best to dramatize it.'³⁷ In the classroom, Wolf claims, planning a performance puts the teacher in the role of a facilitator and therefore empowers students to take charge of their own learning process, which should appeal to teachers who advocated student-centered approaches.

Many of my students became interested in poetry after attending open mics and poetry slams. So for me, acknowledging that delivery is part of the equation is a way of meeting these students where they're at. Bob Holman writes: 'Poetry's becoming an endangered species, I believe, had everything to do with the neglecting of live performance, and its current renaissance is due in large part to the acceptance of the live presentation of the poem as the performance twin of text.'³⁸ In my own development as a poet, reading Whitman, the Beats, Frank O'Hara, and others as a teenager led me to Seattle's vibrant open mic scene, which led me to more books – a healthy circle.

The world is becoming not less literary but more multi-literate, and today's students are as likely to get initiated into the poetry world via HBO's *Def Poetry Jam*, the Internet, or at a local coffeehouse as in our classrooms. These venues don't have to replace the classrooms as a place where poetry happens; the classroom can be a place where we build on students' enthusiasm and learning picked up elsewhere. Poetry writing instructors would do well to address these modes of delivery in addition to using more standard methods that teach students to write with journals, anthologies, and book contests in mind.

Many academic poets already are getting savvy about non-traditional means of delivery: The University of Iowa hosted a conference on New Media Poetry in 2002, aiming 'to look at the possibilities for poetry offered by the electronic convergence of words, images, and sound'; to 'highlight the changing contexts in which literature is produced as a result of the electronic word'; to 'examine emergent reading possibilities and strategies'; and 'to consider some of the new forms of distribution and archiving made possible by the Web.'³⁹

In a recent *Atlantic Monthly* article entitled 'Poetry Out Loud,' Peter Davison contends that new methods of delivery haven't greatly impacted the way poems are written: 'What has changed about poetry in our time is not the art of poetry but the technology of mediation.'⁴⁰ But maybe it's necessarily both. Maybe poetry needs to adjust to new mediums for its delivery, and maybe new types of poetry will call for innovative means of delivery. All great poetry speaks to eternity, of course, but it first has to

speak to its own age, and the poetry of a high-tech age needs to adapt to and take advantage of high-tech modes of delivery.

The rise of slams and non-academic performance poetry has been partially responsible for the desire of many young poets to enter graduate creative writing programs, which have grown exponentially in size over the past twenty years. Most programs sponsor a reading series for graduate students as well as a visiting writers' series:

And the more readings, the greater the need for poems that worked well when read aloud. No one likes to bomb onstage. Consequently, aspects of performance poetry – humor, natural language, edgy subject matter, strong and overt emotion – began to filter into mainstream 'literary' poetry.⁴¹

Clearly, by teaching undergraduates how to feel comfortable performing their work, teachers can prepare them for two aspects of graduate school: (1) participating in department-sponsored student readings, and (2) being able to better understand (and write) literary poetry.

Students need to train their ears to hear pleasing rhythms and sound effects, or the absence of these qualities, in their own work or the work of others. While it's true that most workshop leaders have students read their poems aloud before class discussions, it's still the poem on the page that gets primarily scrutinized, not poem's aural qualities, and certainly not the poet's ability to deliver the poem out loud. Preparing and giving a public class reading is a way of acknowledging that student work is part of an oral tradition too, that poetry is older than paper. Bob Holman writes: 'Those who scoff at performance poetry as simply using live performance skills to hide a poorly written poem haven't learned to trust their ears as well as their eyes.'⁴² There's a caution in the first half of Holman's statement. Teachers can't afford to overemphasize delivery at the expense of well-crafted poetry. Delivery should be a means of lifting the words off the page, bringing them out as fully as possible, rather than a means of hiding what's missing from the page. As poet and California State, Long Beach professor Gerald Locklin said: 'A lot of people don't understand that spoken word poetry is better off if it's well written to start with.'⁴³

Former *Poetry* editor Joseph Parisi recently dismissed poetry slams – in *Forbes Magazine*, of all places – saying: 'I think the emphasis is probably on performance rather than on poetry. The use of the language is not very imaginative; the ideas are trite.'⁴⁴ Such a sweeping generalization is not at all fair. There are doubtlessly slam poets who fuss as much about word choice as Gustav Flaubert, or at least as much as Joseph Parisi. But there are definitely plenty of people in performance poetry, slam, and spoken word circles who do care more about performance than about poetry. In terms of the five canons, I interpret this as an overemphasis on delivery at the expense of the others, particularly invention. My suggested remedy

for this is to spend no more than two or three weeks in a semester focusing on delivery. Faced with a class with a large percentage of students who have more talent at performing poetry than on writing it, instructors in a five-canonical classroom can make an adjustment, spending more time on invention, arrangement, and style (performance poets and especially slammers being already quite skilled at memory). On the other hand, if an instructor encounters a group of students who write well but are particularly reticent to read their work out loud, the instructor can make an adjustment, focusing a higher percentage of class time on delivery than on the other canons.

DJ Renegade believes that poetry will have broader cultural appeal if more poets train their ears better and rediscover the visceral pleasures of rhyme and meter. Renegade recalls a barnstorming performance poet who used to sing Emily Dickinson's poems to the tune of 'The Yellow Rose of Texas.' It also works with 'Gilligan's Island' or 'Amazing Grace,' as Dickinson wrote primarily in ballad stanzas and hymnal stanzas. Renegade blames modernist obscurantism and reliance on free verse for poetry's decline in popularity: 'Most people like poems that have meter and rhyme. It gives them something to hang on to even before they understand the words.'⁴⁵ I agree. Delight in rhyme and meter seems to be instinctual. From a very early age, children respond very positively to rhyme, repetition, and meter in beginning books and childhood songs. My older son, Evan, as an infant, could only be calmed on long car rides by endless recitations of verses such as 'Five Little Monkeys Jumping on the Bed' and 'There Was an Old Lady Who Swallowed a Fly,' long before he understood what any of the words meant. The long-lasting popularity of Dr Seuss books, which contain rhyme, repetition, and meter (along with startling juxtapositions that make such poems more memorable), evidences the visceral appeal of metrical poetry.

In his belief that the public responds to meter more than to free verse, Renegade echoes the poets of the populist movement known as expansive poetry, an outgrowth of the new formalism and the new narrative. See Kevin Walzer's book-length study *The Ghost of Tradition or New Expansive Poetry*, a collection of essays edited by R.S. Gwynn.

Stephanie Pruitt has insight into the pitfalls of too much and too little emphasis on delivery: 'I am saddened by the number of "poets" who do not read or recognize the work of our predecessors. On the other end of the spectrum is literary-quality print poetry that seems to suffer from a social disconnect.'⁴⁶ Pruitt is correct in sensing a social disconnect in much published contemporary poetry. This social disconnect is the central concern of Gioia's essay 'Can Poetry Matter?' In that essay, Gioia portrays the academic poetry world as an insular enclave that has ghettoized itself

and failed to address the larger culture. While some performance poets, to their discredit, don't see much connection between books and what they're doing on stage, many literary poets have forgotten that they're working in a genre with a rich oral tradition – yet they go on dreary reading tours to promote their books anyway: 'Sometimes . . . I think that poets make no connection between what they do when writing and what happens at a reading.'⁴⁷

Stage Versus Page: The Perceived Divide Between Performance Poetry, Spoken Word, and Stand Up Poetry (on the One Hand) and Literary, Academic, Workshop Poetry (on the Other Hand)

A common perception, in some circles, is that good spoken word artists can't write good poetry and that good poets can't perform their poetry well. In 'Sibling Rivalries: Literary Poetry Versus Spoken Word,' Quraysh Ali Lansana asks: 'Why does the divide exist and what does it mean?'⁴⁸ Like me, Lansana began as a performance poet and then moved into academia. Despite earning her MFA and getting three collections published, Lansana finds that the 'performance poet' tag continues to haunt her. She has asked various black poets about the perceived divide between performance poetry and literary poetry, as well as about the impact of *Def Poetry Jam* on their work. In response to Lansana, Naomi Long Madgett of Detroit says: 'Performance poetry is entertainment that does not require much thought to be appreciated or much time for subtle meanings . . . Much depends on its delivery, and seldom does it stand on its own on the printed page.'⁴⁹ This sounds like a low assessment, unacceptable for poems by college-level poetry writing students. But there's no reason my students can't learn delivery techniques that can enhance poems that also work well in print.

Spoken word poetry aficionado Tonja Withers tells Lansana about some occasions when poets who didn't have live audiences in mind while writing got onstage and failed to deliver. 'If a page poet goes on stage and reads a poem . . . as an audience member, sometimes it feels like I'm in a classroom and the teacher is reading from a textbook.'⁵⁰

Charles H. Webb's *Stand Up Poetry: An Expanded Anthology* proves that serious, successful poets are capable of writing with audiences – live audiences – in mind. In my opinion, *Stand Up Poetry* is the performance poetry anthology, because it shows that performance poetry doesn't have to degenerate into the print version of a bad open mic where anything goes and the audience is held captive (as opposed to being captivated) by a 'poet' reciting 'By the beard of Odin, it's a drag. By the beard of William,

it's a drag. By the beard of Robert, it's a drag. By the beard of Susan, it's a drag.' (Robin Hemly claims that these lines are part of an epic that was 'single-handedly responsible for closing down every open poetry reading in the city of Chicago' shortly before Marc Smith started the first contemporary poetry slam at a Chicago tavern called *The Green Mill*).⁵¹

Webb insists that stand up poetry is not written primarily as something to be performed. It is a type of literary poetry featuring a concern for audience and mindfulness of the oral tradition: 'Stand up poetry is written for the printed page, bearing in mind that poetry has always been an oral art, at its best when read aloud.'⁵² I love the insistence on drawing from the best of two traditions. Let these two streams come together, filter the pollution out of each (dryness and Modernist disregard for audience in the case of much literary, academic poetry; pandering and inattentiveness to language in the case of much spoken word art and poetry written primarily with slams and open mics in mind). The result will be something pure, flowing, and powerful.

Performance poet Christine Gholson of Des Moines, Iowa disagrees with Webb (and me) about considerations related to the poem on the page being at least equally important as considerations related to the poem on the stage: 'We crave the sound. It's why we buy so much goddamn music. The words on the page are secondary. Most audiences want it out loud, they don't want to buy a book – no matter how much they like what they hear on stage. That's fine. The true energy of a poem comes when it's spoken.'⁵³ This is a shame if it's true. If a book is written with a live audience and a readership in mind, the book and the public reading ought to complement one another. Poets who say they write for themselves are better off not publishing either on the page or at the podium.

The stand up poetry scene in and around Long Beach, California, was profiled in a recent article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Though the term 'stand up' conjures images of comedians angling for their own sitcoms, the moniker actually has origins of a more literary nature. Poets in Long Beach trace the term to the title of Edward Field's book *Stand Up Friends With Me*. 'He read poetry in an accessible, vernacular style, using straightforward, not poetic, diction,' said Gerald Locklin, Webb's colleague at California State University, Long Beach.⁵⁴ What I like about stand up poetry is that, in contrast to much performance poetry, slam poetry, and spoken word art, it frequently holds up to the standards of academic, literary poetry. Reading Webb's anthology, it's hard to dispute his claim that '[a] lot of the best poets in the country have discovered the uses of performability'.⁵⁵

Coffeehouse Poetry Anthology, a book published by Bottom Dog Press in 1996, includes poems by poets from each of the fifty United States. All of

the poems in the anthology have been previously performed in public in coffeehouses or taverns. In the introduction, editor Larry Smith writes: 'There is no real conflict between oral and written poetry, between the spoken poem and the poem on the page. They are mutual aspects of poetry and reveal the vitality and diversity of the written word.'⁵⁶

Jenniver Bosveld, editor of Pudding House Press, believes that the gulf between academic poets and performance poets has been widely exaggerated: '[T]he academics get a bumb wrap [*sic*] most of the time and many from that scene have been the biggest innovators of coffeehouse opportunities . . .'⁵⁷

Smith's co-editor June King, describes open mics in Huron, Ohio as 'the academics, the homemakers, the erotics, the greeting-card poets, the new Jim Morrisons, the trembling first-time readers and the veteran circuit riders' all performing an 'egalitarian' atmosphere of 'inclusion' and 'tolerance.' Politically correct buzz words aside, that's all very sweet, but should performance poetry have to abandon standards? Obviously at slams, not all poems are considered equal. Some get a '10' and the poets move on to the next round; others get a '1' and the poets either sit and stew or they go home. At slams, it seems, some poems are better tolerated than others, and some poets are more included than others. My guess is that even the friendly Huron crowds King describes aren't as egalitarian as she makes them out to be. I'm sure that they look for certain effects in poems and they use subtle cues ranging from cheers and raucous laughter to yawns and side conversations as rewards or sanctions for those performers who deliver and those who don't.

Of course contemporary oral poetry is not just an American phenomenon. The United Kingdom also has a thriving public poetry culture. In London, The Poetry Society even operates an establishment called Poetry Café, where patrons can drink tea and eat sponge cake while enjoying an open mic or one of several regularly scheduled readings, including Exiled Writers Ink, a gathering of writers exiled from their homelands who meet to read their works to each other.

The following is a slam poem written by Grace Bruenderman, one of my students who is also a member of Western Kentucky University's national champion forensics team as well as a slam poet who is currently part of Bowling Green, Kentucky's team and has competed in the nationals twice. Let's examine the ways that her poem works off the page and ways it can work better on the page, as a way to examine the sibling relationship between spoken word and page poetry. There's a common expression among members of twelve-step recovery groups: 'take what you need and leave the rest.' What can student poets take from spoken word artists and what should they leave? Anne Waldman defines a performance poem as

'a poem written to be performed before an audience.'⁵⁸ But how is a readership similar to and different from an audience? Answering this question is a key to answering the question of what poetry writing students can take from spoken word and what they should leave.

Grace didn't write this poem in response to any of my class assignments. I wish she had; I'd like to take some credit for it. She approached me with it prior to our class reading and told me that, since she wrote the poem to be performed, she thought it would work better at the reading than the poems she wrote for class. In Grace's mind, the divide that Lansana perceives between page poetry and stage poetry is very real. 'I don't take my slam poems too seriously,' she told me on more than one occasion, but I think that there's a lot to admire in this piece.

Channel Changing by Grace Bruenderman

Golden Girls, Matlock, and Murder She Wrote.
The only three television shows created, directed, and edited
for people with their senior discount cards in their back pockets.
Hey hey hey Angela Lansbury!

I have a secret.

I know who did it. Again.

And again and again and again.

Because knowing the killer is never a thriller
when every eighty-year old man watching is yelling,
'Speed it up, bitch.'

I get bored just watching you slide smoothly
across silver embedded typewriter keys,
pulsating with each . . . tap . . . each . . . ah . . .

OK, see? That would have been sexual but the
lack of intellectual levels leaves you dumb and us
dumbfounded.

What if Joey, from 'Dawson's Creek'
turned seventy-five and had a heart attack
from climbing that stupid ladder against
Dawson's window, because
'I don't wanna wait . . . for our lives to be over!'
Then DON'T.

Because we're metaphorically dying, sighing
about imitation butter and motherfucking high cholesterol –

Awww . . . are things not what they used to be?
I have an idea. Ch-ch-ch-ch-ch-ch- change them!

You know, we have become an assembly line of assholes,
slapping labels on Gladys and Ethel and Grandpa Bob that say,
'Expired,' retired has a bad bad connotation
as we place our relatives into square, white rooms of
sanitary bed sheets and Jell-O instant pudding,
gardens left not weeded, dignity strewn across the
dash of my grandfather's red Ford truck that my mom
took away when he got 'too old.'

Does the fact that we're young make us more important?
Think about that, because that's what's scary,
that's what needs to change, not your
skin tone, your toothpaste, your eye color?

We are young when we think it,
we are old when we think it, and
the secret is – 'Shhhhh . . .
No one is more important.

So, what if the end is the beginning,
and what if the beginning is the end?
Can you handle that?
Can you deal with that, maybe
pack that away for later?

Let me tell you something:
Later, it's becoming . . .
now.

Let's analyze Grace's poem as literary poetry written with a live audience in mind, using Webb's elements of stand up poetry (humor, performability, clarity, natural language, flights of fancy, a strong individual voice, emotional punch, a close relationship to fiction, use of urban and popular culture, and wide open subject matter) as a guide.⁵⁹ It is very humorous, especially in the first stanza, where Grace seems to want to entertain her audience in order to get them into a receptive mood for the poem's more serious moments. The raucous applause Grace received at our class's public reading proved that the poem has performability. It is very clear, and Grace definitely has a strong individual voice. The first

two stanzas feature flights of fancy, and the poem obviously makes good use of popular culture. It also packs an emotional wallop, beginning, for me, with those ‘expired’ labels slapped on Gladys and Ethel and Grandpa Bob. In fact, I would venture to say that this poem has all of the elements of a good stand up poem.

If Grace had submitted this to her peer critique group or showed it to me during a conference, we probably would have suggested some ways to bring language more to the forefront. Perhaps she could cut everything after ‘No one is more important,’ which strikes this reader as more powerful than the lines that come after it. The language in those last two stanzas strikes me as flabby and uninteresting. She might also consider losing the first two lines, because the apostrophe to Angela Lansbury strikes me as much more attention grabbing than those lines. Then there are some elements of Grace’s stage performance that don’t translate to the page: she sang the lines from the ‘Dawson’s Creek’ theme, she mimed typing while discussing a typewriter in the first stanza, and she made ‘Ch-ch-ch-ch-ch-ch’ sound like a beater car that someone was trying to start. If Grace wanted to revise the poem to make it more page-friendly, members of her peer critique group might brainstorm ways to substitute language for those dramatic gestures. At any rate, this draft of ‘Channel Changing’ is not too many drafts away from being as successful on the page as on the stage, and it demonstrates how thinking of a live audience while composing can enhance a draft.

Considering Audience

One of the most common pieces of advice in contemporary composition courses is ‘consider your audience,’ or variations on that theme. This advice has been especially popular since the ‘New Rhetoric’ movement of the 1950s and 1960s,⁶⁰ but it’s really nothing new. It goes back at least to the 5th century BC. In his *Rhetoric* and in *Organon*, Aristotle classifies audiences into three types: (1) ‘the passive spectator audience’; (2) ‘the more active audience, the judge who renders a decision’; and (3) ‘the interlocutor, the worthy opponent with whom the rhetor engages in dialectic.’⁶¹ These three types still exist in (1) university-sponsored poetry readings, (2) poetry slams, and (3) panels at academic conferences.

Jury selection and product marketing are examples of people taking audience analysis seriously.⁶² Attorneys know that they need to understand their audience if they’re going to select members of the audience most likely to find in their favor, then they need their witnesses and their opening and closing arguments to tell a story that will compel the jury to believe in their interpretation of the case and to rule in their favor.

Similarly, advertisers know that the more they know about their audience, the more likely they are to win the audience over. Why shouldn't writers take audience analysis equally seriously? Certainly writers don't need to use audience analysis as a means to manipulate their audience, as advertisers and trial lawyers may. However, if writers truly want to speak to member of their audience, if they want to challenge them, entertain them, inspire them, and so on, it should be helpful to know who the members of the audience are, what they know, and what their tastes are.

Whether or not a poet can know specifics of who might read or hear a particular poem, it is important for the poet to have some general thoughts about audience in order to anticipate and answer questions that might pop up in audience members' heads at different points in the poem. Most theorists in rhetoric and composition agree that '[t]he writer or speaker in the act of preparing a text or producing a speech must imagine an audience whenever one has not yet physically convened.'⁶³

Performance poets have an advantage over other types of writers because they don't have to imagine their audience; they have the opportunity to mingle with their audience personally, and they can easily carry on informal audience analyses that can't help but have a bearing on how they will write future poems. Lollapalooza veteran Sou Broskowitz puts it this way: 'At the open mic, the audience is not just hypothetical, listeners are a few feet from the readers . . . the coffeehouse brings the writer, the writing, and the listener together.'⁶⁴ Contemporary textbooks on public speaking advise students to analyze their audiences in various ways. For example, students are told to 'physically place themselves in the position of the listeners.'⁶⁵

Compositionists who write about audience tend to fall into two camps: (1) those who focus on real audiences and readers whom writers ought to think of themselves as addressing, similar to the way advertisers and politicians think of audiences as groups to address; and (2) those who think of audience as something abstract that authors must 'invoke' through textual cues. Advocates of the 'audience invoked' perspective 'contend that beginning writers should examine how other authors have created audiences via cues in texts, and come to internalize their own sense of a reader.'⁶⁶

However, some rhetoricians and compositionists believe that considering one's audience is potentially hazardous, as it may lead to pandering, or unethical, as it may lead to outright manipulation. Both E.B. White and Peter Elbow have cautioned against overemphasis on audience, and here's Wayne Booth summing up a common 20th-century aesthetic that he observed: 'True art ignores the audience . . . True artists write only for themselves.'⁶⁷ In *The Elements of Style*, E.B. White actually cautions readers,

without any irony, that ‘concern for the reader must be pure . . . The whole duty of a writer is to please and satisfy himself, and the true writer always plays to an audience of one.’⁶⁸ I don’t see how White could have held onto the notion that a writer must only ‘please and satisfy himself’ while penning his children’s classic *Charlotte’s Webb*. It seems to me that, in fact, White must have been scrupulously concerned with pleasing and satisfying an audience that was significantly different from himself, at least in terms of biological age.

Poet and textbook author Dorianne Laux, while writing her poem ‘The Laundromat’ as a student in response to a teacher prompt, had an epiphany about how considering audience could make her a better poet: ‘It was . . . the first time I realized that the voice I used to tell a friend a story or a joke was the same voice I could use for my poetry, all I had to do was make it larger, expand it to include everyone.’⁶⁹ Poetry writing instructors frequently talk about helping young poets ‘find their voices.’ In some cases, such as Laux’s, finding a voice follows when the poet seriously thinks about audience. How you speak depends on whom you think you’re addressing. I tell my students that writing without any consideration for their audience is a great way to ensure that they won’t have much of an audience at all.

Learning from the (Slam)Masters: What Poetry Writing Instructors Can Learn about Delivery from Poetry Slam Coaches and Curators (a Symposium)

In the following symposium, conducted by email, I interviewed poetry slam coaches and curators from around the country. The participants included Jay Davis (hereafter JD), who works as a computer programmer by day and has run an open reading/poetry slam in Portland, Maine for over five years; Len Germinara (hereafter LG), Slam Master of The Nantucket Poetry Slam and Coach of the 2002 East Regional Teen Slam champions from Bridgewater, Massachusetts; Jack McCarthy (hereafter JM), of whom the *Boston Globe* says ‘In the poetry world, he’s a rock star’ (www.standuppoet.net); Angela Elizabeth Boyce (hereafter AEB), fifth place finisher in the 2001 National Poetry Slam in Seattle; and nam (one name, like Sting; no capital letters, like bell hooks), a Hawai’i-based spoken word artist who writes ‘I try to achieve a unique perspective with every performance in both my delivery and my lyrics’ (personal communication).

- TH:** What are some good methods for coping with nerves before and during a performance?
- JD:** (1) Bring your friends. Look at them. Short of friends, look at the audience and find a friendly or receptive face. I almost always

read to a person, even if it's dark and I can't really see. Practice in front of an audience. The first time won't be great, but it gets easier fast. Audiences are usually friendly to newcomers.

(2) Remember that your poem is delivered in the 'voice' of the poem, and you're your 'own' voice. Allow yourself some distance from your work, even if it's autobiographical. Think about it: if you didn't want to be heard, you wouldn't be writing poetry. Claim that. It's power!

(3) Try not to read first (it's hard to figure out the audience), but don't sign up last or you won't hear anything else because you're thinking too much about your upcoming performance. Try and read in the first third of the readers, so the audience – and you – are still fresh.

(4) Try and learn the stage or performance area. If you're reading from the page, check and see that there's enough light. If you can't see the page, the poem will likely bomb (unless you've memorized it). I learned years ago (even before my vision started to get worse from age) to print out my poems in 14 point type. It's much easier to see up there on the dimly lit stage. Even if you've memorized your poem, it's a confidence builder to see the printout in your hand. Beau Sia, who's one of the best performance poets I've ever seen, often brings his poems on paper with him onto the stage. Related to this, if you need to sit when you read (I do), take the extra step and make sure there's a stool to use. Ask the host or stage manager. They're usually very accommodating, but they can't know what your requirements are unless you tell them.

LG: Nothing beats knowing the piece cold. Practice, under varied circumstances. Remember to breathe.

AEB: I believe that breathing deeply and praying help immensely. Also pay attention to the audience reaction and recite an appropriate piece. Being comfortable with the work is also good.

nam: To deal with nerves or fears during or before a performance, simply focus on your content: your words, your truths – your goal with your piece. If you do so, you will feel more purposeful and thus compelled or driven to accomplish your desires. So then your wishes will dissolve your worries. Instead of thinking 'I am going to screw up,' you will think, 'I am going to get my message across no matter what gets in my way.'

TH: In your opinion, what is the number one thing that poets in creative writing classes can learn from slam poets, performance poets, and spoken word artists?

JD: Directness. Much creative writing/academic poetry is too

self-involved and complex for performance. Much of the best ‘academic’ poetry makes for terrible performance. A short list of the things to avoid: (1) Riddles. They can make for good poems when there’s the leisure to peruse the page over and over again to catch the clues, but most audiences need too much stimulation, and if they have to think too much (especially without the privilege of going back over what has already been said) they will stop listening. (2) Unnaturally flowery or complicated language. Audiences see right through it, and stop listening again. (3) Poems without a point. Obscurity for its own sake. Word play that goes nowhere. Things that go well: quoting things that people have heard, making literary references that people get. Both of these things are flattering to the audience, and can stretch and deepen the connection you make with the audience. Russ Sargeant, an amazing performance poet from Maine, does this incredibly well – quoting Shakespeare, Classical myth, Eastern philosophy, pop music, painters you’ve heard of, modern English poets – in such a way as to connect with the audience and make them feel smarter for having heard and followed the point.

LG: Slam has taught me to write it with conviction, make it compelling, and defend it with fervor.

JM: The economics of audience. Suppose you want to get published. You pore over *Poets Market* looking for little magazines that might be interested. You find one with a circulation of 800. If they publish you, how many of those 800 people do you think will actually read your poem? Let’s be generous and say 25%. That gives you 200 people. But the little magazine only publishes 1% of the poem it receives. Statistically, your poem will reach two people. If you send five poems, ten people. How many people would you reach by reading your poem at an open mike tonight?

AEB: Learning what the tone of the poem is and understanding each individual who reads the work will interpret it differently. The immediate feedback of reaction in a performance setting can help a writer gauge the work.

nam: Having been in creative writing classes myself (three poetry workshops at the University of Hawai‘i at Manoa), I would say the number one thing that poets can learn from slam poets, spoken word artists, and performance poets is that words carry more weight than what meets the eye. A poem printed is a text to be read, but a poem performed is a powerhouse to be reckoned with. Performance poetry expresses live emotions, opinions, convictions right in front of your face.

- TH:** In a book called *Something Is Going to Happen*, Allan Wolf advises staying relatively still while performing a poem. ‘Unless you have a specific reason for doing otherwise, plant feet firmly and limit movement,’ writes Wolf. He also advises making any necessary movements exaggerated and deliberate. What kind of advice do you have for performance poets, regarding movement?
- JD:** It depends on the poem. Hand and/or body gestures can be very effective in enhancing the meaning of a poem. When overdone, it is distracting.
- LG:** Mr Wolf’s suggestions are sound. You should be able to deliver the words clearly and succinctly. Once you can do that, you are ready to layer your performance with movement. Movement should amplify the words, not distract from them.
- JM:** I don’t think of myself as a ‘performance poet,’ but as a writer of poems that perform themselves. I lean toward minimal motion unless the poem calls for it. But I don’t think there’s any particular premium on stillness. Whatever you do should feel natural.
- AEB:** Move to naturally enhance your work. Find your own comfort zone of movement.
- nam:** Regarding movement during a performance, I would say do whatever you feel like doing in the moment. That is, whatever happens naturally. You should not force anything – generally speaking. Sometimes right when you utter a certain word or deliver a particular line, your heart – which is directly connected to your mind and entire body – will inspire you to move or emote, so let it happen by itself. It will, if you allow it. Now, of course one can come to a performance with preconceived notions of kinesthetic symbolism to enhance a performance. However, the poet should realize this adds the mental and physical ‘burden’ of having to synchronize movement with words. Nevertheless, it isn’t and doesn’t have to always be a burden if it is functional and the poet knows what he/she is doing. Finally, note, too that the body sometimes has a mind of its own. In this case, one has no choice but to trust it.
- TH:** Wolf suggests that performers assume what he calls the ‘confident stance,’ with hands hanging to the sides, body weight evenly distributed on both hips, and feet firmly planted.⁷⁰ Does this sound good, or do you have other advice about body posture during a poetry performance?
- JD:** This is fine. One other piece of advice: If there’s a microphone, it’s usually there because without it the audience can’t hear. Make friends with the microphone. Many, many otherwise good poets

(and poems) bomb in front of an audience because the poet won't deign to connect with the mic. Even if it means holding your head at a slightly unnatural angle (if it's too unnatural, adjust the mic stand, or ask someone to help), remember – if the microphone is there, it means without it you likely won't be heard.

- LG:** I know many performers, myself included, who still have a challenge in assuming this stance. It usually means (for me, at least) that I haven't prepared well. Practice is the key.
- AEB:** I don't know anyone who stands that way to engage in conversation. Making a connection with the audience is similar to engaging in conversation. Body language creates a sense of connection with the audience, and a stiff body pose will limit the audience's ability to connect, in my opinion.
- nam:** Regarding body posture, from my experience, I would say erect or position your body in a manner that reflects your poem or content. If you are doing a serious piece, use a posture that reflects a solemn tone. If you are doing a humorous piece, be in a posture that says you are going to do some funny poetry. It's all body language. However, sometimes counterpointing or contrasting your body posture with your content can be intriguing. So, all I can really say is to choose a posture that you as the poet feel is appropriate to the individual piece.
- TH:** Is it better to rehearse in the same location where the reading will take place or in a different location (or is there no difference)?
- JD:** It's almost impossible to rehearse for any length of time at the same location, because they're almost always venues of other sorts when the reading isn't happening. I believe the best rehearsal is to completely understand the poem and what you're trying to say. Many, many 'bad' poets read their poems as if they've just heard them for the first time. Mispronouncing words (or pronouncing them unconfidently – mumbling) is an instant turn-off. Learn the poem and speak it as if you mean it. This kind of preparation can be effectively and easily done at home, in the car, in class, or anywhere else. The only upside of rehearsing at the venue is you get to see the audience, the lighting, the ambiance.
- LG:** Practice in your car, on the way to work, in the shower, any place, any time you can.
- JM:** I don't know anybody who makes a particular effort to 'rehearse' in the same space, although it is always a good idea to check out the space and the sound system.
- AEB:** It's best to rehearse in every location you can but particularly in like environments.

- nam:** For rehearsal locale, practice anywhere you can. But if you can practice at the exact place where you will do the actual performance, by all means go for it. In fact, this is the ideal location because now you can better visualize and internalize your surroundings in a way that can only better your real performance. You can now test out the space to see what works and what doesn't, what is practical and what isn't. Not to mention, you can see how loud you can get with or without a microphone, etc. The things you can experiment with are endless. From sound to movement to special relations to lighting to mise en scene.
- TH:** When in the composing process should concern for audience begin? During prewriting? During the first draft? During revision? After the poem is composed and the poet is considering how to perform it? Please elaborate.
- JD:** I'll refer back to the third question and say that a highlight of performance poetry is directness. If you've got a great idea, cast it in such a way that it will mean something to a reader/listener. After a boring, belly-button gazing, mental masturbation poem is written, there's no way to make it audience-friendly.
- LG:** First and foremost I write for me. I try to get everything out when I'm writing. My revisions are to clarify the thoughts and feelings I want expressed. I'm always looking for my voice to come through concise and real. That means sometimes, in some situations I'll have poetry that I will not be able to perform. I won't work a blue poem to a room of octogenarians and I won't read an angry poem to grade school kids. A performer should be able to gauge his audience and choose material appropriate for the occasion.
- JM:** During the first draft, at the very latest, it should become obvious whether this is a page poem or a performance poem – or a possible crossover.
- AEB:** I don't think the audience should be considered at all until you are in front of the group. I would rather the poem be in the moment, creating a feeling of freshness. Each audience is different and the emotions in the room should be reflected in the way the writer performs the piece. This is a return to making the performance a dialog with the audience, being the collective active listeners. I can perform a poem over and over but each time it will be a little different. I will add side notes I believe an audience will react to and simply rely on the common thread of feeling the majority is giving me (more sighing and sadness for a quieter audience, higher pitched voice for a more frenzied feel, etc.).
- nam:** Having any concerns – whatever they may be – while writing or

even prewriting is like jabbing a knife into something. By allowing negative thoughts like 'What is the audience gonna think about my strong content?' or 'Nobody's gonna understand my poem' to interfere with the pre-writing process, one is essentially destroying and, really, killing the poem even before its conception. Almost like abortion. So, to murder the poem at its first stage of birth (i.e. during the first draft) is even a more terrible travesty. At no stage should one allow negativity to affect the creative maturation of the 'baby-poem.' A child with worries and a child without worries are two different children. Which one would you prefer? It's up to you. So think wisely before you do anything.

TH: Is there such a thing as being too concerned about one's audience? Explain.

JD: Don't pander to the audience. Most of them like to be challenged, surprised, even shocked. That's why they're there. Be clear, enunciate, know your poems, show some confidence, speak into the microphone, and the audience will take care of itself. I have found great success starting out poems with really punchy (and possibly controversial) first lines or stanzas: 'I've learned nothing from psychology I've not / been able to hold against myself at one time or another' (from 'Double Negative'); 'I want to make things that are beautiful and transitory. / To make snow angels, I toss my children out an upstairs window' (from 'Snow Angels'). Challenge your audience, but never, ever talk down to them.

LG: In participating in a slam you are seeking approval from your audience. I suggest you like the poem and hope the judges are digging what you have to say.

JM: Sometimes I write a poem that will have meaning only in one particular setting. When I look at last year's output, I judge that there are too many of those poems. But I don't regret the fact that there were some. The occasional poem has a very respected place in the big tent of poetry.

nam: Yes, there is such a thing as being too concerned about one's audience. I remember my first slam poem performance. I was so self-conscious and nervous about what the people in the room would think about my poem. I knew there would be misinterpretations. My poem contained graphic imagery about a supposed darker me. All my worries were before I performed. My performance itself was a different story. I ended up shaking the room and causing waves to roar throughout. They all cheered as I did my piece. Immediately afterwards, over twenty individuals thanked me and praised me for having the courage to speak the 'truth,'

as some of them labeled it. Even Hollywood producer Chris Lee approached me thrice to say my performance was 'great.' I was thankful and relieved. This taught me that to over-worry is a waste of time. One should instead spend that time thinking about how the audience might react if they felt and enjoyed your piece. If you cannot get the audience out of your mind, then at least concentrate not on thoughts of them booing but rather of them applauding – and more specifically, how to get them to do that during / after your performance.

- TH:** When preparing group pieces, what are the most important things for performers to remember? How can coaches help them with issues such as blocking and stage directions?
- JD:** I have no experience with group performing, but my favorite ones were fairly complicated from a stage-direction/blocking point of view.
- LG:** I'm going to assume that all members of the group are off page. Without that, blocking and stage directions are going to be of little help. All movement should enhance the words being spoken. When you are not speaking, pay attention to those speaking.
- AEB:** As a coach of individuals and teams I help them listen to themselves by recording them on tape or video and make them assume different characters and consider how that character would interpret the piece.
- nam:** When preparing group pieces, performers should be aware that this introduces a whole new set of issues, including time management among the team members in terms of rehearsal meetings. Another issue is with the composition of the poem. Everyone writes differently, so when collaborating, different styles are going to inevitably mesh and sometimes clash. Also, remember that different perspectives are going to be represented and that such points of view may lead to conflict. Harmony is the goal, nonetheless: everyone should remember that. Working together. If coaches are available, all the better. They can be the extra eye that sees things the team poets do not, such as proper stage directions. Coaches can also be a good source of encouragement, inspiring artists to constantly unite words in a scheme that has never ever been seen before.
- TH:** What is the ideal number of team members for a group piece?
- JD:** Any size. The main thing with group pieces is the ability to incorporate multiple voices in one poem, which could be very difficult to do with a single 'on the page' piece. Short, quick transitions are good, and require coaching to make it effective. One person starts

a line and another finishes it – it's great, and even greater if the next person changes the meaning of it in some way.

LG: Four.

AEB: I've seen very good duets and teams of four.

nam: The ideal number of team members for a group piece is at least three. This allows for a little more complexity in terms of delivery for a performance piece. More than three brings more problems to deal with.

TH: What other advice do you have for poetry writing teachers who want to include a unit on poetry performance in their classes?

JD: Go to some open readings and slams, and bring your students. Understand the differences between slam and other performance poetry (slam is usually much simpler, with more emphasis on connecting viscerally with the audience – from which, after all, the judges are picked). I know teachers who require their students to attend at least one open reading, and one gives extra credit if they actually perform. I also know two teachers who arrange open readings at their schools (one is a high school) and invite poets from the community to participate. It gives the students a venue (usually their classroom or auditorium) where they feel they belong, but with the addition of bona fide outside poets to keep the bar high.

Many nationally known slam and performance poets tour a lot, and can be hired for special performances at schools, local venues, etc., for a very reasonable rate. Check out www.poetryslam.com and follow some links. [Www.livepoets.com](http://www.livepoets.com) is a great place to find some names and multi-media (videos for many of them). Your local poetry slam (if there is one) is also a great source. Talk to the performers, especially featured performers, and talk to the slam master. They're almost all very friendly and helpful. Write down names and Google for them.

LG: Get a video tape of Reggie Gibson or Taylor Mali. Better yet, take the class on a field trip to see them perform.

JM: Bring in a poet to kick things off. We work cheap, and in three minutes we can demonstrate what you couldn't explain in a week. Or show the video *Slammation* (unless language will get you into trouble). If at all possible, get your class out to an open mic. If there's none handy, set one up. Invite somebody to come to your school and do a reading and run an open mic; publicize it in the community. Poets and wannabes will come out of the woodwork. Some of them will be bad. This lets the student know that the bar isn't very high. They don't have to apologize for their own work.

- AEB:** Combine the canon with unknowns. Contacting local poets and asking them to come in and share their experiences would be nice. I always enjoy going in and reading work and answering questions no matter how young or old the class. Have students go to open mics or featured performances, not to read but to listen. Encourage the students to read a multitude of work but let their influences be things outside of that work. Listen to different types of music during class, classical one day, jazz another, and see if students pick up inspiration from that. Or try going outside for a class and writing in that environment. And let students know not everyone can write in every environment.
- nam:** Make every performance assignment interesting for the students, as they are the ones performing. If it's not interesting for them, chances are it won't be for the audience. The students should feel something with each new performance, ideally something never before felt. Even if it is merely a sense of achievement. They should feel purposeful with each assignment. Sometimes having a goal in mind can be a strong motivator.

Practical Classroom Applications

- Bring in a guest performance poet for a demonstration and a question-and-answer session.
- Show excerpts from the documentary *Slamnation* (or another film featuring performance poetry), and have students discuss elements of delivery such as posture, hand gestures, use of the microphone, etc.
- As a class, go to a forensics meet in which your school's team is competing with teams from other schools. Observe the delivery styles at all of the events, but pay particular attention during the poetry interpretation event.
- Teach blocking and stage directions: 'Cheating out' refers to turning slightly toward the audience when onstage interacting with other performers. 'Explain to the students that an audience is like a third person (who happens to be very wide and hard of hearing) whom you must include in your conversation and activities.'⁷¹
- Take to heart Wolf's advice on 'command,' defined as 'the act of taking control of the performance area and the audience's attention'.⁷² 'Unless you have a specific reason for doing otherwise, plant feet firmly and limit movement.'⁷³ Wolf also advises students to make any necessary movements exaggerated and deliberate while reading poetry out loud.
- Teach students to incorporate physical gestures into their readings. Joel Lipman, a University of Toledo professor who has performed his

poetry at the famed Green Mill in Chicago, advocates ‘physicality, often physical motion,’ and written texts with ‘marginalia and strokes of emphasis.’⁷⁴

- Teach Wolf’s ‘confident stance’: hands hanging on your sides, body weight evenly distributed on both hips, feet firmly planted.⁷⁵ (See Angela Elizabeth Boyce’s counter-advice.)
- Pass on Wolf’s advice on pace: ‘Encourage your students to pause briefly after important lines and gestures, almost as if they were playing freeze tag. Pausing in this way is called “taking a beat.” You can coach students to take a beat by having them pause the length of time it takes to breathe in one deliberate breath.’⁷⁶
- Try Wolf’s voice projection exercise: Have students ‘YAWP’ as if the exclamation ‘comes out of their mouths like a cork popping out of a toy gun.’⁷⁷ Teachers are used to speaking before groups and projecting; many students are not. Teachers need to spend time encouraging students to belt it out, not relying too much on the microphone, as microphones are wont to malfunction at the most inopportune times. SlamAmerica organizer Gary Mex Glazner says ‘Slam’s a reaction to academic poets who stand at a podium and mumble into their beards,’⁷⁸ and teaching delivery in the classroom is an attempt to prevent the next generation of academic poets from having poor, beard-mumbling reading styles.
- Pass on Wolf’s ‘space’ tip: Have the performance in someplace other than the practice space (generally this means someplace besides the classroom). This ‘increases student concentration, particularly if the play space is a more formal setting than the practice space.’⁷⁹
- Try the following exercise described by Bryan Walpert in ‘It’s All in the Delivery: An Approach to Teaching the Music of Language’: Have students write two versions of a poem and have the class decide ‘which poem *performs* its meaning rather than simply stating it.’⁸⁰
- Address Dana Gioia’s recommendation that poetry readings be put on jointly with other types of art (such as music) and other types of public speech (short lectures, for example). ‘Such combinations would attract an audience from beyond the poetry world without compromising quality.’⁸¹ Poetry writing teachers who are putting on public readings of class work could consider putting on the performance jointly with the music classes or with, say, the school’s forensics club. This would surely widen the audience for the reading, though it might lengthen it too much. I’ve found that simply having students invite their parents and friends to the class reading brings in a crowd that comes ‘from beyond the poetry world.’
- Teach students to write ballads and other forms of metered, rhyming,

populist poetry. Maybe even cowboy poetry. Start by giving them some poems out loud and maybe on video.

- Why not begin a unit on delivery with invention activities geared toward writing poems in the different subgenres of ritual oral traditional poetry: (1) incantation; (2) lullabies; (3) wedding ritual songs; (4) laments; (5) songs for special festivals; (6) praise poems (eulogies)?
- To apply Quintilian's insight that understanding one's material is the first key to effective delivery, have students write detailed prose paraphrases and analyses of poems they plan to read out loud, whether the poems are their own original works or written by others.
- Adaptation of the ancient *suasoria*: Advise a famous person on a contemporary, historical, or mythological issue.
- Adaptation of the ancient *controversia*: Give students fictitious courtroom situations to dramatize (in verse).
- Adaptation of the ancient *prosopopoeia*: Have students write a poem from the point of view of a historical personage or a character from literature. The student could imagine a conversation between himself or herself and the personage or they could write a dialogue between two historical/literary personages.
- Audience analysis exercise #1: Have students interview some avid poet readers in the community and find out some things about their backgrounds, their likes, and their dislikes. Have them share and discuss their findings with the class.
- Audience analysis exercise #2: Have students attend a poetry reading, on or off campus, and then have them write reflectively about ways the reader did or didn't satisfy them. Have them share and discuss their findings with the class.
- Audience invoked exercise: Step 1: Have students conduct textual analysis on a published poem, seeking cues in the text that describe the audience. Step 2: Have students conduct textual analysis on a poem of their own, seeking cues in the text that describe the audience. Step 3: Have students write an audience-centered revision plan, followed by a revision of the poem.
- Written delivery: Have students produce a class book. Put them in charge of choosing fonts, choosing paper, finding artwork, designing the cover, selecting and ordering poems for the book, collating, and binding.
- Written delivery: Show students some examples of cover letters written to editors and help them craft their own.
- Gesturing: Have students observe an animated conversation, taking note of every gesture – every lift of the eyebrows, every toss of the head – and write about the ideas and emotions that these gestures

help bring across. The aim of this exercise is to make students aware of their own natural ability to convey meaning through gesture.

Notes

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28. *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 1993, s.v. 'poetic contests.'
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33. *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 1993, s.v. 'bouts-rimés.'
34. *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 1993, s.v. 'performance.'

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Chapter 8

Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackboard Page

Writerly Café

Writing instructors have found a number of ways to enhance their classes using online environments; one of these enhancements is the use of online critiquing. As early as 1999, there were already 278 online writing centers (or OWLs – online writing laboratories) linked to the National Writing Center Association's web site, and according to Kevin Leander of Vanderbilt University, 'a growing number include email links that permit students to submit their papers for online tutoring.'¹ One of these OWLs, the online writing center at University of Missouri-Columbia, features a 'Writerly Café, which is dubbed by the site as a "conversation coffeehouse for writers," an "open environment in which to discuss writing in any form".'²

In similar fashion, instructors who use the computer-enhanced, five-canonical model of poetry writing instruction can greatly benefit their students by making use of online environments for peer critique. Here are thirteen good reasons to take advantage of this technology.

(1) Online Workshopping Encourages Everyone to Participate

I

Among twenty workshopping student poets,
The only moving things
Were the tongues of the teacher and the loudest student.

In 'Teaching Creative Writing Online,' Heather Beck discusses her experiences teaching in an online Master's program at Manchester Metropolitan University in the United Kingdom. She claims that, because there is a written record, a paper trail (or rather a paperless trail), students who would otherwise remain quiet during workshop discussions are motivated

to actively participate: 'Students have to post and make feedback on postings each week; if they don't, everyone can see this, and if they make a poor job, it's also quite apparent.'³ The use of technology also draws out those students who wouldn't normally speak up due to shyness, speech impediments, or other personal reasons, according to Beck: 'Since the bulletin board allows students to reflect for as long as they want before replying, it might be more conducive to encouraging shyer students or those with disabilities or whose language might not be English.'⁴ Additionally, using Blackboard or WebCT for workshops, rather than holding them in class, can keep the more extroverted students (who are not always the most reflective students) from hogging class time with prolix, sometimes ponderous, critiques. 'During online seminars, it's also not possible for a single student to dominate without interruption since everyone can type and post messages online at once. Moreover, it's difficult to type and get everyone to read a long-winded monologue,' writes Beck.⁵

In 'Ten Ways Online Education Matches, or Surpasses, Face-to-Face Learning,' Mark Kassop shows that a higher percentage of students participate in online discussion boards than in in-class discussions. Similarly to Beck, Kassop includes reserved students, non-native speakers, and those who are easily distracted and need more time to collect their thoughts as those who participate more in online environments than in the classroom.⁶

(2) Online Workshopping Is More Flexible than In-Class Workshopping

II
I was of three minds,
Like a poetry workshop
Held simultaneously in three locations.

In her online classes, Beck uses WebCT, a virtual learning environment similar to Blackboard. One of the virtues of the online environment, according to Beck, is its flexibility: '[S]tudents can log on whenever they want and stay for as long or as little as they want.'⁷ She also points out that guest instructors can easily participate without having to get in their cars or on airplanes. Instructors can even arrange to have their class linked with other classes in different parts of the world in order to broaden the learning community and give students access to feedback that might not be available in a class that might have a fairly homogeneous population.⁸

In addition to using the WebCT's bulletin boards, which enable students to comment on their own schedules, and on each others' work,

Beck utilizes WebCT's seminar classrooms to hold live online discussions. She describes it as being 'like a telephone conference or a videoconferencing session, inviting immediate responses, except these are obviously in written rather than spoken form.'⁹ Blackboard has a similar feature called 'Virtual Classroom,' which instructors could use for group discussions. It would save class time while producing the vitality of in-class workshopping. Beck suggests that such groups contain no more than eight students, 'with five to six being ideal,' because larger groups can produce 'numerous conversations occurring simultaneously, which can be confusing and difficult to follow, a bit like T.S. Eliot's "The Wasteland" gone into severe overdrive.'¹⁰

Marcelle Freiman, coordinator of the creative writing program at Macquarie University in Australia, uses WebCT for online distance learning courses, similar to Beck's classes, as well as for web-assisted courses that also feature face-to-face meetings, similar to my classes. Having taught in both environments simultaneously, Frieman has come to the conclusion that more learning takes place in the online workshops than in the face-to-face critique sessions: 'My experience has been that students engaged in online learning, learn more effectively and make better progress in the extended-time structure and environment than students who learn in the face-to-face workshop.'¹¹ Freiman reports that 'the online simulation of face-to-face workshops' in her classes has 'revealed some surprising benefits for students' writing and their learning processes.'¹² Increased flexibility is one of the benefits that Freiman identifies. She writes: 'In teaching online, it becomes clear that the expansion of time and the flexibility of online engagement creates an environment that can promote learning, and that it demonstrably enhances deep learning by encouraging higher level responses to set tasks.'¹³ Freiman goes on to point out that '[w]ithin the extended workshop periods, students have the freedom to work at times that are preferred, or most conducive towards their own learning.'¹⁴ In an anonymous survey of the pros and cons of online workshop environments, one of my students concurs with Frieman: 'Some of the comments are more detailed, and people can go back and re-read the poem after a couple of days and maybe offer something new.'

(3) Online Workshopping Saves Time for Other Pedagogically-Essential Classroom Tasks

III

The Blackboard page whirled with conversation.

It was a small, but important, part of the poetry writing classroom.

Vivian Jewell, a high-school English teacher, has found that at the high-school level, 'class activities that are predicated on the idea that all students have completed the assigned reading usually fail, so teachers create assignments that can succeed when only a portion of the class has finished the reading assignment.'¹⁵ Jewell has concluded that the discussion board features of programs such as Blackboard, WebCT, and the lesser-known Caddie.NET can provide a way for teachers to structure their classes in a way that doesn't cater to the lowest common denominator. The technology enables Jewell to reverse the usual order of activities: 'Instead of asking students to read at home and discuss the text in class, students can read in class and discuss the text at home.'¹⁶

In computer-enhanced five-canonical poetry writing classes, instructors reverse the usual order of activities, just as Jewell does in her literature classes. Whereas instructors who follow the traditional full-class, face-to-face workshop model ask their students to write at home and then reserve class time for critiquing, instructors who follow the computer-enhanced five-canonical model devote the bulk of class time to writing and writing instruction, and students then critique each other outside of class. Instructors who adopt this model ought to inculcate principles derived from each of these five canons. But five-canonical based instruction requires a considerable amount of time, and full-class workshopping has a way of gobbling up class time. Online discussion boards carve out precious class time for writing activities, classified according to the canons, which comprise the more important part of the teaching and learning experience in a five-canonical based poetry writing classroom.

(4) Online Workshopping Facilitates a Student-Centered Creative Writing Community

IV

A teacher and a student

Are one.

A teacher and a student and a group of the student's peers

Are one.

Maria de Vasconcelos, a Borough of Manhattan Community College English professor, has written about her use of Blackboard in a computer-enhanced modern poetry course. She reports that one of the benefits of the Blackboard discussion board is that it turned an aggregate of students into counterparts in a bona fide learning community. She suggests that using Blackboard increases student involvement and decreases the students' reliance on the teacher-as-authority figure. Students who par-

ticipate in Blackboard discussions of their own essays are more likely to own their own ideas, according to de Vasconcelos. She argues that the teacher-centered lecture model too often leads students to blindly make all revisions, or corrections, suggested by their teacher. On the other hand, in a model that facilitates peer discussion, students maintain control over their own work, and they become more engaged because they have an audience that they feel comfortable addressing, one with which they are eager to communicate.¹⁷

In low-residency (also known as brief-residency) MFA programs, online learning environments such as Blackboard and WebCT have been an integral part of a recent paradigm shift. In a traditional low-residency program such as Goddard (the original low-residency program, founded in 1976 by Ellen Bryant Voigt) or Warren Wilson (arguably the most prestigious of these programs, established by Bryant Voigt in 1981), each student works one-on-one with a mentor, having packets full of poems critiqued via snail mail. In the new online-based programs, used at University of British Columbia, University of New Orleans, and elsewhere, students interact more with each other, critiquing each others' poems on Blackboard or WebCT.

Andrew Gray, director of the low-residency program at University of British Columbia, states that 'one of the problems with the mentorship model that most low-residency MFAs use is that it doesn't necessarily sustain community over the periods of time between residencies.'¹⁸ Bill Lavender, director of the low-residency program at University of New Orleans, concurs. Speaking as a panelist on the topic 'Low-Residency Programs: Then and Now' at the 2005 conference of AWP, Lavender offers the following: 'One of the big differences between an online program and a packet program is the interaction with other students.'¹⁹

Beck identifies student-centered learning as the first benefit of online teaching, arguing that workshopping online makes students see instructors 'not so much as experts but as facilitators for their own learning'.²⁰ As evidence of this, she relates that her students suggested several uses for the WebCT bulletin board that she hadn't thought of, including 'one for competitions and one for student publications'.²¹ It is certainly gratifying to watch students take responsibility for their own learning. When I taught workshop-based classes, I often worried about how the students would progress after the semester ended and they no longer had their group to lean on; in classes that emphasize generative writing exercises, I worry about how much they are internalizing, to what degree they will continue to do interesting things in their writing when I'm not in the front of the room with prepared writing prompts. The students I don't worry about are the ones who are engaged with their own learning and

their own writing, the ones who give themselves assignments, come up with their own reading lists, and form their own critique groups independently, as needed. Because the online critique format demands that students be more independent, working on their own time rather than bringing poems to class and passively receiving feedback, it helps make students more responsible for their own learning.

Freiman has noticed that the online workshops foster community in ways that traditional workshops don't. She writes:

[B]y workshopping their writing in small, private forums in extended workshopping time periods of two to three weeks, these students are able to form supportive relationships and a sense of collegiality that is less likely to happen in the compressed experience (space and time) of the two-hour weekly on-campus workshop.²²

(5) Online Workshopping Increases the Potential for Thoughtful, Considered Responses

V

I do not know which to prefer,
The constructive comments that you make,
Or the restraint in what you hold back,
Getting feedback on Blackboard
Or just after.

In both Blackboard and WebCT environments, there is no way for students to remove their own postings, short of asking the instructor, who functions as a site administrator, to remove postings on their behalf. In 'Teaching Creative Writing Online,' Beck frets over an online argument that erupted after 'one student posted more severe feedback on another student's work than was intended,' and she advises instructors to stress that 'it's wise to take special care regarding tone when giving feedback.'²³ I agree that it is important for students to carefully consider tone, both in their critiques and in their poems. I think this is actually one of the advantages of written critiques over spoken ones: it gets students in the habit of carefully considering both tone and audience while writing.

Likewise, the student poet who is reading a critique and trying to decipher its tone is learning a valuable skill. If the student keeps writing poetry after graduation, most of the feedback that he or she receives will be in writing. Editors are not likely to call writers or show up at their doorsteps with suggestions; they are more likely to write notes suggesting revisions, and sometimes the publication of the poem depends on the

writer's ability to first understand the content and the tone of the suggestion and then to revise appropriately.

Joseph Boyden, a fiction writing professor in the low-residency program at University of New Orleans, describes a remarkable level of student involvement in full-class Blackboard-based workshops. 'It's not unusual to have 150–200 posts in one story,' said Boyden.²⁴ Beck's experience with WebCT-based online workshops has been similar. She states: 'It was not uncommon for students to post 5000 words of detailed, line by line feedback on submissions!'²⁵ My undergraduate students, working in small groups, don't make nearly as many comments as Boyden's classes do, and the comments are not nearly as prolix as Beck's, but they give each other extensive, helpful feedback without using any class time to do it. At the end of this chapter, I will excerpt one of their online discussions, and readers can decide for themselves whether or not this mode of feedback successfully rivals (or even surpasses) the full-class, in-class workshop model.

(6) Online Workshopping Saves Paper

VI

Discarded drafts of poems filled the recycling bin
With barbaric paper wads.

The shadow of the Blackboard page
Crossed the room, to and fro.

The future
Traced in the shadow
A decipherable effect.

Steven Cramer, director of the low-residency MFA program at Lesley University, says that instructors can mark up texts by hand and pass them on to students as .jpg files.²⁶ In an anonymous survey of the pros and cons of online workshop environments, one of my student describes the advantage of this method as follows: 'This saves trees.' In a world where resources are becoming scarce and where writers are among the worst offenders in regards to this particular resource, it's nice to have technology out there that allows us to write and rewrite without ecological guilt. Using less paper also means that it's easier to be organized. Another of my students writes: 'It's easy to post poetry and get feedback, there are no loose papers, and everything is easily accessible.' Since both poems and feedback are posted online, no one can lose them (or have the excuse of having misplaced them).

(7) Rigor: Online Workshopping Holds Teachers and Students Accountable

VII

O poets sitting in front of classrooms,
Why do you imagine green bards?
Do you not see how the Blackboard pages
Open on the laptops
Of the students in front of you?

For a typical full-class, in-class workshop session, the instructor can get away with putting in little or no prep time. Some instructors do read student poems in advance and make written comments. Some augment the workshop with discussions of assigned books and by preparing assignments for students to complete out of class. But all too often, the format is more like this: at the end of each session, the instructor asks a handful of students to bring in poems to be critiqued during the next session. At the beginning of the next class session, these students pass copies of their poems around the room. One by one, these students read their poems out loud while the instructor and the other students make written comments on the spot. Then, after fifteen or twenty minutes of discussion, the cycle repeats, with another student reading a poem out loud and then receiving on-the-spot feedback. The quieter students seem to disappear for weeks at a time, until it is their turn to have a poem critiqued.

This no-prep, full-class workshop is an ideal setup for teachers who view themselves as writers first and teachers second (a distant second), those who would never refer to themselves as academics. It's also an ideal setup for students who are looking for undemanding classes. But a shift to the more rigorous computer-enhanced, five-canonical classroom model, facilitated by intensive small-group, online workshops, would not attract teachers who aren't serious about teaching or students who aren't serious about learning. According to the late writer and teacher K. Margaret Grossman, Theodore Roethke had an interesting method for separating the sincere aspiring poets from the rest of the herd during the first week of his creative writing class at the University of Washington. The class would be packed beyond capacity with enrolled students and others eager to enroll in the course and study with the famous poet. On the first day, Roethke would survey the room and say, 'So, you want to be writers. Sheee-itt!' Then he would walk out and not come back until the next class session. By then, the class would have thinned down to just a handful of students, the rest having decided that Roethke was either crazy or just a complete jerk. 'Okay, it looks like only the serious ones are here,' Roethke would

announce. 'Now we can begin.'²⁷ Shifting to the more rigorous computer-enhanced, five-canonical model is a more appropriate way of saying 'So, you want to be writers' and limiting the class to those who are serious enough to roll up their sleeves and work hard.

Beck describes the heavy workload that she had when 'some extremely zealous students were making nearly a dozen responses to each bulletin board posting' and the class 'agreed to limit weekly postings to one or two per student'.²⁸ As an instructor who has struggled to get students to put more than the minimum required effort into online discussions of each others' work, I've got to say that I wish I had Beck's problem, instead. Tracking the online activity of her graduate students during the first year of Manchester Metropolitan University's Master's program, Beck has recorded a rather staggering level of involvement: 'In compiling statistics after this first year of teaching, eleven part-time students sent me 1107 emails; they posted 734 messages to the bulletin board, and they accessed the site on average 939 times.'²⁹ Wow! I want British graduate students, rather than American undergraduates. This year my students complained about the work load approximately 1107 times, called me an unreasonable slave-driver give or take 734 times, and whined on average 939 times. (Not really. I love my students, but their engagement level isn't quite at the level that Beck reports.) While online workshopping definitely increases student participation overall, the exact level of participation will naturally vary depending upon the level of experience and level of interest of the students involved.

(8) Online Workshopping Makes the Poetry Writing Class More Writing Intensive

VIII

I know metaphors, accents,
And subtle anapestic rhythms;
But I know, too,
That the Blackboard page is involved
In what I know.

Beck contends that using WebCT for her online classes has made those classes much more writing-intensive than traditional creative writing classes: '[W]ith the online course, general discussions, requests for elaboration or assistance, answers to directed questions are all in written form, meaning that the online course is more writing-intensive than its campus-based equivalent.'³⁰ The computer-enhanced, five-canonical model is even more writing-intensive than Beck's online model – by a long shot –

because in addition to the writing that the students do on Blackboard, there is the writing that they do in class. In the computer-enhanced, five-canonical model, the five types of writing exercises take up the bulk of class time. For example, in my computer-enhanced, five canon poetry writing classes, the students spend upwards of forty-five minutes of each class session writing, in addition to the time they spend writing outside of class.

(9) Online Workshopping Can Improve Students' Critiquing Skills

IX

When the student was critiquing a classmate on Blackboard,
She marked the lines that she liked
And thought hard about why she liked them.

Maria de Vascencelos argues that Blackboard enables weaker students to learn critique skills by imitating their stronger counterparts.³¹ Frieman agrees that critiquing in online environments can lead to better critique skills, crediting the fact that the comments are recorded and left online as a motivation for increased effort on the part of student critics: '[T]he fact that their comments remain there for the duration of the course acts as a form of 'published', or recorded, critique, promoting the motivation for good performance.'³²

Frieman also argues that the full-class, face-to-face workshop model can foster anxiety and defensiveness on the part of student critics, as well as student writers: 'At their best, online discussions form a progressive narrative thread, mediated by both instructor and students. One might compare this to the on campus workshop where pressure to perform and anxiety tend to inhibit deep learning.'³³ While all poetry writing instructors ought to provide students with workshopping guidelines, online workshopping that allows for workshopping at students' own pace allows students more time to confirm that they are abiding by such guidelines, especially when the guidelines are posted online and can be reviewed at any time.

(10) Online Workshopping Can Increase Student Motivation

X

At the class Blackboard site
Full of thoughtful discussion,
Even the bawds of euphony
Would learn something about poetry.

Freiman suggests that students in traditional workshops often become unmotivated, or discouraged, because the model forces them to spend energy protecting their egos, rather than taking risks, experimenting with new modes of writing. I admit that in the past, as an undergraduate and graduate student taking traditional workshops, there were times when I brought finished, old poems to workshop because I wanted to look good and I wasn't prepared to sit quietly and withstand the onslaught of brutal honesty (and sometimes thinly veiled hostility), coming from all directions that is often launched at student poets in the full-class workshop environment.

Freiman refers to a 1999 study by John Biggs called 'What the Student Does: Teaching for Enhanced Learning' in which Biggs described the advantages of a pedagogy in which students 'feel free to focus on the task, not on watching their backs.'³⁴ In graduate workshops, where students often feel a sense of rivalry as they vie for status within their community and favor in the eyes of the instructor, not to mention awards and fellowships, the full-class workshop model does frequently create a competitive situation in which students are so busy watching their backs that they don't have energy for the ostensible tasks at hand.

Freiman points out that online environments provide students with a screen that shields students 'from direct face-to-face interaction, while enabling them to work interactively with others in a far more "objective" manner.'³⁵ On this point, Freiman concludes that 'although reasons for motivation are more various than this, it is true that motivation increases as stress is reduced.'³⁶

(11) Online Workshopping Can Improve Students' Critical Writing Skills

XI
He rode to school
In a city bus.
Once, a fear pierced him,
In that he mistook
The shadow of his ballpoint pen
For some kind of unwieldy spear.

Maria de Vascencelos contends that, in addition to improving students' critiquing skills, Blackboard enables weaker students to improve their ability to write about literature by imitating the terminology and usage of their stronger counterparts.³⁷ Also, since each can comment, each student

has additional opportunities to write comments, and knowing that everyone can see them is a powerful motivator for writing one's best.

(12) Online Workshopping Facilitates Assessment Measures

XII

The river is moving.

Let's monitor from the Blackboard page

And rescue those who can't swim.

Freiman points out that online learning environments facilitate assessment of learning outcomes such as increased knowledge of genres, advanced reading and critical skills, and improved skills in language use. 'Online teaching and learning, an environment which is particularly suited to the task-based, reflective activities of creative writing, provides opportunities for us to observe, measure, and assess these outcomes,' states Freiman.³⁸ Freiman points out that it can be difficult to observe and record what happens in a classroom, whereas '[t]he online workshop provides an environment for active learning in which it is possible to see what students actually do in their learning.'³⁹

Frieman also claims that the online environment provides a means for earlier diagnosis of problems. To illustrate this, she recalls a student who was increasingly articulate in the online critiques that he wrote on drafts of poems by other students, but whose own poems were poor. She was able to intervene and help the student find ways to transfer the writing skills used in his critiques over to his poems. In a full-class workshop, this student may have merely been passed over, labeled a bad writer, especially if he couldn't critique poems verbally as well as he could in writing.⁴⁰

(13) Online Workshopping Keeps the Conversation Going

XIII

It was evening all afternoon.

It was time for class

And it was almost time for class.

The students sat and conversed

On their Blackboard pages.

How many workshop students have had the following experience: the class is having a lively discussion about a poem, and the student wants to chime in, piggybacking on someone else's comment, or retorting to someone else's comment, but the student is unable to get a word in edgewise? Or alternately, how many workshop students have thought about a class dis-

cussion after class and hit on just the right response to another student's comment, only to have the initial comment long forgotten by the writer? Or what about the student who rummages through their home library and finds the perfect quote from, say, an essay by Octavio Paz, that clears up something that the class had debated? In theory, the student could go to the next class and announce 'I was thinking about that issue we were talking about during our last class, and I found this quote that sheds some light on it.' But the student would risk a lot of blank looks from classmates who couldn't remember the thread of the previous discussion. In an online workshop, there is a written record of everyone's comments, and you can simply post a reply to any comment, at any time. Beck remarks: 'The bulletin board is open 24 hours a day for reading, posting, and downloading messages.'⁴¹

According to Beck, most of her students keep the online discussion going even after the semester has ended: 'When the course finished this spring, nearly all students decided to carry on with the writing workshops on their own over the summer.'⁴² I admit I cringed when I first read that Beck's students kept workshopping after the year ended, because I view endless workshopping as a form of faulty dependence, similar to that of ex-drinkers who still anxiously attend twelve-step meetings twenty years after their last drink, fearful that their firm resolve will collapse without the aid of the group. There is a greater danger of workshop dependence in a setup like Manchester Metropolitan's online Master's program than there is in a five-canonical-based class that treats workshopping as secondary to generative exercises. Less students will come out of a five-canonical-based class with a dependence on workshopping, and more will go on to become confident, self-reliant writers, because students in a five-canonical-based class have the chance to internalize an arsenal of techniques designed to help them begin, develop, revise, memorize, and perform their poems. In her web-assisted classes, Frieman finds that students become more self-sufficient as the semester goes on:

[S]tudents workshopped their final works online, without my input, benefiting from the workshopping skills and confidence they had learnt in their shared judgments. Witnessing this leap by students into autonomous learning has been the most gratifying aspect of teaching creative writing online.⁴³

For those students who do choose to continue to participate in workshops after graduation, online workshopping provides an ideal format for preparing them for 21st-century non-academic/post-academic critique groups, which are increasingly being held online. One example of a very high level online workshop is the discussion board hosted by *Alsop Review*, an online literary journal.

My purpose here isn't necessarily to draw attention to this web site, but to predict that the practice of workshopping online will burgeon in the near future, and soon face-to-face workshop will be the exception, rather than the norm. I consider this a positive trend, especially for poets with frantic schedules or those who live far away from centers of high culture such as New York City and San Francisco. Small-group, online workshopping prepares students for this type of environment in ways that full-class, face-to-face workshopping cannot.

An Online Discussion of Megan Kelley's poem 'Very Small,' featuring Flat Top Tony and the Purple Canoes

The following is a sample online peer critique session, held on Blackboard by a small group of undergraduates at Western Kentucky University. I have edited it for length. The actual discussion goes on for several more pages. This group of students, one of three groups in my Spring 2005 workshop, refer to themselves collectively as Flat Top Tony and the Purple Canoes. They are Megan Kelley (hereafter MK), Tara Koger (hereafter TK), Megan Somers (hereafter MS), Ryan Dearbone (hereafter RD), Danielle Underwood (hereafter DU), Craig Williams (hereafter CW1), and Chuck Williamson (hereafter CW2).

First, here's the first draft of Megan's poem, which came from an in-class invention exercise that the students call 'The Wringer' because it involves taking a guided free write about a childhood memory and then putting it through the wringer (cutting out all of the unnecessary words and applying other revision techniques).

very small:

very small:

I sat on my father's shoulders

he walked,

I rode, around the deserts

our house,

flimsy stand-in for the horizon

the sunlight

coming across the floor with weight

heat pressing

the walls cave in

screen door
moving backwards on the carpet

brown carpet
hard-packed like dirt

pressed down
the explosion of sky

we walked
over pebbles large as my eyes

his hands
on the baked gingerbread walls

the whispers:
'this is blue' 'this is red'

didn't understand
he was talking about color

this is blue
the cool indoor arms, the shelter

this is red
the sharp edges of vases, the inside of hands

we knelt
in the sunlight, two wild things

touching, touching
'this is yellow'

this is yellow

the light
crept away unnoticed

we faded
into 'this is grey'

the words
became the soft night down

the desert blanket
the night.

RD: I like this piece. I like the form of it but I'm kind of confused by it too. I started to get lost right about

we knelt
in the sunlight, two wild things

touching, touching
'this is yellow'

this is yellow

but I figured it out. I like how you used colors to set the changing tones and moods of the piece. One thing I'm not understanding is the title. I'm sure it represents something, I'm just not sure what. Also this part

the words
became the soft night down

the desert blanket
the night.

I think need a little bit of clarifying. Great job, Cheers!

CW1: I have to tell you (and it could be the typical late hour with which I decided to critique this): this poem baffled me. I didn't get it. So I read it several times until I realized that I fell right into your sneaky trap. That's exactly what you wanted me to do! Read the poem over and over. You see, a bad poem? I'd just give it a cursory glance, give a half hearted 'nice job' and move on never to look back for fear I'll turn into a pillar of ashes. That's what I'd do for a bad poem. But a good poem makes me reevaluate (is that a word?) it until my eyes bleed, looking for meaning like my life depends on it. It's kind of like the appeal of David Lynch movies; that feeling of a riddle that must be solved. Even if you initially hated *Mulholland Drive* (which I did), you are strangely driven to watch it repeatedly (which I did) and eventually you come to love it (which I did). Such is the stages I went through when it comes to your poem. I liked how rhythmic it was; I could very much

hear this set to music. I liked the imagery and the colors that are used. My favorite lines include:

we walked / over pebbles large as my eyes
we knelt / in the sunlight, two wild things
touching, touching / 'this is yellow'

MS: At first I thought this was going to be one of those daughter/father poems of the daughter remembering the days as a child. With the second line that just seemed perfect.

I like the two line stanzas. That is very interesting, but they do not seem to flow well. There seems to be an abrupt change each time and it just frustrated me. I may have missed something so take all of this for what it is worth.

I know as a child I remember being on my dad's shoulders, and I am still very close to him today. I think that plays into my interpretation on this one because I just expected to get these warm memories from the childhood and they weren't there. I'm not really sure what kind of suggestions to offer so I'll just stop there.

CW2: Not everything needs to flow perfectly, Megan S.; Megan K. isn't an MC bustin' out the fat rhymes and such. If the content justifies the form, I think the two-line terseness works – and I would be very upset if Megan K. changed it, honestly. All artists have struggled to redefine the constructs of their fields; revolutionaries found a new language for familiar material. Check out Jean-Luc Godard, for instance, whose counter-cinema forced viewers into a Brechtian realm of estrangement, driving them away from the lull of conventional cinema, directing them to his Marxist polemic – and so on.

Then again, I've grown unnaturally fond of this poem.

What's more, the abrupt shift from one image to the next . . . doesn't it force you to redirect your attention and absorb the many icons of childhood experience? I think Megan's found an incredible alternative to the old fashioned penny arcade slide show – or maybe a house. In this poem, images are built with bricks, one at a time, and we are left unable to see the whole until the completion of the house.

MS: As far as the colors, I just don't get much out of them. I saw the gray as the fading of the relationship, but that was all that I could make out. I don't know why I'm missing it so much here. Going back and reading it again the stanzas work pretty well. I'm not sure what caught me with it last time. I think it's just a little jarring to see all two line stanzas. I just felt like you touched on the child/

father relationship and then it was gone. There are no specifics of the relationship and it just left me to wonder what the relationship really was. The bottom line is that I'm just missing something in the poem. I think it's just me having a mental block and not what you have written. I tend to do that with poetry sometimes so . . .

MK: I took Chuck's nudge on giving a sense of past or present or future, but now I'm considering the alternatives . . . so . . . Hmm . . . what do you guys think of these?

'*this* was blue: / the cool indoor arms, the shelter'

versus

'*this was* blue: / the cool indoor arms, the shelter'

versus

'blue was *this* / the cool indoor arms, the shelter'

Here's where I'm at at this moment: I'm kind of wanting to stick with the 'this was blue' format in some form because it mimics the statements of the father. The italic emphasis of 'this' versus the alternative of 'was' I'm not sure on . . . I'm leaning towards the 'this' because I'm wanting to show the idea rather than necessarily emphasizing the past of it.

But give me some thoughts, guys. I'm like the overprotective mum right now. I keep leaning towards keeping it in the nest when maybe I need to let it fly.

DU: Megan, Wow. You have some really great lines in this poem. I think this is one of my favorites that you have written thus far. Although, there are parts that I don't quite understand. I do understand the love of little girls for their dads. Our dads are our heroes. No matter if they are poor, rich, ugly, or handsome. This poem brought back memories of when I was little and my daddy took me on dates with him to places like McDonalds:). My dad is still very special to me. He is still my hero. So I really liked that imagery. My favorite lines:

the light
crept away unnoticed

we faded
into 'this is grey'

the words
became the soft night down

the desert blanket
the night.

This poem is absolutely beautiful! Thanks for the great read. ;)

CW2: I say: find a balance between this isolation of couplets and tradition. I think some of the internal transitional phrasing works well, but I would suggest ditching anything that would, potentially, connect one stanza from the next.

CW2: I've read many of the arguments posted by our peers, complaining of confusion, incoherence, etc. While I can see where their critiques might hold some weight in this discussion, I would argue that enforcing some silly transitions would mar this poem's effectiveness. Through these tersely defined, fragmentary images, we see the poem progressing like photographs in motion: a family slide show. Clearly, this creates the representation of nostalgia, crystallized fully in forcing each stanza to detail a single image. While it is far from a narrativization of the past, it does read much like a kaleidoscope of polaroids, the memories slouching over the horizon one at a time – like white elephants. At the same time, there seems to be the distance of age imposing far too much; we get the childhood nostalgia, but how husky has that voice become over the years? I wonder how some of the wording could, potentially, be shifted around like furniture to imply, oh-so-subtly, how / if the nostalgic narrator's relationship with these things have passed.

The color motif works well, especially since there is some ambiguity as to how these colors fit within the poem's final equation. It is emotionally touching without being didactic or manipulative, achieved through careful line-breaks and subtle repetition. It might be a little vague for some, but I find it startling, breathtaking, a veritable buffet of kickass. Just like childhood, colors are universal: the warmth of red, the cold of blue, the sunstreaks of yellow still swimming in our skin. One thing I might suggest, to cut away on the confusion, would be some return to classical punctuation – well, not to the utmost of fidelity, but to a point. I'm not trying to impose some strict set of boundaries for you to follow. On the contrary, just some mechanical matters that could, potentially, make the poem more readable to those less trained in this style.

TK: 1) A very intense piece, Megan. The first four lines grabbed me and stung me and hung with me. Those lines alone are beautiful and simple and could almost be a new-age Haiku. Though the poem imitates the idea of the Wild West, it seems ultimately very exotic.

*very small
I sat on my father's shoulders*

*he walked,
I rode, around the deserts*

2) Did you create this form? I liked it a lot. The idea of every first line of every two-line 'stanza' consisting of only two words, with one being a verb, is much more difficult than it seems, I suspect. I think all poets or 'poet-be' claimers should make up their own form at least once. It gives that person a new respect for what I call poetic regimen. One can always look to a poem they have read and seek to imitate that, but it's not the same experience. To create a form, before you've even thought of the poem or the imagery or anything else, is to truly create a piece that is entirely your own.

3) *brown carpet/hard-packed like dirt*
I think every house in the eighties/early nineties had this same brown carpet. Am I right? I remember when we had it running through the living room and the dining room. Eventually, a drunk woman passed out at the wheel of her big 1970s van and drove it right through the glass sliding doors into our living room. After that, our brown carpet was never to be trusted again: there were always bound to be tiny shards of glass that the human eye couldn't see nested, hunting, waiting for unsuspecting feet. We had to wear shoes at all times when in the living room until the insurance company gave us enough money to buy some new carpet the next year.

4) If I am going to criticize any section of this poem, it will be:

*the whispers:
'this is blue' 'this is red'*

*this is blue
the cool indoor arms, the shelter*

*this is red
the sharp edges of vases, the inside of hands*

I really like the ideas that exist in these lines, but there is something lacking . . . an aggressiveness that I found in the rest of the poem, maybe. Because the form of the piece is so simple and so clean, it is somewhat like a very sparse and spic apartment: the cleanliness and the space are wonderful, but there must always be some compensa-

tion. That apartment must have a mod couch in Fuchsia Ferocity. If there's only going to be one couch in a white apartment, that couch has got to be loud! The rest of the poem succeeds remarkably well. The lines that I have quoted above would probably have eased into another poetic form with comfort, but in this form it just seems like they are perhaps understated.

A Proud Instructor Responds to Flat Top Tony and the Purple Canoes and their Discussion of Megan's Poem

As their instructor, I was pleased with the levels of engagement and honesty that Flat Top Tony and the Purple Canoes brought to this discussion of Megan's poem. That was no doubt partially due to the fact that part of their grade for the semester depended on how active they were in online peer critiques, but I like to think that it was also partially due to a sense of community and a sincere desire to help a fellow writer. I like the fact that, though I know some of these students to be shy, their thoughtful, intelligent comments did not go unheard or unvoiced as they might have in a full-class discussion. I like the fact that the poet was able to receive critical feedback from the comfort of her own home, rather than being made to feel like she was on a firing line, as it sometimes feels when one is on the receiving end of criticisms in a full-class workshop. I like the fact that there is a public record of all comments made, because this helps me grade students' critique work and because it is a checkpoint against flippant, mean-spirited, or otherwise potentially damaging comments. Most of all, I like the fact that using an online environment freed us up to use class time for other, more pedagogically essential, classroom tasks, namely a battery of exercises designed to train apprentice poets to be masters of invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery.

Notes

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2. Leander, 'Laboratories for writing,' 5–6.
3. Heather Beck, 'Teaching creative writing online,' *New Writing* 1 (2004), 34.
4. Beck, 'Teaching creative writing online,' 35.
5. Beck, 'Teaching creative writing online,' 35.
6. Mark Kassop, 'Ten ways online education matches, or surpasses, face-to-face learning,' *The Technology Source* May/June (2003), paraphrased in Vivian Jewell, 'Continuing the classroom community: Suggestions for using online discussion boards,' *English Journal* 94 (2005), 83.
7. Beck, 'Teaching creative writing online,' 24.
8. Beck, 'Teaching creative writing online,' 35.

9. Beck, 'Teaching creative writing online,' 27.
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11. Marcelle Freiman, 'Learning through dialogue: Teaching and assessing creative writing online,' *Macquarie University* (online) (*Journal of the Australian Associated Writing Programs* 6 (2002). Accessed April, 18, 2005). On www at <http://www.griffith.edu.au/text/school/art/text/oct02/freiman.htm>, 19.
12. Freiman, 'Learning through dialogue,' 4.
13. Freiman, 'Learning through dialogue,' 10.
14. Freiman, 'Learning through dialogue,' 10.
15. Jewell, 'Continuing the classroom community", 83.
16. Jewell, 'Continuing the classroom community,' 84.
17. Maria de Vasconcelos, 'Abstract of Let me share a secret with you! Teaching with computers,' in *Viewpoints* 2002 (online) Western Kentucky University / EBSCOHost / Technology / ERIC ED478780 accessed April, 12, 2005.
18. Erika Dreifus, 'The lowdown on low-residency programs,' *Poets & Writers* 33 (2) (2005), 79.
19. Bill Lavender, 'Low-residency programs: Then and now,' AWP Panel, Vancouver, March 2005.
20. Beck, 'Teaching creative writing online,' 33.
21. Beck, 'Teaching creative writing online,' 34.
22. Freiman, 'Learning through dialogue,' 8–9.
23. Beck, 'Teaching creative writing online,' 26.
24. Joseph Boyden, 'Low-residency programs: Then and now,' AWP Panel, Vancouver, March 2005.
25. Beck, 'Teaching creative writing online,' 34.
26. Stephen Cramer, 'Low-residency programs: Then and now,' AWP Panel, Vancouver, March 2005.
27. K. Margaret Grossman, interview by author, June, 1992.
28. Beck, 'Teaching creative writing online,' 30.
29. Beck, 'Teaching creative writing online,' 32.
30. Beck, 'Teaching creative writing online,' 34.
31. de Vasconcelos, 'Abstract of Let me share a secret with you.'
32. Freiman, 'Learning through dialogue,' 13.
33. Freiman, 'Learning through dialogue,' 13.
34. John Biggs, 'What the student does: Teaching for enhanced learning,' *Higher Education Research and Development* 18 (1999), 61, quoted in Freiman, 'Learning through dialogue.'
35. Freiman, 'Learning through dialogue,' 10.
36. Freiman, 'Learning through dialogue,' 10.
37. de Vasconcelos, 'Abstract of Let me share a secret with you.'
38. Freiman, 'Learning through dialogue,' 3.
39. Freiman, 'Learning through dialogue,' 7.
40. Freiman, 'Learning through dialogue,' 13–14.
41. Beck, 'Teaching creative writing online,' 24.
42. Beck, 'Teaching creative writing online,' 34.
43. Freiman, 'Learning through dialogue,' 20.

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Chapter 9

Conclusion

Joan Poet, MFA, has been an assistant professor at Big State University for four years now. She was hired shortly after her MFA thesis, *The Echo Chamber*, won a prestigious first book award. During her first two years as an assistant professor, she felt very uncomfortable with her role in academia. She used the full-class workshop model in her courses, and on the first day of each class, she always said ‘Writing isn’t something that can be taught. I can encourage you and I can challenge you to work harder, but you either have a knack for it or you don’t.’ Each time she said that, she silently asked herself, ‘If writing can’t be taught, what am I doing here? Why did I enter the teaching profession?’

Once, a timid undergraduate came to her office and said that the idea of having the entire class discuss his poem in his presence would make him sick to his stomach. Joan Poet told the student that he had talent, that he shouldn’t be afraid of constructive criticism, and that he needed to develop a tough skin if he hoped to complete publishable poems and / or attend graduate school in creative writing. As he walked out her door, she wondered, ‘Do talented, introverted students like that one really need to develop nerves of steel in order to develop their writing?’

Another time, a different undergraduate came to Joan Poet and confessed that he had a bad case of writer’s block and didn’t have anything to submit for workshop. Joan believed that the student was left-brained, lacking artistic talent, and she gently steered him away from the creative writing track and toward the literature track. In the back of her mind, she wondered if there was more that she could have done to help draw out the student’s inner poet.

In addition to nagging doubts about her abilities as a teacher, Joan Poet had concerns about her ability to relate to her colleagues who taught literature, linguistics, or rhetoric/composition. They were all spending their energies on scholarly research that she found antithetical to creative endeavors. While serving at the annual conference of AWP, she heard another panelist say ‘I’m the only non-academic on this panel’ in a sort of prideful tone that identified the speaker as a self-styled rebel among

a group of sell-outs, and Joan heard herself retort, weakly, 'I teach at a university, but I'm *not* an academic.' Another time, when a visiting writer came to her campus to give a reading, she heard herself tell him 'There's a lot of antagonism in this department between the creative writing faculty and the academic types in the English department. We just don't speak the same language.'

After two frustrating years as an assistant professor, Joan Poet discovered the computer-enhanced, five-canon model of teaching poetry writing. She immediately saw the potential benefits of this approach. At first she hesitated about completely overhauling her teaching methodology, since she knew it would mean that she would have to work harder, but once she implemented it, she found that the benefits far outweighed the costs. Her job as an assistant professor is now more time-consuming and tougher in some ways, but it is much more rewarding. She is confident that she can teach every student something significant about poetry writing, and she has developed productive relationships with some of colleagues, particularly the ones who teach rhetoric/composition; they have given her tons of ideas that have informed her writing as well as her teaching.

Joan is now spending a lot of time in her office reading (and sometimes participating in) her students' online critique sessions. It is rewarding to see how deeply engaged the students are with each others' work, and it is nice to see how well this method of workshopping is drawing out the quieter students. She also likes the fact that her students rarely seem to feel put on the spot, the way they sometimes did in full-class workshops. They are receiving feedback from the comfort of their own computer terminals. No one ever misspeaks or mishears a comment, because all comments are written down. She is pleased that her students are doing so much writing outside of the classroom. She can literally see some of them improving their prose from week to week. Some of her students, such as the very-accomplished Jane Graduate Student, are even providing Assistant Professor Poet with cogent feedback, via the class Blackboard page.

Joan is also spending much more time preparing for class sessions than she did when she used the traditional workshop model. She has created a number of invention exercises, arrangement exercises, and style exercises for classroom use. After having her students try these exercises out and trying them out herself, she has refined them and turned them into very effective ways of writing and revising poems. She has also written about the theoretical underpinnings of some of these exercises and published academic papers combining theory, practical classroom applications, and samples of student work. She has published some of these papers in *in medias res*, a new journal devoted to creative writing pedagogy. Sometimes

she uses exercises, in her class, that she learned about from *in medias res*, to which she now holds a subscription. Although she is now spending more time on class prep and scholarship, she still has plenty of time for her writing. Like her students, she is now spending large chunks of each class period working on her own poems, which have greatly benefited from Joan's studious application of the five canons to her own work.

Last summer, Joan held a research fellowship, which she used to master the place system of memory. Now, when she gives readings from *The Echo Chamber* and her new book of poems, *The Tongue* ('an astonishing leap forward, stylistically,' according to one prominent critic), Joan is able to recite the poems by memory. She is highly sought after on the reading circuit, because she is known as a dynamic, passionate performer, thanks to the delivery exercises that she has conducted along with her students. Her increased memory capacity has come in useful in the classroom, where she is now much more apt to remember just the right quotation. It is also helpful in her writing; she now has an uncanny ability to think of the right epigraph for a poem. Finally, she has amazed interviewers by reciting whole poems and quotations about poetry off the top of her head.

Of course, Assistant Professor Joan Poet MFA is, like John Undergrad and Jane Graduate Student, is an invented character, an ideal. However, it is my sincere belief and hope that the ideas laid out in this book will have a positive, transformative effect on the professional lives of my readers. I hope and expect to encounter many, many Joans in the near future.

Index

3vc 72
'10 Things I Hate About You' 98
.jpg files 162

absences 52
academic poets 135
academic voice 85
accentual strong stress verse 76
accentual-syllabic metered poetry 69-70, 76
accountability 162
acronyms 119
action 124
'Active Observation' exercise 117-118
Adams, Stephen J. 29
Addonizio, Kim 72
address, issues of 30
adopting rhetorical theory 26
adjusting tone and diction 96
'The Age of Anxiety' 69
adversarial imitation 97
Aeschylus 128
African griots 127
Ai 83
Alderson, Daniel 93
Alexander, Pamela 95
All the Fun's in How You Say a Thing 73
alliterative strong-stress verse 69
allusion 39
Alpaugh, David 30, 31
Alsop Review 168
American Scholar 127
amnesia 105
analogical vehicles 41
analogy cards 37
analyzing
– conversations 85
– endings 61, 75
– line breaking strategies 63
– opening lines 60, 75
– stanza types 63
anapest 69
anapestic trimester 71
anaphora 107
Anglo-Saxon poetry 69

'Anima Hominis' 60
antithesis 39, 74
The Anxiety of Influence 97
aphorisms 39, 52
Apollinaire, Guillaume 33, 37
Apology for Poetry 37
Applewhite, James 108
apprentice writers 6
appropriateness 82, 84-85, 98-100
Aquinas, Thomas 114
Arabic legends 128
archaisms 89
archiving via the Internet 130
argumentative prose 60
Aristotle
– audience, analyzing 138
– developing style 91
– delivery 122
– epilogos 61
– imitation 95
– invention 44
– five topics 42
– organic form 63
– origins of poetry 95
– *Poetics* 28
– *Topica* 41
– virtues/ vices of style 82
Aristotle on Memory 112
Arnaut, Daniel 71
arranging
– images 75
– poetry in prose mode 73-75
– poetry in verse mode 68-72
arrangement
– affects stylistic choices 58
– composition studies 61-63
– exercise 60
– generating new material 75
– importance 59
– organizing principle 28
– ordering words 81
– paying attention to 116
– Quintilian 57-58, 63
– specifics about 57-77

- vs. invention 57-58
ars 82
Ars Poetica 95
The Art of Memory 105
'The Art of Memory Reconceived' 107-108,
 112
Arte of English Poesie 28, 81
'Artful Talk' 61
Ascham, Roger 95
Asphodel 43
assessment 167
Associated Writers and Writing Programs
 46
association and memory 118
Atlantic Monthly 130
attendance policy 49-50
attitudes 26-27
Auden, W.H. 69, 107
audience
 - adjusting tone and diction 96
 - analysis 29, 138-140
 - arrangement 59
 - awareness 29
 - breaking lines 62, 75
 - clarity 83
 - considering 138-140, 161
 - enlarging 30
 - finding a voice 140
 - inventing 52
 - invention of motivation 48
 - invoking 49
 - role of 75
aural elements of poetry 3, 122
automatic writing 37, 44, 53
AWP 46
AWP Chronicle 6
AWP Official Guide to Writing Programs 23
AWP Pedagogy Papers 71
- balancing lessons 29
ballads 127
barbarisms 89
Bartholomae, David 85
Bates, Jessica 83
Bawer, Bruce 4
Beats 130
beautiful lie 49
Beck, Heather 156, 161, 164, 168
beginning writers 46, 66
Bender, Daniel 91, 95
Beowulf 66, 69
Bernstein, Charles 95
Berry, Ralph 26
Best Words, Best Order 69
- Bible stories 87
Biggs, John 166
Bishop, Elizabeth 37
Bishop, Wendy 6, 26, 33, 44, 46, 86, 107, 110
Blackboard
 - allows for reflection 157
 - benefits 159
 - decreasing reliance on teacher 159
 - discussed 10-18, 156-176
 - images posted 83
 - increasing student involvement 159
 - low-residency MFA programs 160
 - student involvement 162
 - structuring classes 159
 - using for workshops 157
 - weaker students 166-167
Blair, Hugh 25
blame 39
Bloom, Harold 48, 97
Bly, Robert 66
Bogan, Louise 64
Book of Forms 39, 68
The Book of Songs 127
The Book of Memory 116
Booth, Wayne 138
Boston Globe 140
Bosveld, Jenniver 135
Bottom Dog Press 134
bout-rimés 128
Bowery Poetry Club 129
Boyce, Angela Elizabeth 140-149
Boyden, Joseph 162
breaking lines
 - See *line breaks*.
brainstorming
 - acronyms 119
 - chart 53
 - list 43
 - ways to perform poetry 129
 - research methods 53
Breadloaf Writers' Conference 3-4
Breton, Andre 36
brief-residency MFA programs 160
Briggs, Dean le Baron Russell 3
Brodsky, Joseph 107
Brooks, Gwendolyn 69
Broskowitz, Sou 139
Brotchie, Alastair 44
Brother Antonious 41
Bruenderman, Grace 135-136
Bryant, William Cullen 23
bulletin board 157
Burke, Kenneth 43
business writing, fixed form 63

- 'By the Beard of Odin' 133
- Caddie.NET 159
- Caedmon 69
- Cairns, Scott 41
- California State University 134
- Campbell, George 25
- 'Can Poetry Matter?' 30, 129, 132
- Canterbury Tales* 128
- 'Capitalist Poem #5'
- Carruthers, Mary 116
- Carsen, Ciaren 96
- 'Causa Prima' exercise 109
- celestial memory system 113
- Celtic legends 128
- ceremonial discourse 58
- changing people's minds 68
- 'Channel Changing' 136
- Charlotte's Web* 140
- charts 53
- Chaucer 69, 128
- Chestek, Virginia 6
- Chesterton, G.K. 66-67
- choosing poem for public reading 126
- The Chronicle of Higher Education* 134
- Chrysippus 116
- chunking, aid to memory 116-117
- Ciardi, John 48
- Cicero
- duties of orator 81
 - delivery 122
 - mnemonic method of memory 110
 - virtues/ vices of style 82
- cinquain 69
- circumstance, topic of Aristotle 42
- Clare, John 37
- clarity
- benefits of peer critique 83
 - controversial 83
 - image journal 98
 - reading contemporary poetry 98
 - virtue of 82
- classical rhetoric 39, 59
- classical vices 89
- Classical Rhetoric in English Poetry* 24, 29
- Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student* 58, 92
- classroom competition 24
- close reading and memorizing 117-118
- clustering 43-44, 53
- Coffeehouse Poetry Anthology* 134
- Coleridge, Samuel Taylor 36, 63
- Collins, Billy 72, 83, 108, 129
- Colors of a Different Horse* 6
- collage 37
- Columbia University 107
- Comedia* 114-115
- The Communist Manifesto* 65
- community, sustaining 160-161, 176
- comparison 39, 42, 53
- competition 2, 24
- composition
- courses 6
 - expressionism 25
 - exercises 86
 - handbooks 38
 - instructors 6
 - learning from 44
 - and the art of invention 34
 - rhetoric as parent discipline 25
 - status of teachers 25
 - studies 25-26, 61-63
- Composition Rhetoric* 25
- composition studies 39, 85
- computer-assisted five-canonical model
- benefits 28-29
 - ensuring instruction in key areas 28
 - new paradigm 31
 - prep time 163
 - reversing order of activities 159
 - rigorous 163-164
 - vs. traditional workshop model 180
 - writing exercises 165
 - writing-intensive 164
- concrete poetry 74, 77
- confirmation 60, 75-76
- confirmation 59-61
- Congestorium Artificiose* 114
- Connors, Robert J. 25, 124-125
- conscious vocabulary building 82
- 'Consistency and Variety' 86
- contemporary poetry 108
- content 57
- controversia 123-124
- convenience of traditional workshop model 4
- conversation 167
- Copeland, Charles Townsend 3
- Copia* 89, 100
- copying poems 118
- Corbett, Edward P.J. 42, 58-59, 82, 92
- Corman, Cid 69
- Cornell University 81
- correctness of diction 82, 98
- costuming 129
- counterdrift 61
- Counting Crows 71
- Cramer, Steven 162

- Crane, Ronald S. 62
Crane, Stephen 73
Crapsey, Adelaide 69
creating
– new poetic forms 52, 72
– writing prompts 52
'Creation of Sam McGee' 1
creative writing field 6, 25-26
creative writing instruction 6, 26
creative writing instructors
– lack of pedagogical training 5
– new teaching methods 6
– passivity 6
– shirking real teaching 6
creative writing pedagogy 26, 44
creative writing programs
– Iowa graduates 23
– marginalizing poetry's role in culture 30
– rise in number 35
creative writing workshops
– overemphasizing peer critique 36
– student-centered classrooms 6
– See also *creative writing teachers*.
creative writing teachers 5-6
creative writing pedagogy 5
creative writing programs 5
critiquing
– drafts 23, 51
– improving skills 165-167
Culler, Jonathan 81
cult of personality 6, 51
Cummings, E.E. 73, 75, 77
Cunningham, J.V. 64
curse poems 53
Cynghanedd 69
- da Signa, Boncompagno 105
dactyl 69
Dada 127
Dante
– beautiful lie 49
– place memory system 114-115
– developing style 91
– figurative language 88
Daphnis and Chloe 39
dare poem 46
Davis, Catherine 64
Davis, Jay 140-149
Davison, Peter 130
De tribus maximis circumstantiis gestorum 116
de Vasconcelos, Maria 159, 165-166
Dearbone, Ryan 169-176
decasyllabic line 69
declamation 123-124
- decorum 84, 98-100
Def Poetry Jam 130
definition, topic of Aristotle 42
delay 40
deliberative discourse 58
delighting readers 68
delivery 28, 122-151
Demosthenes 122
dependence on workshopping 168
Descartes 106
descendaiku 48
description 39
developing a writing style 89
diagnosing problems 167
Dialectic 116
Dickinson, Emily 73, 132
diction 82, 95
difficult sections 116
discipline of rhetoric 25
discourse 57
discovery 37, 40
discovery drafts 40
discussion and memorizing 117-118
disregard for students 6
distribution via the Internet 130
Disyllabic Sarah 72
Ditto Tavern 129
Divine Comedy 91
Dobyns, Stephen 69, 73, 75, 87-88
Dolce, Ludovico 114
Donne, John 67, 73
double translation 95
drafting 40
Dragga, Sam 124
dramatic monologues 87
dramatic poems 58-59
drawing the sword 81-82
drift 61
Dryden 24-25
'Duck, Duck, Turkey' 4
Duhamel, Denise 83
Dunn, Stephen, 61, 83
Duritz, Adam
- earnestness 87
East Regional Teen Slam 140
Easthope, Anthony 64
easy "A" 2
ecphrasis 39
Ede, Lisa 42
Eden, Rich 62
Ediger, Marlow 107
Edson, Russell 74
Eight Mile 128

- ekphrasis 39, 53
 - Elbow, Peter 44
 - elements of poetic style 81-100
 - The Elements of Style* 138
 - Elements of Rhetoric* 60
 - Eliot, T.S. 65-66, 74, 158
 - elite students 4-5
 - elocution movement 124
 - eloquence vs. poetry 27
 - emergent reading possibilities 130
 - emic 42
 - Eminem 71
 - emphasis 88, 95
 - emotional response 48
 - emulation 91
 - enabling restrictions 61
 - Encomium of Helen* 94
 - encouragement 4
 - Encyclopedia of Rhetoric and Composition* 57, 106
 - endings 61, 76
 - Engle, Paul 3-4
 - enjambment 73
 - enkomion 39, 52
 - enlarging poetry's audience 30
 - environment and memory 117, 119
 - epic poetry 127
 - Epstein, Joseph 30
 - equipping students with tools 38
 - Erasums 89, 100
 - essays, assigning 77
 - Essays on Epitaphs* 27
 - Estrada, Rafael Perez 74
 - 'Eternal Arguments in Heaven and Hell'
 - 'The Ethics of Delivery' 124
 - Ethiopian Story* 39
 - ethos
 - influences arrangement 59
 - role of 75
 - tone 88
 - etic 42
 - eulogies 127
 - Euripides 128
 - Everson, William 41
 - evidence
 - reading/writing haikus 98
 - third virtue 82-83
 - Excel™ spreadsheets 48, 52
 - Exiled Writers Ink
 - excuses 49-50, 52
 - exercises
 - 'Active Observation' 117
 - arrangement 60
 - 'Causa Prima' 109
 - composition 86
 - concrete poetry 74, 75
 - declamation 123-124
 - delivery 132, 149-152
 - diction 95
 - emphasis 95
 - family stories 119
 - figurative language 95
 - 'First Cause' 109
 - generative 168
 - genre 95
 - Hear an Iamb, There a Trochee 71, 76
 - imitation 93-95
 - invention 34, 38-39, 46, 51, 75, 108
 - lyric poetry 71, 76
 - memory 108, 117-119
 - rearranging fables and poems 75
 - 'Rearranging Memory' 110
 - revision 52
 - scanning stanzas 71
 - style 89
 - writer's block 30
 - writing 29
- Exercises in Style* 90, 100
- exercitato 82, 100
- exordium 59, 61
- experimental poems 87
- expressionism 25, 85
- expressionists 39
- expressivism
 - See *expressionism*.
- exquisite corpse 37
- fable 39
- Fahnestock, Jeanne 57, 64, 67
- fairy tales 87
- family stories 119
- Farrar, John 3
- faulty pedagogy 1
- Fenton, James 127
- Field, Edward 134
- fifth virtue 88
- Figliola, Tony 126
- figurative language 29, 88, 95
- figures 29, 81-82, 88
- figures of speech 88-89
- Filemaker Pro™ 48
- Finch, Annie 68
- finding a- voice 140
- 'First Cause' exercise 109
- five-canonical approach
 - alternative to workshop model 1-18
 - benefits 28, 156
 - ensuring instruction in key areas 28

five-canon classroom
– adjusting to students' needs 132
– demands reading/writing 86
– reversing order of activities 159
– workshop dependence 168
five canons of rhetoric
– arts of rhetoric 81
– best teaching model 28
– duties of rhetoric 81
– invention the most complex 35
– key for poets 35
– memory 105
– problem canons 122
fixed forms 63, 66, 72, 95
Flat Top Tony 169-176
Flaubert, Gustav 131
flaws of traditional workshop approach 4
flytings 128
focus 41
focused concentration 116
Fogler, Janet 117
folk tales 87
fonts 124-125
Forbes Magazine 131
forensics teams, observing 125
Form and Style in the Arts 58
A Formal Feeling Comes 68
formal verse 68
forms 3, 48, 58, 68-72
Fouinet, Ernest 72
Franklin, Benjamin 95-96
free association 53
free verse
– betwixt and between style 74
– arranging poetry in 73-75
– dictatorial 65
– dismissed by Chesterton 66
– fixed form debate 64-68
– introducing 76
– line breaks 74, 77
– long lines 75
– ‘Notes on Free Verse’ 73
– order of instruction 70
– revising 95
– rise of 69
– types 73, 76
– vs. metrical verse 132
free writing 44, 53
freed verse 73, 77
Freiman, Marcelle 158, 161, 165-166, 168
The Frogs 128
Frost, Robert 3, 66-67
‘The Function of Tone’ 87
Fussell, Paul 73

futurism 127
Galileo 123
game of variants 37
genealogies 110
generating new material 59
genius, teaching 27
genres 58, 63-64, 67, 95
Geoffrey of Vinsauf 28
Germinara, Len 140-149
‘Gerontion’ 74
gesture 124
ghazal 2
‘The Ghost of Tradition’ 132
Gholson, Christine 134
Gilbert, Jack 84
Giles, Sandra 39
Ginsberg, Allen 41, 75, 77, 108
Gioia, Dana 30, 69, 71, 76, 129, 132
gnome 39
Gorgias 94
grades 2
graduate workshops 166
Graff, Gerald 67
Gray, Andrew 160
Greek legends 128
Green Mill tavern 127, 134
Greenland 128
Greenwell, Erin 109
Gregg, Linda 84
grid memory 116
Griffin, Marie 6
Grossman, K. Margaret 163
‘Ground Swell’ 109
Guatemala 128
guided meditation 53
Gunn, Thom 69
Gwynn, R.S. 132
haiku 68, 83
haiku sonnet 48
Hall, Donald 33
Handbook of Poetic Forms 74
Hardin, Joe 34
Hayes, Candice 93-94
Heaney, Seamus 96
hearing stresses 71
Heffernan, Michael 48, 73
Hicok, Bob 83
Heliodorus 39
Hemly, Robin 134
Herbert 29
Hesiod 27, 38, 106
‘Hear an Lamb’ exercise 76

- heuristic thinking 40
 high-tech modes of delivery 131
Hippias Major 110
 Hippocrates 38
 history of traditional workshop model 22
 Hoagland, Tony 77
 Hodges, Amy 41
 Hoffman, Daniel 65
 Hollander, John 64
 Holman, Bob 127, 130-131
 Holmes, Kerry 51
 Homer 27, 29, 94, 127
 Homeric legends 87
 homophonic translation 95
 Hopkins, Gerard Manley 41
 Horace 94
 Howe, Marie 45
 Hugh of St. Victor 116-117
 Hugo, Victor 33
 Hulme, T.E. 65
 Hutton, Patrick H. 108, 112
 'Hymn of Creation' 69
 hyperbole 88
- iamb 69, 71
 iambic pentameter 64, 69
 ideal forms 63
Iliad 94, 106
 image journals 53, 83-84
 image-based memory system 110-116
 imagery
 - getting across on stage 126
 - image journal 98
 - memory 107-117
 - reading/writing haikus 98
 - student poems 118
 - third virtue 82-83
 images
 - arranging 75
 - evoking pathos 82
 - memory 107-116
 - sequencing 76
 imagination 39, 108
 imitatio 82, 91, 100
 imitation 91, 93-100
 incantations 127
 increasing student participation 164
 inner critic 52
 inspiration 34, 40
 Inspiration™ software 47
 inspired madness 27
Institutio oratoria 81
 intellectual response 48
 interest interview 40
- Internet 130
 'Interpretation of Poetry' 126
 introduction to speeches 59-60
 intuition, heuristic thinking 40
 Inuit 128
 inventing
 - audience 52
 - forms 48, 76
 invention
 - activities neglected 5
 - dare poem 46
 - defended 33
 - defined 33-34, 37
 - during arrangement 75
 - exercises 34, 38-40, 48-49, 51, 108, 169
 - four tools of refutation 61
 - getting words on paper 81
 - imagination 39
 - journalists' questions 43
 - methods required 37
 - most complex of the five canons 35
 - organizing principle 28
 - poetic forms 52
 - revising 36
 - in poetry writing curriculum 51
 - prewriting 36
 - process 48
 - techniques 36, 44
 - towards an art of 33-53
 - vs. arrangement 57-58
 invention strategies
 - brainstorming list 43
 - clustering 43
 - exercises 34
 - free writing 43-44
 - inducing inspiration 40
 - journalists' questions 43
 - pentad 43
 - question-based 43
 - tagmemics 41-42
 - teaching 36
 - topical questions 41
 - word-processing software 47
 Iowa Workshop 23
- Jarman, Mark 109
 Jeffers, Robinson 73
 Jewell, Vivian 159
 Johnson, Claudette 123
 journalists' questions 43, 53
 journals
 - image journals 53
 - insufficient number of 30
 - no refereed journal 26

- .jpg files 162
judgmental professors 34-35
judicial discourse 58
Justice, Donald 4, 69, 107
- Kacsir, Marci 70
Kansas City Star 105
Kassop, Mark 157
Kelley, Megan 169-176
'Kevorkian Asks about Beauty' 123
Kevorkian, Jack 123
'Kicked Out' 92
Kidspiration™ software 47
King, June 135
Kirby, David 51
Koch, Kenneth 49
Koger, Tara 169-176
Kooser, Ted 84
Krider, Ruby C. 126
Kunitz, Stanley 105
- lack of teacher training 5
Lamentations 67
language, figurative 88
Lansana, Quraysh Ali 133
'The Laundromat' 140
Lauer, Janice 40
Laux, Dorianne 140
Lavender, Bill 160
Lawrence, D.H. 65
layout 124-125
Le Faucher, Michel 124
Leander, Kevin 156
learning
- art of writing 23
- from compositionists 26
- from political orators 24
lectures 160
Lesley University 162
Leucippe and Clitophon 39
Levertov, Denise 63, 73
levels of style 84
Levine, Philip 35, 108
Lewis, C.S. 128-129
Lewis, J. Patrick 46
lies 48
line breaks
- experimenting 76
- free verse 76
- imitating line lengths 76
- rhetorical 75-76
- strategies 62-63
- stimulating discussion of 74
- teaching 119
- viewing as rhetorical 62
'Lightweight' 92
limiting
- focus of topics 41
- class time spent critiquing 42
literary poetry 133-137
Literary Theory 81
The Little Rhetoric and Handbook 42
live online discussions 157
'Local Assays' 3
Locklin, Gerald 131, 134
Loci Mnemonic 110-116
Logan, William 48
Lombardy, Anthony 85
long-lined verse 76
Longfellow, Henry Wadsworth 23
Longinus 39, 95
Loomis, Ormond 85
'A Lost Eloquence' 107
love songs 127
low-residency MFA programs 160
Lowell, Amy 113
Lowell, Robert 73, 108
lullabies 127
Luria A.R. 113
Lux, Thomas 83
lyric poem
- arrangement 58-60
- delivery 127
- exercise 71, 76
- Macquarie University 158
Macrorie, Ken 44
Mad-Lib poems 92, 100
Madgett, Naomi Long 133
making content 57
Manchester Metropolitan University 156,
 164, 168
Manhattan Community College 159
manuals on poetry 28
manuscript preparation 125
marginalizing poetry 30
margins 74
Marx, Karl 65
Mayer, Hansjorg 74
McAuley, James J. 96
McCarthy, Jack 140-149
McGrath, Campbell 93
medieval art 115
meditation 41, 53
Melnick, David 95
'Memorization of Poetry' 107
memory
- aids 107

- alternative techniques 116
- class assignments 106
- classroom applications 118-119
- contemporary techniques 117-118
- forgotten art of 105-119
- imagination 108
- quoting from 3
- tips 106
- units 119
- in Vedic Culture 107
- weakened by writing 105
- writing better poems 108
- Menaker, Daniel 4
- mentorship model 160
- Merton, Thomas 41
- metaphor 88
- metaplasms 100
- meter 107, 132
 - 'Meters and Memory' 107
 - metrical feet 76
 - metrical verse 70, 132
- Metrodorus of Scepsis 113
- Mill, John Stuart 27
- Milton, John 29
- mimesis 91, 100
- The Mind of a Mnemonist* 113
- 'Mini Book Reviews' 46
- mispronunciations 89
- Missing Measures* 73
- Mitchell, Ruth 62
- mnemonics 111, 114, 117
- modern poetry 108
- modes of discourse 25
- modeling writing 90
- mood and memory 117
- Monroe, Thomas 58
- Moore, Marianne 60, 69, 75, 77
- motivation 165-166
- moving readers 68
- 'Mrs. Potter's Lullaby' 71
- Muldoon, Paul 96
- Murphy, James J. 42
- Murray, Donald 39-40, 53
- Muske-Dukes, Carol 107
- 'My Grandfather's Tackle Box' 108
- Myers, Jack 92
- mythos 39, 52

- naked poetry vs. traditional verse 63
- nam 140
- Nantucket Poetry Slam 140
- narrative, aid to memory 117
- narrative poems 58, 127
- narration 59-61

- National Council of Teachers of English 26
- National Poetry Slam 140
- National Writing Center Association 156
- NCTE 26
- Nelson, Eric 71, 76
- 'Neo-Formalism: A Dangerous Nostalgia' 64
- neologisms 89
- 'The New Conservatism in American Poetry' 64
- New Media Poetry 130
- 'New Rhetoric' Movement 138
- Newton, Sir Isaac 37
- New Writing* 26
- New York Times* 106-107
- Nietzsche 88
- non-native speakers 157
- notes 62
- 'Notes on Free Verse' 73
- number lines 116

- O'Connor, Flannery 4
- observation charts 52-53
 - See also *sense charts*.
- Odyssey* 106
- O'Hara, Frank 130
- Old English poetry 69
- Old Faithful* 46
- Old Testament poetry 67, 76
- Olson, Charles 74
- On the Sublime* 95
- On the Teaching of Creative Writing* 3
- one-line stanzas 62-63, 76
- one-word lines 62-63, 76
- online peer critiques 156, 169-176, 180
- online workshopping 156-176
- online writing centers 156
- open form 63
- opening lines 60, 75
- open mic 128-130, 133, 135, 138
- oral cultures 105
- oral delivery 125-129
- oral elements of poetry 3
- 'Oral Interpretation of Literature' 126
- oral poetry 127, 135
- oral tradition 106-108, 122, 127-129
- orators 24, 81
- oratory, women's 24
- organic form 63
- organizing information 43
- Organon* 138
- original defined 91
- ornament 88, 100
- ornateness 88, 100

- Orr, Gregory 108
Ostrom, Hans 6
Ovid 24-25
Owen, John 45, 72
Owenian Wedge 72
OWLs 156
- pacing 126
packet program vs. online program 160
Padgett, Ron 74
paintings 53
pantoum 72
paper, saving 162
paper selection 125
paradeille 72
parallelism 107
parodies 98
paradox 39
paragraphing 62-63
'Paragraphing for the Reader' 62
parallelism 74
paraphrases 98
Parisi, Joseph 131
Parnassians 128
Passerat, Jean 72
Paz, Octavio 168
pedagogy
 - arrangement 64
 - based on rhetoric 28
 - Bishop, Wendy 34
 - creative writing 5-6, 26
 - facilitating learning opportunities 4
 - faulty 1
 - lack of training 5-6
 - methods 2
 - reflecting writing practices 35
 - rhetorical theory 22peer critiques 29, 40, 83, 138, 156, 161, 169-176
peer review 1-3, 23
pentad 43, 53
performance 6, 130
performance poetry 127, 131-139
peroatio 61, 76
persona 20, 29
personal voice 85
perspicuity 82-83, 98
persuasion 48, 68-72
Peter of Ravenna 113, 115
PETER PUSSY DOG 129
Petrarch 72
Phaedras 94, 105
The Phoenix 113
photographs 53
- Piers Plowman* 69
Pigman, G. W. 97
Pike, Kenneth L. 41-42
Pindar 72
Pinsky, Robert 106-107
Place System 110-116
Plath, Sylvia 2, 108
Plato 25, 27, 88, 94, 105, 110
Po, Li 66
Poe, Edgar Allan 23
'A Poem about Blake's Mommy' 94
poems
 - analyzing endings 61
 - analyzing opening lines 60
 - breaking lines and stanzas 62-63
 - memorizing 115poetic contests 127-129
Poetic Designs 29
poetic form 59
poetic invention, art of 33-53
poetic license 100
Poetic Meter and Poetic Form 73
poetic style, elements of 81-100
Poetics 28, 92, 95
Poetria nova 28
Poetry 108, 131
poetry
 - arranging in prose mode 73-75
 - arranging in verse mode 68-72
 - as discourse 64
 - categories 74
 - competitions 125-127
 - counterdrift 61
 - defined 127
 - drift 61
 - endangered species 130
 - genre 68
 - language primary 81
 - learning from slam masters 140-149
 - manuals 28
 - marginalizing 30
 - memorizing 105-119
 - new mediums for delivery 130
 - new types of 130
 - of a high tech age 131
 - oral/aural art 122
 - oral tradition 127, 131
 - vs. prose 68
 - romantic attitudes toward 27
 - Yeats quotation 60-61*Poetry 180°* project 129
'Poetry and Memory' 108
'Poetry and the University' 4
Poetry As Discourse 64

- 'Poetry as a Supplemental Event' 125-126
- Poetry Café 135
- Poetry Home Repair Manual* 84
- 'Poetry Out Loud' 130
- poetry slams
 - interests students 130
 - rise of 131
 - twist on old tradition 127-128
 - started at Green Mill Tavern 134
- The Poetry Society 135
- poetry vs. eloquence 27
- poetry vs. prose 68, 95
- poetry vs. rhetoric 68
- poetry writing
 - fifth canon 28
 - forgotten art of memory 105-118
 - third canon 28
 - rhetoric of poetry writing instruction 22-31
- poetry writing instruction, memory 105-119
- poetry writing instructors
 - as authority figures 159
 - basing pedagogy on rhetoric 28
 - bringing poets to the classroom 129
 - five-canon model 156
 - foreign language instructors 106
 - forensics competition 126-127
 - free verse/fixed form debate 67, 73
 - helping students memorize 117-118
 - holding a poetry slam 129
 - holding a public reading 129
 - increasing student involvement 159
 - introducing techniques to students 38
 - lectures 160
 - online instruction 156-176
 - performance vs. analysis 129
 - preparing students for graduate school 131
 - teaching delivery 129-149
 - teaching paragraphing 62-63
 - teaching traditional forms 67
 - using tagmemics 41
 - using traditional workshop model 5
- poetry writing classes 2, 164-165
- poets
 - ancient 38
 - difference from rhetors 49
 - inventing means of catharsis 49
 - inventing motivation for response 48
- Poets & Writers* 30, 36
- Ponge, Francis 74
- Pool, Rhonda Leem 126
- post cards 53
- Pound, Ezra 43, 65-66, 75, 114
- Practice of Poetry* 46
- praise, category of pro gymnas mата 39
- premium 75
- prep time 163
- prepared minds 36
- prewriting 36, 39-44, 51, 53
- primitive poetic language 108
- principles of style 82-89
- Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* 28, 35-36, 48, 58, 63
- private voice 85-86
- problems, diagnosing 167
- process memos 87
- process-oriented courses 6
- proemium 59
- professional poets 30
- Professional Writers/Writing Professionals' 5
- 'The Professionalization of Poetry' 30
- 'Projective Verse' 74
- pro gymnas mата
 - applications to poetry 39
 - arrangement exercise 74
 - categories 39
 - stylistic imitation 38
 - techniques 39
 - updating 52-53
- projective verse 74, 77
- prompts, flexible 52
- proofs to support argument 60
- propriety, virtue of 82
- prose
 - assigning 76
 - discussed 74
 - paraphrases of poetry 95
 - vs. poetry 68
- prosody 48, 107, 118
- prosopoeia 123-124
- Pruitt, Stephanie 132
- Psalms 67
- psogos 39
- psycholinguists 67
- public readings 126, 129
- public voice 85-86
- Pudding House Press 135
- pure song 34, 51-53
- purity of diction 82, 98
- Purple Canoes 169-176
- purpose, line breaks 62-63, 76
- Puttenham, George 28, 81
- Pygmalion effect 85
- pyrrhic 69
- Queneau, Raymond 90, 100

- Quintilian 57-58, 63, 81, 113, 116, 122
– imitation 92
– loci mnemonic 110
– virtues/ vices of style 82
- Raab, Lawrence 36
Raines, Craig 87
'The Raised Voice of Poetry' 127
Ransom, John Crowe 64
rap battles 128
reader-response theory 48-49
reading
– assignments 159
– aloud 116, 118
– poetry 26
– recommended 82
– responses 87
– series 131
'Rearranging Memory' 110
reciting genealogies 110
recording stories 85
recurrence 29
recursive nature of writing 40-41
refrains, aid to memory 107
refutation 59-61
relationship, topic of Aristotle 41
Renegade, DJ 132
Repa, Mila 41
repetition 29, 68, 116, 132
reserved students 157
resistance 40
response 48
revising
– invention techniques 36
– poems 26
revision exercise 52
revision stage 48, 52
Reynolds, David S. 23
Reynolds, Kim 50
'Richard Cory' 1
rhetoric
– alternative to Iowa workshop model 24
– arrangement 57-77
– audience analysis 29
– audience awareness 29
– basis for composition studies 25
– basis for writing instruction 26, 29
– benefits for writing instruction 28-29
– changing people's minds 68
– delivery 122
– fixed form 63
– imagination 39
– impact on poetry 27
– instructors 6
– memory 105
– organic form 63
– of poetry writing instruction 24-25, 29-30
– learning from 44
– parent discipline to composition 25
– poetry's resistance to rhetoric 27
– second canon 57-77
– subjective theories 25
– tools of refutation 61
– Yeats quotation 60-61
Rhetoric 138
Rhetoric, Discovery and Change 41
Rhetorica ad Herenium 59, 84, 88, 100, 114, 122
rhetorical style 94
rhetorical figures 89
rhetorical theory 22, 26, 28
rhetorical tradition 122-124
rhetors
– arrangement 58
– developing style 91
– difference from poets 49
– imitating authors 92
– inventing emotions 49
– inventing motivation 48
– memory 105
rhymes
– aid to memorization 107
– figures of rhetoric 29
– rediscovering pleasures of 132
– traditional forms 68
rhythm 29, 126
Rich, Adrienne 65
rigor 163
Rimbaud, Arthur 36, 128
Ritter, Kelly 5
ritual poetry 127
rivalry 166
Roberts, Sharon 47
Robinson, Edward Arlington 1
Roethke, Theodore 34, 114, 163
Rohman, Gordon 40-41
Roman grammar schools 123
romantic attitudes 27, 91
Romberch, Johannes 114
The Rostrum 125-127
- Sadoff, Ira 64
Sappho 72
schemes 89
Scholemaster 95
Scopas 110
Scottish flytings 128
self interview 40

- | | |
|---|--|
| <p>self-reliant writers 168
 semio-syntactic model of rhetorical figures 89
 Seneca the Elder 110
 sentimentality 87
 sentential 39, 52
 sense charts 48, 52
 Service, Robert 1
 sestina 72, 97
 <i>Severe</i> 85
 Sexton, Anne 2, 39, 108
 Shakespeare, William 24-25, 33, 67, 72-73, 95
 shamans 125
 shaping content 57
 Shaw, Robert 86-87
 Shelnutt, Eve 6
 Shereshevskii 113
 Sheridan, Thomas 124
 short-lined enjambmed poetry 76
 <i>'The Shrinking Lonesome Sestina'</i> 97
 <i>'Sibling Rivalries'</i> 133
 Sidney, Sir Philip 29, 37, 67
 Simic, Charles 74, 95
 simile 88
 Simonides 110-111
 Sirowitz, Hal 129
 Skelton, Robin 48
 slang expressions 89
 Smith, Dave 3
 Smith, Larry 135
 Smith, Marc 127, 134
 Snyder, Gary 41
 solecisms 89
 Somers, Megan 169-176
 <i>Something Is Going to Happen</i> 129-130
 Song of Solomon 67
 Sonne, Lex 92
 sonnenzio, invented by Addonizio 72
 Sorabji, Richard 112
 sound of resemblance 114
 sources of poetry, lies 49
 speaker, invention of motivation 48
 speaking persona 29
 <i>The Spectator</i> 95-96
 speeches
 - invention of motivation 48
 - openings 59-60
 - proemium 59
 spondee 70
 Stafford, William 4
 stage vs. page 133-138
 <i>'Stagger'</i> 70
 <i>Stand Up Friends With Me</i> 143
 stand up poetry 133-138 </p> | <p><i>Stand Up Poetry</i> 133
 Stanley, Mari 71
 stanza breaks
 - experimenting 76
 - imitating 76
 - rhetorical 62-63, 76
 - teaching 119
 stanzas, scanning 71
 Starkey, David 5, 110
 starting scholarly journals 26
 State University of Iowa 3
 status, composition vs. poetry teachers 25
 Steele, Timothy 65-67, 73
 Stegner, Wallace 3, 4
 Stern, Lynn 117
 Stevens, Wallace 87
 Stewart, Nick 70
 Strand, Mark 4
 stresses, hearing 71
 structure 3
 student-centered classrooms 6, 159
 students
 - absences 52
 - attitudes 26
 - aural elements of poetry 3
 - competition 2
 - defensive 2
 - discussions 2
 - disregard for 6
 - elite 4-5
 - encouraging 4
 - equipping with tools 38
 - first readers of own work 52
 - failure 38
 - feedback 161-162
 - form 3
 - increasing participation 164
 - invention strategies 3
 - making poems memorable 118
 - memorizing 3, 117-118
 - motivation 165-166
 - non-native speakers 157
 - oral tradition 3, 127-129
 - practice critiquing texts 3
 - reading aloud 2
 - reserved 157
 - responsible for own learning 161
 - rigor 162
 - rivalry 166
 - structure 3
 - self-reliant writers 168
 - taking risks 2
 - undisciplined 2
 - writing better poems 108 </p> |
|---|--|

- style
– acquiring 82, 95
– adapting to genre 84
– affected by arrangement 58
– center of five canons 81
– classifying 90
– colorful 82
– concerned with language 81
– developing 89, 95-96
– exercises 89, 95-96
– finding 91
– levels of 84
– lofty style 84-85
– low style 84-85
– making words memorable 81
– means of seduction 81
– middle style 84-85
– organizing principle 28
– principles of 82-89
– strategy for students 3
stylistic analysis 98
stylistic imitation 38, 91-98
suasoria 123-124
subgenres of poetry 75
subject matter 59, 75
subjective theories of rhetoric 25
supporting arguments 60
Summa Theologiae 114
Super Bowl of Poetry 128
surrealism 37
surrealists 36-37
Swander, Mary 4-5
syllabic verse 68, 70, 76
synkrisis 39, 53
syntax 81-82, 95
Szczepanski, Jay 85-86
- tagmemics 41-42, 53
tailoring lessons 29
talent, finding 27
Talking Back to Poems 93
Taos Heavyweight Poetry Championships 128
Tate, Allen 64
Tate, James 36, 81
Tatius, Achilles 39
teacher-centered classrooms 6
teacher training, lack of 5-6
teachers
– free verse/fixed form debate 64
– lack of training 6
– seeking sounder methods 35
– See also *creative writing instructors*.
teaching
– art of writing 23
- bias 67
– conflicts of free verse/fixed form debate 67
– genius 27
– invention strategies 36
– new paradigm 31
– paragraphing 62-63
– poetry writing 1
– respect for the art 27
– technique 27
'Teaching Creative Writing Online' 156, 161
Teaching Memory Improvement to Adults 117
'Teaching Style' 93
technē 38-39
techniques
– of ancient poets 37
– teaching 27
technopaignia 74
teleutons 97
'Tell, Type, Transcribe, Transform' 85
Temple, Brandon 97
'Ten Ways Online Education Matches' 157
testimony 6
Theogony 106
theoretical basis for traditional workshop model 22
'Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird'
 145
Thirteen Ways of Looking for a Poem 60, 180
Thomas, Stephen 129
Thucydides 38
tone
– establishing 88
– stylistic imitation 98
– written vs. oral 161
Topica 42
topical questions 52, 53
traditional verse
– arranging poetry in 68-72
– line breaks 74
– vs. free verse 63
traditional workshop model
– anxiety 165
– defensiveness 165
– discouragement 166
– discussed 1-18
– elements 23
– feedback 162
– history 22
– methodology contrasted with Whitman 22
– motivation 166
– poetic invention 33
– vs. computer-enhanced five-canon model 180
– See also *workshop model*.

- Transformations* 39
 transforming notes into a whole 61
 trees, saving 162
trenta sei 48
 triadic, short-line verse 76
trikuelle 72
 trochees 69, 71
 tropes
 – effective use 29, 81-82
 – ornament 88
 Turco, Lewis 39, 68
 Turkey 128
 typography 124-125
- underlining material 116
 Underwood, Danielle 169-176
 units, memorizing 119
 University of British Columbia 160
 University of Georgia 5
 University of Iowa 130
 University of Louisiana-Lafayette 5
 University of Missouri-Columbia 156
 University of New Orleans 160, 162
 University of Washington 163
 University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee 5
 Untermeyer, Louis 3
 Urdang, Constance 4
- Vanderbilt University 156
 variety 87
 Verlaine, Paul 74
 verse 68-72
 verse libré 74
 'Versions of Imitation in the Renaissance'
 97
 'very small' 169-176
 viator 48
 vices of style 82-89, 100
 Vickers, Brian 24, 27, 29
 Vico, Giambattista 108
 villanelle 72
 Virgil 91
 'Virtual Classroom' 158
 vitiae 82
 virtues of style 82-89
 virtutes elocutionis 82
 vocabulary building 82
 voice
 – delivery 124
 – developing 86
 – discovering 85
 – exercises 86
 – finding 140
 – issues of 30
- means of seduction 81
 – style 81
 – types 85
 Voigt, Ellen Bryant 160
 vorticism 114
 vulgar language 89
- 'The Waking' 114
 Wakoski, Diane 64
 Waldman, Anne 135-136
 Walzer, Kevin 132
 Warren, Amanda 46
 Warren, Robert Penn 64
 Wartburgkrieg 128
 'The Wasteland' 158
 'The Way I Am' 71
 Weathers, Winston 90, 93, 98
 Weaver, Richard 25
 Webb, Charles H. 133, 217, 218, 222
 WebCT
 – bulletin board uses 160
 – distance learning 158
 – flexibility 157
 – low-residency MFA programs 160
 – student involvement 162
 – structuring classes 159
 – using for workshops 157
 – writing-intensive classes 164
 Webster, Daniel 24
 webzines 125
 wedding ritual songs 127
 Wellek, René 63
 Welsh poets 68
 Western Kentucky University 135
 Western Michigan University 5
 West, William N. 106
 West Side Story 98
Western Wind 74
 Whalen, Philip 41
 'What the Dead Do' 45
 'What the Living Do' 45
 'What the Student Does' 166
 Whately, Richard 25, 60, 75
 White, E.B. 139-140
 White, Edmund 49
 Whitman, Walt 22-25, 73, 76, 130
 Whittier, John Greenleaf 23
 'Who Killed Poetry?' 30
 Wilbers, Stephen 23
 Wilbur, Richard 69
 Williams, C. K. 75, 77
 Williams, Craig 169-176
 Williams, Miller 97
 Williams, Tennessee 108

- Williams, William Carlos 36, 43, 73, 75-77
Williamson, Chuck 169-176
Wilson, Warren 160
Winans, A.D. 129
Winters, Yvor 64
Wishes, Lies, and Dreams 49
Withers, Tonja 133
Wolf, Allan 130
World Wide Web 105-106
Wright, Charles 4
Wright, Orville 36
Wright, Wilbur 36
writer's block 2, 30, 46
The Writer's Chronicle 6
writing
– essays 26
– exercises 28
– and memory 117
– prompts 52
– responses to poetry 26
word-processing software 47
words, sequencing 76
Wordsworth, William 27
workshop model 2-5
– an alternative 3
– benefit to students 4
– convenience 4, 6
– core of serious writer's training 4
– critique 1-18,
– curricula of dubious value 4
– elements 23
– elite students 3-5
– etiquette 1
– failure 38
– flaws 4
– history 3
– ineffective 3-5
judging students work 34-35
– lacks art of invention 38
– only available model 24
– perpetuated 5
– primary form of instruction 3
– theoretical basis 3, 22
The World Doesn't End 95
'The Wringer' 169
The Writer 108
'Writerly Café'
writing
– alternate openings 75
– better poems 108
– developing style 89
– enhancing classes 156
– exercises 165
– in front of students 90
– free verse 66
– and memory 108
– series 131
Writing Without Teachers 44
writers
– developing style 91
– imitating authors 82
– inventing emotions 49
written delivery 124-125
Yates, Francis A. 105, 111-112, 114-115
Yeats, William Butler 60-61
'You and Me, and Memories of Bradley'
109
Young, Dean 36, 38
Young, Richard E. 34
young writers and workshop model 24
zodiac 113
Zukofsky, Louis 69, 95