

“Rules” for Writing Poetry

Modified, Original Source by J.E. Glasser

1. Write an open form poem. Do not focus on end rhyme and meter.
2. Do not be concerned with neatness, grammar, or spelling. They are editing concerns you can correct after the poem itself.
3. Let the poem flow, taking you with it. In the first stage of writing, let words spew uncensored onto the page. This first draft will show you what you are really writing about. Later you can critically begin to select from, expand, and order the initial draft.
4. Break lines intentionally. Do not write in paragraphs where the margin dictates where the line ends. Rely instead on sound, image, and meaning to help you determine where to break lines.
5. Show instead of tell. Poems are composed of things, concrete perceptions that recreate experience for the reader. (The reader can relate to something concrete—something that appeals to his or her senses which we use to experience to the world). Splicing images together can lead to the discovery of new ideas, new connections, and new meanings.
6. Show it in the fewest words. Poems are compressed experiences performed in the fewest words that do the most. Cut out all the flab (all unnecessary words).
7. Carefully select your words with an eye and ear for their sounds, sensory appeal, meaning (literal and emotional), and interest.
8. There are no set subjects appropriate for a poem. Any subject can be used, anything inserted into the poem, to discover and create meaning.
9. Use your own good words. There is no “poetic” diction. Poems are not measured by the weight of polysyllabic words found in a thesaurus.
10. Don’t say it if you’ve heard it before. Make new connections, correspondences you discover and explore.
11. Endings of poems are not summaries or explanations. Instead of defining or limiting the poem, let the end ramify, provoke.
12. Don’t be afraid to “lie.” Poetry is not an autobiography. Alter the facts to reach an emotional truth that lies beyond the literal details.
13. Take risks—the risk of saying ten absurd things before you find that surprising new way of seeing and saying, the risk of being different (to say something in a new way may initially make others uncomfortable), and the risk of exposing yourself, how you feel about yourself and your world.
14. Come back later to the “poetry assignment” if something more compelling comes knocking.
15. Break any of the above “rules” if it helps your poem. *Please note, however, that before you break the rules, you need to have mastered them!*

Closed Form = poetry with a prescribed structure: rhyme, stanzas, meter, etc.

Open Form = poetry with structure that is not prescribed or fixed.