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Tool 16

The (In)Formalist

WHAT IS POETRY MADE OF?

SOUND

*Formality/Informality
of Language (Diction,
Syntax, and Voice)*

PURPOSE

To work and play with Sound in your poems and/or prose by focusing on the Formality/ Informality of your language, and to practice directing the *voice* of your writing.

BACKGROUND

Remember our conversation about *diction* (individual word choices) and syntax (the arrangement of those words)? A poet's diction and syntax affect the sound of a poem in many ways, and they will certainly dictate the degree of formality, which can be anywhere from swifty, slangy casual to elegantly, eloquently formal.

This is a good time to introduce the term *voice*—that quality that makes a writer's work unique, as one aspect of voice is how formal or informal a poem, or any other piece of writing, is. Voice can be thought of as a writer's overall style, created through her diction, syntax, and even punctuation, as

well as the way she handles her subjects, develops her characters, conveys her settings, etc. In discussing writer's voice, [Wikipedia](#) uses the apt comparison of musical instruments: "As a trumpet has a different voice than a tuba or a violin has a different voice than a cello, so the words of one author have a different sound than the words of another." Voice, including its degree of formality, is very heavily tied to the writer's era, educational background, cultural background, and experiences.

While each writer has her own overall voice, the voice of individual pieces of writing can be directed through the words selected and the way they're arranged. Short sentences and simple one- and two-syllable words will create a more informal effect than the formal effect of long sentences and multisyllabic words.

Here's a short list of what can give writing, whether it's poetry or prose, a formal feel:

- not using contractions ("I will" is more formal than "I'll, for example)
- using multisyllabic words
- using words not normally used in conversation
- using inversions ("have you not" versus "haven't you," for example, and "white flows the river" versus "the river flows white" in the poem below)

How many examples of formal language can you find in this beautiful love poem by Robert Louis Stevenson?

I Will Make You Brooches

I will make you brooches and toys for your delight
Of bird-song at morning and star-shine at night.
I will make a palace fit for you and me
Of green days in forests and blue days at sea.

I will make my kitchen, and you shall keep your room,
Where white flows the river and bright blows the broom,
And you shall wash your linen and keep your body white
In rainfall at morning and dewfall at night.

And this shall be for music when no one else is near,
The fine song for singing, the rare song to hear!
That only I remember, that only you admire,
Of the broad road that stretches and the roadside fire.

~ Robert Louis Stevenson

And, of course, the opposite choices will give writing an informal feel:

- using contractions
- not using inversions
- not using many multisyllabic words
- using words normally used in conversation

WHAT TO DO

Consciously use diction and syntax to create voice and control the Formality/Informality of a poem or other piece of writing.

1. As you write a new poem or other piece of writing—or edit one that you’ve been working on—focus on its voice and how formal or informal you’d like it to be.
2. Play with its diction and syntax, first by deliberately making it more informal, and then more formal. Use the bulleted lists above to help you.
3. Then, consider the level of formality that best serves your subject matter and the voice you would like your writing to have.

EXAMPLE

Here are two of my poems in which I deliberately chose the Formality/Informality of my language.

I wrote “Voice Lessons” when a close friend of mine was losing one of her brothers to cancer. I didn’t know what to say to her that could possibly be of comfort. When I came across some beautiful lines about grief in a book of Linda Pastan’s work, I decided to write my friend a poem using them as an epigraph. I strove to use a voice similar to Pastan’s slightly formal one, using simple words with a lyrical syntax caused in part through repetition.

Voice Lessons

*When my griefs sing to me
from the bright throats of thrushes
I sing back.*

~ Linda Pastan

Is it the smell of hyacinths in the house
that makes you notice
people falling all around you, falling for want

of words? A boy loses
a father, a boy you knew only once
on a summer evening catching fireflies,
and mostly you remember his face
was dirty.... Still. To lose
a father. You want a word.

But you can't find one, so
you are silent. Finally
you understand why people turn
their heads away, won't look
grief in the eye. Now someone you love
is losing a brother and again
the silence reaches up
to strangle the words
in your throat. For what do you know?

Is it enough to listen to Cimarosa
while you knead bread for her, pat comfort
into the dough? Is it enough
to plant a garden? To teach your son
peris as you show him their pendulous blossoms,
to hear him love the word, make a litany
of it, affirm over and over,
peris, peris, peris,
is is is, as though
he'd been born
to learn how to sing

When, however, I wanted to capture the experience of opening the box of the clothes I wore when I was a little girl that my mother sent me when I had a little girl of my own, I chose very simple, conversational language and syntax. Note that, while I use repetition in this poem as well, the voice is much less formal, which feels like a much better fit for this subject matter. Another reason I chose a more informal voice is because "For Mother, as I Sort through This Box of Clothes You Saved for a Granddaughter" is a poem of address in which I'm speaking directly to my mother.

**For Mother, as I Sort through This Box of Clothes
You Saved for a Granddaughter**

I remember sitting in the tub,
you washing my hair, a halo
around your head where light
met the steam. I was telling you
how much I loved being eight,
that I wanted to be eight forever.

And then I was nine and so happy
to be nine I wanted that age
to last forever ,too, then ten,
the years clicking by like Hail Mary's
on your rosary beads till I would want
nothing more than to leave you.

But that year, my eighth, you bought me
this candy-striped pink and white dress
with a whale appliqué on it.
I remember wanting to cry
when I tried it on the next summer
and it no longer fit.

Though I didn't say a word,
you came home one day carrying
an identical dress in
the next larger size, proving
something about love I've never
found words to thank you for.

REFLECTION

Do you gravitate toward writers on one end of the formality scale or the other? How formal or informal does your writing tend to be? How might you incorporate what you've learned in this tool as you continue writing?

HONE YOUR CRAFT

Take note of how formal/informal the work of poets you admire is. Study the diction, syntax, and voice that create this effect.

As you write your own poems and prose, be conscious of the formality and informality of your diction and syntax, and the way they affect your voice.

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