



# Poetry Rocks!

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## Tool 18

# The Traditionalist

*WHAT IS POETRY MADE OF?*

*FORM/SHAPE*

*Forms, Traditional and Non*

### PURPOSE

To grow in knowledge of the Form/Shape a poem can take by creating a poem in (or adapted from) a traditional form.

### BACKGROUND

I once heard poet Naomi Shihab Nye speak of how, as a little girl, she was drawn to poetry just from the way it looked on the page. The white space all around the words made her feel that there was something very special and important about poems, and she decided, even before she could read, that she would become a poet. This story illustrates the visual power of the form and shape of our poems.

#### **Forms: Traditional and Non**

There are many traditional forms of poetry, each with its own form and shape. And we, in my opinion, are very fortunate to live in a time when we can choose to use any of them that we care to. And we also have the option of invented new forms—innovative poets are always coming up with their own forms, usually by adapting an established form, as I do the “small double almost-haiku” in the example below. We also have the option to play with the form and shape of our poems in infinite ways through free verse, which simply refers to a poem that is not written

in a traditional form that dictates rhyme, meter, and poetic structure. Because of this, even though free verse has been around for a long time now, it's still considered a non-traditional form.

As for traditional forms, the sonnet, limerick, and haiku are no doubt ones you're familiar with, even if you can't rattle off the requisite number of syllables, metric feet, lines per stanza, etc. You may also be familiar with the villanelle, sestina, and pantoum. And I know you've heard of terza rima, the poetic form I discussed and gave examples of in Tool 14, "The Lyric." For reference, About.com has [a page of links](#) to online definitions and examples of all these common poetic forms, and more as well. If you're interested in writing poems in traditional forms, rather than just dabbling with it as we are doing here, check them out.

## WHAT TO DO

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Write a poem in (or adapted from) a traditional form: terza rima, sonnet, haiku, limerick, villanelle, sestina, pantoum, etc. If you'd like some definitions and examples to guide you, click on the names of poetic forms you're interested in exploring on About.com's [page of links](#). And here's a detailed "[Sonnet-writing Tool](#)" if you want to try your hand at a sonnet.

Keep in mind that, when writing contemporary poetry in form, it's fine to be a purist. It's also fine to bend the form by using slant rhyme, altering the meter or syllable count, etc. Have fun with this, and give up any attachment to the outcome. If you're new to poetic form, what you're after is process, not results.

## EXAMPLE

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Poetry, for me, is often born of grief. When the mother of one of my best friend's died while I was teaching in the North Carolina Mountains, it felt terrible to not support my friend by attending the funeral. But there was no one to fill in for me and my students had traveled from all over the country to attend the class. Being in this situation brought back the guilt I felt for not having attended my grandmother's funeral several years earlier, even though my mother had insisted that I didn't need to travel 600 miles with two young children for the funeral of a woman none of us had a good relationship with.

I took my writing class members on a hike with our journals, having recently played with *The Shuffle*. The juxtaposition of the waterfall's peaceful sound and my remorse, along with the words from my *Shuffle*, inspired a poem.

The spare words I wanted, along with the images from the natural world, suggested haiku to me. A traditional haiku is composed of three lines, with a pattern of 5-7-5 syllables, so I arranged my words into two sets of syllables (5-7-6, 6-7-5), as close to a haiku as I could get without sacrificing meaning or content.

Note that I transposed funerals for the sake of the poem. This could be called a “lie in service of the truth”—a poet does not make the same pact with the reader that a memoirist, biographer, or reporter does, to recount reality as it happened. Rather, each poem is an invented world that creates an experience for a reader.

I wanted readers to feel the emotional truth of what missing my grandmother’s funeral was like for me through the images of Laurel Falls in June, when the rhododendron blooms. Note, too, my very long title. I like really long titles! But I would never use one indiscriminately :). One thing a title can do is give readers the context needed to understand and appreciate the poem. As this particular poem is largely comprised of images and conveys very little information, I chose to let the title give the chronology (the time of my grandmother’s imagined funeral) and the geography (a rock by Laurel Falls), and even the form I used.

**Small Double Almost-Haiku Written  
As I Sit on a Rock by Laurel Falls Instead  
of Attending My Grandmother’s Funeral**

Glisten of wind, green  
babble, lace cascade—assuage  
my guilt. Fill me, fallen

stars of rhododendron.  
Blossom through the mottled dark  
of my absent heart.

## REFLECTION

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In a few short sentences, describe your experience of this experimentation with form. What value do you see in writing in, or close to, a traditional form?

### HONE YOUR CRAFT

If you’re interested in writing poetry in traditional forms, use the links above to learn more about them. Study examples of poems written in the forms that most appeal to you, and then write your own poems in traditional forms. A great book resource for learning traditional forms is *Rhyme’s Reason* by John Hollander. For examples of contemporary poems in traditional forms, I like *Strong Measures: An Anthology of Contemporary American Poetry in Traditional Forms* edited by Philip Dacy and David Jauss.

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