



Poetry Rocks!

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Tool 7

The Envisioning

WHAT IS POETRY MADE OF?

CONTENT

Geography

Chronology

Furniture

PURPOSE

To focus on Geography, Chronology, and Furniture as necessary Content ingredients and to practice deliberately weaving them into your work. This tool can be used in ANY genre to strengthen your writing.

BACKGROUND

In addition to the first two Content components, Words and Subject Matter, there are three more components that Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Maxine Kumin says should be included in every poem. As I've mentioned, she calls them Geography, Chronology, and Furniture, which makes them easy to understand and remember.

Geography: The "Where" of the Poem, a Sense of Place

In literary terms, Geography is another term for *setting*. There are many kinds of "where" words, both generic or specific, that can give readers a sense of place and make the setting come alive: names of rooms, like "my grandmother's kitchen;" any words that convey a house or a home; highways, boulevards, streets, etc.,

like “Lexington Avenue,” and even addresses; neighborhoods, towns, cities, counties, states, countries, and continents; lakes, rivers, mountains, patches of woods, schoolyards, churches.... The list goes on and on.

Whatever we write about originates somewhere, by dint of the fact that our bodies exist in space. And sometimes it takes only a few words or phrases to give readers a sense of place. You don’t always even have to name the place; an object can do that work for you, as the word “stove” places the setting in a kitchen. And sometimes, an entire poem or piece of writing can be centered in and completely about one place. James Wright’s *prose poem* “[The Secret of Light](#)” is a beautiful example of “poetry of place,” which is the official name for this kind of poem. (We’ll discuss prose poems when we get to the Form and Shape aspect of poems.)

Chronology: The “When” of the Poem, a Sense of Time

You can weave a sense of time into your writing with a few words or phrases—or many. And, as with Geography, there are many kinds of “when” words that can be used, generic or specific, to give your reader a sense of the Chronology of your piece of writing: times of day, like 8 a.m. or evening; days of the week, dates, months, seasons, years, decades, centuries; a person’s age; moments in a lifetime, like births, weddings, deaths, graduations; relative time words like soon, before lunch, after the hurricane, the next summer, later; even “[After School After Ordinary Days](#),” as in the beautiful poem by that name by Maria Mazziotti Gillan.

Furniture: Sensory Details, “Stuff” from the Real World

Another, more poetic word for what Maxine Kumin means by Furniture is *image*. In literary terms, an image will often be something we see (a visual image), but all senses are in effect images, bringing a world vividly alive to the reader. A poem needs things that a reader can see, hear, taste, smell and touch. Enjoy listening to Billy Collins’s poem “[Litany](#)” that both illustrates and pokes fun at all five senses’ worth of “the plentiful imagery of the world.”

WHAT TO DO

Create a poem from a photograph by using its Geography (details of place), Chronology (details of time), and Furniture (sensory details).

1. Select a photograph that has emotional importance to you of any kind, for any reason.
2. Study it for a few moments. Let the image speak to you.

3. Jot down a number of words or phrases that capture each of these three areas of content. These may be able to be seen in the photograph, but you can also go outside the photograph for them, either through memory or imagination.
- **Geography:** any “where” details, generic or specific, as described above
 - **Chronology:** any “when” details, generic or specific, as described above
 - **Furniture:** any “what” details, or sensory images, to bring the physical world of the photograph alive—you may not use all five senses, but do consider each of them as you’re gathering your “furniture” for use in your poem.
 - things that can be seen (colors, objects, shapes, sizes)
 - things that can be heard (music, voices, conversation, noises)
 - things that can be tasted
 - things that can be smelled
 - things that can be touched (textures, and any physical sensations of the body as well, such as movement)
4. Now, craft a poem that captures your thoughts and emotions about this photograph, using as many or as few of these Geography, Chronology, and Furniture words as you care to.

EXAMPLE

My mother was a “saver.” Many years ago, she sent me a large box that contained special clothes I’d worn as a girl that she’d saved for the daughter she hoped I’d have. When I came across this photo of my daughter in one of these dresses, I remembered what she’d said when she wore it for the first time and used her words (Furniture!) as the center piece of this poem. Here are some of the words and phrases I gathered for possible use in my poem:

- **Geography:** my mother’s house, my house (note that these places are not named in the poem, but are present nonetheless)
- **Chronology:** my childhood, my daughter’s age (three), summer
- **Furniture:**
 - things that can be seen (red and white dress)
 - things that can be heard (my daughter’s words “I’m going to wear this dress to the summer”)
 - things that can be tasted (candy apple)
 - things that can be smelled (candy apple)
 - things that can be touched or felt (twirling, crisp)

Dressing for Summer

You are three, twirling
in a dress with a red frog
appliquéd on a crisp white skirt,

a candy-apple-and-white-striped bodice.
You twirl and twirl, delighting
in this dress

that came today
in a box from my mother—
a dress I wore when I was three.

I'm going to wear this dress to the summer,
you say, as if summer
were a party

to wear a favorite dress to,
which I see now,
thanks to you, it is.

REFLECTION

In what ways do including Geography, Chronology and Furniture change or enhance your writing? How do these details affect your reader's experience?

HONE YOUR CRAFT

Take note of how poets you admire include "geography" in the content of their poems. And be sure to include "geography" in your own poems.

Grab a highlighter and a great poem, and highlight every word or phrase that contributes to a sense of place.

Experiment with different ways to let your readers know the "wheres" of your poems.

Take note of how poets you admire include "chronology" in the content of their poems. And be sure to include "chronology" in your own poems.

Again, grab a highlighter and a great poem, and highlight every word or phrase that contributes to a sense of time.

Experiment with different ways to let your readers know the "whens" of your poems.

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