



Poetry Rocks!

Take your dreams seriously...play with them. ®

Tool 9

The List

WHAT IS POETRY MADE OF?
CONTENT
Furniture

PURPOSE

To expand on what you've learned about Furniture as a necessary Content ingredient and to keep practicing weaving specific sensory details into your work. As with tools 7 and 8, The List can be used in ANY genre to strengthen your writing. You'll also get to practice one of what I find the most enjoyable poetic forms, the list poem, sometimes called the catalog poem.

BACKGROUND

The list, or catalog, form of poetry goes back thousands of years. Two classic examples are the lists of Trojan War heroes in Homer's *Iliad* and the lists of family lineage in the Bible. One of the most famous list poems of all time, written between 1759 and 1763, is an excerpt of Christopher Smart's long poem "Jubilate Agno" entitled "[For I Will Consider My Cat Jeoffry.](#)" And Walt Whitman is famous for the lists and catalogs in his *Leaves of Grass*.

WHAT TO DO

Write a poem that is completely made up of, or includes, one or more lists of related items, people, places, or ideas.

1. Choose a subject you'll enjoy playing with. I've seen beautiful poems written on subjects as varied as the items in a husband's woodshop, the gifts of an ordinary day, the objects depicted on a handkerchief in an exhibit at a holocaust museum. The choices really are endless.
2. Create one or more lists having to do with your subject. For example, in the first of my poems shared below I picked the subject "a Southern spring" and chose to list three things: plants in blossom, weeds, and insects. In the other, as a Leapfrog off a poem by the poet Lisel Mueller, I listed items I considered necessities and grouped them into subsets that became stanzas. And it's perfect to go simple by picking a subject and make only one list, as in the examples I listed above in 1.
3. Now turn your lists(s) into a poem, paying special attention to the order and arrangement of the items. Think about what you could add that would elevate your poem to more than a simple list. You can check out how I do this in the poems below, and you may also want to revisit Marilyn Krysl's list poem "[Saying Things](#)" to see how she pulls this off.

List poems may appear to be completely uncrafted, and the order of the items listed random, but this is seldom the case. There's a real art to the process, including careful attention to sound and rhythm, which we'll explore soon! Be sure the last item in your list is a strong one that offers a sense of completion and ends your poem well.

EXAMPLE

I'm going to give you two list poem examples to illustrate two of the myriad ways they can be written—the first poem includes three lists that are integral to the subject (the plants in blossom, weeds, and insects mentioned earlier); the second is a detailed catalog of the subject.

"Southern Spring" is the first list poem I ever wrote. It began as an assignment for a poetry class I took years ago. I was walking through the woods one spring day, stymied by the task of writing a list poem, and couldn't help but notice the lushness of a Southern spring in contrast to the hard-won Northern springs of my childhood. Then I realized that all this pulsing life around me was a perfect subject. I had a great time looking up bugs and weeds in my thesaurus and arranging them in a way that pleased my ear through both sound and rhythm. The most fun I've ever had at a poetry reading of mine was watching the hands of an interpreter for the deaf as she "interpreted" my lists for listeners at Charlotte-Mecklenburg's Main Library.

Southern Spring

While the Calgary winter
holds, you arrive
too soon.

I'm not ready for the bridal wreath
spiraea to burst its seed pearls
against the proud forsythia,

for the poppy-seeded pear
blossoms, for the pollen
that shimmers in the air.

Wait, I want to say to the ropes of
wisteria, readying their war
on my blueberry bushes.

I'm not ready for you, for the
daffodils, backs broken from their bent search
for their own trumpeting reflections,

for the fecund soil to spawn
its beggar's-ticks, chickweed, milkweed, pokeweed,
pigweed, crazyweed, fireweed, dandelion.

Wait, I say, wait!
Whatever hyacinth bulbs are to do
in the frozen earth, mine haven't done.

I'm not ready to rejoice
in swollen creeks, their rushing
in lush counterpoint to couplings of birds.

Can't you wait until winter
ices out the weak resolves,
until bleakness tempers mettle,

until the tumblebug, potato bug, stinkbug, sow bug,
louse, locust, lacewing larvae
suffer a long, hard frost,

until the first hint of
fuzz on a fistful bud
is enough?

The second list poem example, "Add My Necessities to Your List" was written as a Leapfrog in response to poet Lisel Mueller's beautiful list poem "Necessities." I loved the idea of exploring my own "necessities." Mueller's categories were "a map of the world," "the illusion of progress," "answers to questions," "evidence that we matter," and "the old things first things"—serving as an example of how distinctive and original the subjects of our lists and catalogs can be.

Add My Necessities to Your List

For Lisel Mueller

Add My Necessities to Your List

For Lisel Mueller

1.
Contours. Mountaintops and valleys
for their own sakes, glinting riverbeds,
winding roads that lead
to the inviting, unknown places. Woods
to hide in. To get lost in, like Hansel and Gretel,
and find our way out of, proving to ourselves
our hearts know true north.
2.
Oceans. To run alongside of, to show us blue-
grey green backlit by sun, to drop treasures
at our feet. Streams, so we will know
how peace sounds. Cold well water
worth working a rusty pump handle for.
A memory of an early morning lake
that took our breath away when we plunged.
3.
Fruit. The first wild strawberry, fresh
from the sun. The last, gleaming
in a Mason jar from the fruit cellar. Sweetness
as reward for struggle. Nourishment after battling
dry weather, hailstorms, the odds.
Love, passion, apples ripening on trees
in children's picture books.

4.
Words. Thick books, dialects,
endearments murmured
in a foreign accent between kisses
on a windy hillside. Poems
with their slant
rhymes, rhythms. Babies' babbles:
pure desire for words.

5.
Kin. Children who hum when
they build block roadways. Husbands
and fathers who whistle. Grandmothers.
Oh, Lisel Mueller, the grandmother
I never had, may I adopt you
to mark my map as I make my way toward
that cliff you have defeated
with the contours of your oceans,
the fruit of your words?

REFLECTION

Have you noticed that a list poem almost always focuses on things we experience through our bodies, rather than ideas we experience through our minds? How does it feel to you to approach a poem in this way?

What can you take away from this exercise about the relationship between ideas and things?

HONE YOUR CRAFT

Start a collection of list poems.

As you read poetry and prose, notice the lists that are a part of many, many pieces of good writing. You'll find lists everywhere—often with the names of just three or four items.

Put lists in your own writing.

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