



# Poetry Rocks!

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## Tool 12

# The Sound Effect

**WHAT IS POETRY MADE OF?**

**SOUND**

*Consonant Sounds*

*Vowel Sounds*

### PURPOSE

To work and play with Sound in your poems through focusing on the consonant and vowel sounds in the words your poems are composed of.

### BACKGROUND

Think of the Sound component of a poem as its music, created by its *diction* (word choices) and *syntax* (the order and arrangement of the words). After all, poetry began as an aural tradition—it was meant to be heard, not read. Before written language was widespread, poems were handed down from generation to generation by being memorized. And certain sounds were a huge aid to memorization—especially rhythm and rhyme.

After the invention of the printing press, people's encounters with poetry were often via the printed, rather than the spoken word. Rhythm and rhyme mattered less once poems could be preserved in written form. Other kinds of wordplay became possible, like, for example, arranging words on a page in a shape that mirrored the subject of the poem. (We'll talk more about this when we discuss Form and Shape.) But sound is still a critical element in most poetry, and so much fun to play with! Here are some ingredients to add musicality to your poems.

## CONSONANT SOUNDS

The letters of the alphabet are divided into consonants and vowels for a reason, and both serve as musical ingredients in poems. Two common consonant poetic techniques are *alliteration* and *consonance*.

### **Alliteration (repetition of consonant sounds at the beginnings of words)**

Whether or not you've learned the name of this technique, you've known about it for many years, as it's been used to twist the tongues of countless children through the likes of sentences such as "Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers" and "She sells seashells by the seashore."

You'll get a different effect, not only from which consonant sounds (individual or blended, such as "bl" and "str") you use, but also how often and how close together you repeat them (twice seems accidental and is unlikely to be noticed, five or more can sound comical or ludicrous if they're too close together, and three often works better than four). Experiment!

### **Consonance (repetition of consonants elsewhere in words)**

It's likely you've never even heard the word "consonance." This repeating of consonant sounds in the endings, middles, and beginnings of words forms a much more subtle music. If you've ever wondered why a poem or a passage of prose just sounds great to the ear, even when there's not a rhyme or a particular rhythm at play, consonance (and its vowel equivalent, assonance), is likely at work. There's something very pleasing about the repetition of certain sounds, and, if you're not already doing this, you will really grow as a poet when you choose words to use in your work based on sound as well as meaning. One example, from my poem "Desire":

Discouragement isn't in your language//of longing, lunging, lunging.

## VOWEL SOUNDS

### **Assonance (repetition of vowel sounds)**

You may not have heard of assonance, the vowel equivalent of consonance, either. As you can easily surmise, this is a repeating of vowel sounds in the endings, middles, and beginnings of words to create pleasing sound and musicality. Here's one example, from my poem "Everything That Happens":

If only,/at the plot's first vicious/twist, I could skip ahead to the final pages

## Pitch (auditory frequency)

In his excellent textbook *Western Wind: An Introduction to Poetry* (Random House, 1974), John Frederick Nims presents a "Frequency Scale of English Vowel Sounds":

ōō	ō	oo	aw	oi	ow	ah	u	u(r)	a	e	i	ī	ā	ēē
boo	bone	book	bought	boy	bough	bar	bud	bird	bat	bet	bit	buy	bay	bee

This is a "graduate school" level poetry consideration; being familiar with the concept is enough. Speak the words in order and see if you can hear the pitch rise from low (the "oo" sound that can boom and moo) to high (the "ee" sound that can shriek and squeal).

Remember as you listen while you write, that it's not just the five vowels (a, e, i, o, u), but the vowel *sounds* (which may be spelled oddly, like the long "a" sound in "reign"), as well as the order and combination of vowel and consonant sounds you use that matter when creating beautiful Sound in your poems.

## WHAT TO DO

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Create musicality in a poem by using alliteration, consonance, assonance, and/or even pitch.

1. Choose a subject you'd like to write a poem about.
2. Then choose five words you'd like to use in your poem. You can use words from your Diction Deck if you like. If not, be sure you pick words that you love for their sound and meaning. Write these words across the top of a piece of paper. Each word will be the start of a column of words that focuses on one or two vowel or consonant sounds in those words.
3. Under each word, list words that share consonant and/or vowel sounds. You may choose words that make sense to you in relationship to your subject, but you don't have to—sometimes the juxtaposition of seemingly random, unconnected words can suggest a stunning metaphor or a fresh, unique way of approaching your subject.
4. Once each list has a fair quantity of words, write your poem, using as many of the words in your lists as you can. This is wordplay, not linguistics, so don't worry if you begin listing words that begin with "w" and the word *sidewalk* shows up, or if a list of words with a final "k" sound morphs into a list of words with the short "u" sound, or even if a

word appears on more than one list. What you're after is letting one word's sounds suggest another, and then another, resulting in a poem with musicality caused by many interrelated sounds.

## EXAMPLE

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When I was in my 30's, I heard a speaker discuss being a child when the Cold War came to an end. I had a memory flash: huddling in a school hallway during a drill, preparing in the event the Russians dropped bombs on us. I suddenly realized why I always flinched whenever an airplane flew overhead. I then remembered a character from a childhood picture book, "Chicken Little," who was afraid that the sky was falling. I had my subject. Here's an abbreviated version of my word lists that I used to create my poem, which came out as a list poem of things that fall.

<b>sky</b>	<b>plums</b>	<b>tuck</b>	<b>wing</b>	<b>huddle</b>
<b>"S"</b>	<b>"L" &amp; "M"</b>	<b>"U" &amp; "K"</b>	<b>"W"</b>	<b>"H"</b>
snow	ferment	tick	worry	hover
soft	September	duck	wrenched	head
sleet	wormy	scud	whirling	hallway
glisten	warm	nuts	sidewalk	hickory
imprison	autumn	gut	wool	hard
inside	meteors		world	harbor
hailstones	melt		window	
sometimes	me		wouldn't	
	smell			
	wool			

### **Chicken Little, 1962**

On hearing a speaker discuss the end of the Cold War  
and suddenly remembering the Cuban Missile Crisis

Let me tell you, the sky  
was always falling  
until I could name  
what did fall: Snow, soft feathers  
from a giant's bed ticking  
that glistened under porch lights,  
melted in my hair. Sleet sometimes,  
or hailstones, petals of rain  
that imprisoned me inside,  
behind a window. Wormy apples, plums

fermenting in the warm September air.  
Then came autumn with all its fallings:  
acorns in their nubbly caps,  
hickory nuts in hard casings, dry leaves  
whirling, scudding  
the sidewalk—I began to tuck  
my head under my wing, worry  
that the sky wouldn't hold.  
Names beget names, always more  
that could fall: Stars, meteors. Cradles  
harboring babies. In grade school drills,  
I learned how to huddle  
in a cinderblock hallway, head  
between my knees, the smell  
of my damp wool uniform wrenched  
into the smell of fear.  
I wasn't given words  
for the lurch  
in my gut whenever I heard  
droning overhead. All I knew, ducking  
for any kind of shelter: it had something  
to do with airplanes, with world without  
end amen.

## REFLECTION

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How did this approach to writing work for you? Did any surprises or serendipities show up as you played with words for Sounds' sake? What value do you see in approaching writing a poem in this way?

### HONE YOUR CRAFT

Take note of how poets you admire include repeating consonant and vowel sounds in their poems.

Be sure to include alliteration, assonance and or consonance in your own poems.

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