

Radical Revision Techniques

by Christine Stewart

This **MFA My Way** is all about getting to work. Before you read further, pull out two or three poems that you consider dead or failed (no such thing as failed writing, though, remember that. All writing moves you forward in some way).

Choose poems that didn't quite burst into bloom or bear the fruit you'd hoped they would. Make sure you haven't looked at these poems for at least a week so you have some emotional distance.

With each poem, try at least three of the suggestions below, all of them if you dare! Be brutal and adventurous.

1. *Change the type of sentence in the first line(s).* If it's a statement, make it a question. If it's a question, make it a declaration. If it's an imperative (a request or order), make it an exclamatory sentence. Express an emotion. Describe an image. Think Monty Python and *do something completely different*.
2. *Delay the verb.* See if you can get to the third line of a sentence (depending on how long your lines are) before you share the verb.
3. If someone tells you (or you think) you have too much (whatever - description, images, adjectives, etc.) in your poem, *add more*. What probably doesn't apply here are abstracts. More abstracts will just make the poem more insubstantial and create more work for you to bring it back into balance.
4. If someone tells you (or you think) you have too little (whatever) in your poem, *take out more*.
5. *Take the last line and make it the first.* Rewrite from there, keeping whatever works in what's already there. Or be brave and don't use anything from previous poem. Write new from there.
6. *Expand your poem.* Add repeated subordinate clauses using who, when, until, if, while, before, after, as, since, whenever, where, etc.

Also use coordinating conjunctions: and/and/and; or/or/or; but/but/but (think of it as a list that keeps going) So, for example: "The man, who once loved me, who once told me _____, and _____, and _____, and _____..." so you're pushing the syntax and the comfort of the line/sentence. Or, "The man who once _____, who _____, who _____."

Actual listing: Must make a qualitative progression (light to dark, big to small, for example); can't be random. Push the list; see what you come up with.

Repetition: Repeat what you just wrote. Maybe repeat it again. *Contradiction:* Say the opposite of what you just wrote.

Intrusion: Open some other book of poetry you own to a random page and pick a random line to include in your poem. Change it around so you're not stealing. ;)

7. Compress your poem.

Negation: Use the word 'not.' When you do this you get both the presence of the thing named and its absence. You can also use other words that negate - 'un'; 'never'; 'less'; 'without.' Use it more than 3 times. This is my favorite! It can bring a lackluster poem to life in a big way.

Kennings: (Used in Anglo Saxon poetry—remember Beowulf?): using figurative language to create a compound noun. This in turn creates a heightened metaphor. 'Whaleroad' for sea or 'skull splitter' for axe. 'The shutmouth mother' (Plath).

Possessives: Use unusual possessives: 'how the sun's poultice draws on my inflammation' (Plath) or ' or riding a wave of what feels like the world's good will' (Peter Cole).

Shift the parts of speech: Use a noun as a verb or vice versa. Use an adjective as a verb, etc. What do I mean? Think of how "Facebook" has become a verb. "I'll Facebook you later." Or Google.

Other Exercises

Go over your poem and underline any lines you feel jump out with lots of energy. Pick three of those lines. Make one the first line of a new poem, one a middle line, and one the last line. Now, using some of the above strategies (minimum 2), write a new poem.

Cut and paste: Print poem double spaced. Cut out each line. Rearrange them. Start by moving the last line to the first line's place and go from there. Close your eyes, mix them around and choose order with eyes closed. Find new meanings and combinations.

Do this with stanzas as well.

What is the point of all this? To cut the umbilical cord once you've birthed the poem and see what it can be without you imposing what you want it to be. Especially if it's not working. Detach from the outcome and find the poem's hidden treasure. Maybe it has a different message and meaning from what you intended. Let it come forth!



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