



Poetry Rocks!

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Tool 4

The Shuffle

WHAT IS POETRY MADE OF?
CONTENT
Words

PURPOSE

To expand on what you learned in Tool 3 by focusing on the sound, meaning, and power of individual words, as well as to develop your appreciation for the nuances of the effect individual words have on the sound and rhythm in poems and in prose. And to begin to make conscious choices about how, where, and why to use line breaks in your poems.

WHAT TO DO

Create a poem "Stéphane Mallarmé-style" (out of words instead of ideas) by arranging a random assortment of individual words that you love for their sound and meaning into a three-stanza "sound poem."

This tool is adapted from an exercise in a book by Elliot Sobel called *Wild Heart Dancing: A Personal, One-Day Quest to Liberate the Artist and Lover Within*. WordPlayer Gina Wilson nicknamed this process "Word Poker" because you must play the cards you're dealt in the order you turn them up. What's interesting is that meaning often shows up, and that this tool is often a springboard that leads to a real poem or another piece of writing because of the juxtaposition of words.

NOTE: This tool sometimes baffles people because it's so different from the way we usually write. What you'll end up with is a three-stanza poem (for the new poets, a new stanza is formed by skipping a line), with the same ten words in each stanza, but in different order because of your *Shuffling*.) Here's how to play:

1. Gather paper, a pencil or pen, and ten index cards (or your Personal Diction Deck).
2. Choose ten words you love for their sound and meaning, the more interesting the better, and write each of them on a separate index card. (If you've already created a "Personal Diction Deck" use 10 of these word cards.)
3. Shuffle your ten cards well!
4. Create the first stanza of your "sound poem":

- Flip over the first card and write that word on the first line of your paper. Example: *lullaby*
- Flip over the second card. Here is your choice: you may either write this word on the same line or begin a new line. Add any punctuation you like. You may also add endings to words ("s" or "es", "ed", "ing") but you may not add any words or change the order of them.

Example:

Lullaby wind

or

*Lullaby
Wind*

- Flip over your third card. Remember, your only poetic choice is, Do I put this word on the same line, or the next line?

Example:

Lullaby wind, cascade

or

*Lullaby
Wind cascade*

or

*Lullaby
Wind
Cascade*

- Proceed as above with cards four through ten. Remember, you must use each word in the order you flip it over. Your poetic expression comes

with choosing, for each word, “Same line, or next line?” and with any punctuation you’d like to add. Congratulations! You have now written the first stanza of a poem.

5. Shuffle your cards again, and repeat steps above. Be sure to skip a line before you write your words. You’ve now completed your second stanza.
6. Shuffle your cards again, and repeat steps above, again skipping a line. You’ve now completed your third stanza, and your poem is complete.
7. Read it aloud. Savor the sounds!

This tool is sheer fun, especially when you get into the spirit and really *deliver* your poems, with great interpretive inflections. And often, two or more words that end up next to each other provide a serendipitous juxtaposition – a fresh, surprising metaphor, a joke, or sheer loveliness. Listen for these. What ideas do they suggest?

If you want to take this process a step further, create a “regular poem” using as many of the words/word combinations as you care to.

EXAMPLE

One time, when I played “*The Shuffle*,” my stanzas came out this way. (Notice how much I love to play with punctuation – you don’t have to!):

Lackadaisical?
Hawaii!
Limpid luck tango—
Hubbub.
Lavender.
Listen: flimflam hullabaloo.

Limpid, flimflam, lackadaisical.
Hawaii lavender.
Tango hubbub.
Listen: Luck!
Hullabaloo!

Listen. Flimflam luck tangos,
lackadaisical. Hawaii hubbub.
Lavender hullabaloo,
Limpid.

I liked the idea of “flimflam luck tangoing” so much that I played with it, creating a first draft.

DRAFT 1

Flimflam luck tangos
the night away,
careless. She has
nothing to lose. Aces
up her sleeve, you'd think.
Bacon frying on a
lean September Sunday
when the food stamps
have run out for
everybody else. It would
be easy to hate her—
she with her Chanel # 5
and glittery good looks,
decked in gold and diamonds.
I tell myself
they're really cubic zirconia,
that she'll be hung over
in the morning.
Cheap. Tawdry. Floozy.
I spit out words
my mother taught me
for girls like her. But as I
walk away from the dance floor,
why this urge to toss salt
over my shoulder,
just to be on the safe side?

Then, I experimented with Form/Shape and Sound. Here's a bit of explanation, as a way of laying groundwork for what you'll learn in future tools as we discuss these other two components of a poem:

My second draft is in the Form/Shape of a *Petrarchan sonnet* (named after the Italian poet Petrarch), which is comprised of fourteen lines in two stanzas—an eight-line *octave* followed by a six-line *sestet*.

In the realm of Sound, it employs *syllabics*, meaning that each line contains the same number of *syllables* (10).

And I used a technique called *slant rhyme* throughout the poem, except for lines 5 and 6 ("easy" and "sleazy"), which are a *full rhyme*. The slant rhyme in lines 1 and 2, 3 and 4, 7 and 8, etc. (what we call AA, BB, CC, etc. *rhyme scheme*) is created by ending both lines with the same vowel sound *or* the same final consonant. This enhances the musicality of a poem. (Don't worry if you can't hear these slant rhymes; they're much more subtle than perfect rhymes.)

DRAFT 2, SHAPED INTO RHYMED SYLLABICS

Flimflam Luck tangoes the night away. She
has nothing to lose. Aces up her sleeve.
Bacon frying on a lean September
Sunday when the food stamps have run out for
everybody else. It would be easy
to hate her, dismiss her kind as sleazy—
all perfume and glitter. I do, in fact.
I tell myself it's cubic zirconia, that

she'll be hung over in the morning. Slut.
Cheap. Tawdry. Tart. Floozy. I spit out
words my mother taught me for girls like her.
Why then this urge to toss salt over
my shoulder, just to be on the safe side?
Why am I humming in $\frac{3}{4}$ time?

I really like this draft. But this form seemed too, well, formal, for a floozy like Flimflam Luck. So I turned this slant-rhymed sonnet into a looser form by changing the line breaks while keeping the words the same.

If you're already familiar with the nuances of rhyming, you may want to note the way *my line-end rhyme* and *slant rhyme* became *internal rhyme* (rhyme in the middle of a poem's lines, rather than at the end). This gives the poem a hidden swinginess that mirrors the swinginess my narrator is hiding from herself. Now the form feels right to me, in sync with the subject and tone of the words.

Luckless

Flimflam Luck tangoes
the night away. She
has nothing to lose.
Aces up her sleeve.
Bacon frying on
a lean September Sunday
when the food stamps
have run out for
everybody else.

It would be easy
to hate her, dismiss
her kind as sleazy—
all perfume and glitter.
I do, in fact.

I tell myself she's pure
cubic zirconia, that
she'll be hung over
in the morning. *Slut.*
Cheap. Tawdry. Tart.
Floozy. I spit out
words my mother taught me
for girls like her. Why then

this urge to toss salt
over my shoulder, just to
be on the safe side?
Why am I humming
in three-quarter time?

REFLECTION

What opened up for you as you focused on the sounds of individual words, rather than their meaning and how they were put together?

How could you use this kind of wordplay to enhance your writing in the future?

HONE YOUR CRAFT

If you found this exercise challenging, you may, like Degas, be trying to craft poems out of ideas instead of words. This tool is one you should come back to often. Your writing will become richer and more exciting for you as you keep playing with words you love for their sound and meaning and expanding your diction and syntax.

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