



Poetry Rocks!

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Tool 5

The Sprint

WHAT IS POETRY MADE OF?
CONTENT
Subject Matter

PURPOSE

To explore and develop promising Subject Matter for the content of your poems and/or prose.

BACKGROUND

What are we purchasing, when we pay attention, but ourselves?

~ Mark Doty

In any genre, our Subject Matter can be anything in or out of this world. We can look inward to our own thoughts, feelings, habits, beliefs, preferences, etc. We can look outward at whatever captivates our attention. As we, through our writing, engage in a conversation with what fully enlivens us, we grow, as poet and writer Mark Doty notes in the above quote, to become even more ourselves.

Annie Proulx knows this secret. She won the Pulitzer Prize for her novel *The Shipping News*, which started with her interest in a map of Newfoundland. When she finished that book, she turned her attention to accordions. As she read through accordion-related court cases—such a particular curiosity—she found

out that money could be hidden in an accordion. That fact inspired her novel *Accordion Crimes*.

You can write poems about Newfoundland. You can write poems about accordions. You can write about anything that fascinates you, as a fifth grader named Neil Von Holle proved. Neil attended Our Lady of the Assumption Elementary School, where I was leading a poetry project in Mrs. Croghan's fifth grade classroom. All the students were writing poems for a book, complete with artwork and biographies. They would each get a copy, and a copy would be given to the school library as a gift. They also planned to give a reading for their parents. It was a big deal.

But there was a problem. Mrs. Croghan and I both wanted all the students to be proud of their poems. I'd used quite a few different prompts, and many good poems had flown from pencil to page. The children were all happy. Except for Neil. Neil didn't like poetry, and he didn't like any of the subjects I'd given the class to write about. We were down to the wire and I didn't know what to do, except to pay close attention to Neil. One morning, he and I went out into the hall to see if we could find a poem. We sat on the floor. It was peaceful there. Neil began poking at something with his pencil. I looked more closely. "You know, Neil," I said, "You could write about that."

Neil liked the idea. One of the types of poetry we'd discussed in class was the poem of address. Neil had a few questions to ask of his subject:

Oh Dead Fly

Oh dead fly, oh dead fly, who killed you?
Oh dead fly, oh dead fly, did you run into the window?
Oh dead fly, oh dead fly, tell me, how did you die?
Oh dead fly, oh dead fly, did you run into the wall?
Oh dead fly, oh dead fly, did it hurt to die?
Oh dead fly, oh dead fly.

~ Neil Von Holle

When Neil finished his poem, he taped the fly to his paper. That was the paper that he read from at the class poetry reading, and this was the poem that went into the class anthology. I like this poem a lot myself. It manages to be both funny and serious at the same time—no small trick.

And it's a crowd pleaser in every classroom of children I've taught poetry in. I read it. The children laugh, and then they pause. And then they write poems of

their own. Neil, the poetry hater, has inspired a lot of poems since he wrote “Oh Dead Fly.” I’m grateful I took the time to pay attention to him and his fly.

What objects, events, phenomena, people fascinate you? Pay attention! That’s where you’ll find your Subject Matter for your poetry and/or your prose.

WHAT TO DO

Develop a poem (or piece of prose) by using a stream-of-consciousness-style writing technique I call the Sprint to explore an object, event, phenomena, person, or anything else that fascinates you.

1. Choose a word, phrase, or idea that intrigues you, one you would enjoy developing into a poem or some other form of writing. Any of the words (or combination of words) from your Diction Deck is a good candidate.
2. Choose an amount of time to write (three to fifteen minutes) or a number of pages to fill (one to three). Ten minutes is a good place to start.
3. Set a timer or draw a “finish line” on the page. (There used to be an online timer that applauded instead of ringing or buzzing, and I miss it! But I did find a pleasant sound for the timer on my phone. You may want to do the same.)
4. Begin with your chosen word(s) and keep your hand in motion the entire time. Run with it, or if you like, let it run with you. If necessary, write your word(s) over and over until something comes to you.
5. Do not—I repeat, do not—stop until you reach your finish line, or hear that timer go off. Often, wonderful words show up in that final stretch when you think you have nothing left to say.
6. Finished? Take a few deep breaths, stretch a little, and then read your words out loud. Did you surprise yourself? Highlight the words, phrases and sentences that you like the best.
7. Craft a poem (or other piece of writing) by pulling out the best of what showed up in your Sprint and playing with it.

EXAMPLE

This is one of my favorite ways of writing a poem and I do it often. This Sprint and the resulting poem grew from a July drive to South Carolina I took when my daughter was five and my son two so that I could show them peaches growing on trees and buy some fresh-picked ones.

I knew I wanted to capture our experience in a poem, and I knew a Sprint would be the perfect starting point. Notice how I keep pushing the word "peach," circling back to it over and over. I've heard this technique called "cracking open a word" and I suggest you try it, allowing yourself the freedom to let go of proper sentences and punctuation and go a bit wild! I've highlighted the words, phrases, and sentences I pulled from my "wild" exploration of the word "peach" to create the poem "Eat a Peach, Amanda."

"Peach Sprint," July 22, 1991

Peach. Crack open the word peach. A good year for peaches, I kept reading, and then we went to South Carolina, near Gaffney and peaches abounded. Peaches everywhere, roadside stands of peaches, traveling down scenic highway eleven behind a truck loaded with sweet peaches, and passing orchard after orchard of trees hung heavy with golden orbs. Peaches. Those heavy spheres warm from the sun, they are suns, giving off a light of their own as they lie in my hand warm from the sun. Up north I never picked a peach, I could down here. So many peaches. Dori Sanders wrote that book called Clover she knows a lot about peaches I could tell. I love peaches. You can eat them quickly, gobble them up, when you cut them juice oozes out making your hand sticky. Dan likes to bite into them whole and the juice runs down his chin all over his clothes, a good year for peaches, you can see the men with their roadside trucks relaxing. Think about being a peach farmer, being dependent on the sun and the rain, and the soil, all those trees of peaches. Peaches. Both my children love them. I love them. I love peaches because they sound so sweet. A good year for peaches. A year of jam and preserves. Gold to last through the winter. Gold to help us remember the summer sun. Peaches. A good year for peaches. Abundance. How satisfying to sit back and know it was a good year for peaches. Peaches. Peaches like suns. Peaches too warm to be moons. Too luscious, what a lovely word, luscious. Peaches so sexual, they bruise like human flesh, that's why the poem to Amanda because I want her to have a life full of every good thing. And it was so nice being at that peach stand in sight of the Gaffney water tower, the peachoid, we all call it, it was so nice to be biting into fresh peaches, they had so much fuzz on them, and we picked blueberries too but that's another poem. This is about peaches, a good year for peaches when you could trust the land. When you could have all those bad years of early freezes behind you, because some years all the peaches are hard and dry and small. They lose most of them and you are being strengthened and then along comes this year when you get to relax and enjoy and know that life is offering you all this sweetness and you want to cry as you drive through this misty rain with peaches in the air, with the air ripe with peaches, with peach festivals and recipes for peach butter and chicken with peaches and you know that life will offer this kind of sweetness only seldom and you pull off the road to eat them and you want your children to eat them you want their lives to be full of peaches you want them to eat peaches, you want them to eat peaches, quickly, as if there are more than they could possibly eat, to take them for granted, how wonderful to let the skin of a peach be this thin shield you can bite through to get to the sweet how wonderful to offer this chance to trickle and dribble and all that sweetness into your mouth and you want them to have enough, to be sated with peaches, to make them for your husband to love peach blossoms and peach festivals to worship the peach because it is like the sun to worship the warmth of the sun caught inside a luscious peach to know that life will have moments of peaches to know you are living for a few days in the grace of peaches, and you can smile at the farmers who drive their laden

trucks of bushel baskets to a clearing by the side of the road you can say it's a good year for peaches, and know they'll smile you can know they made it through those years of freezes and this year was a good year for peaches.

You'll see, reading this poem, how many words and phrases I used exactly as they flowed onto the page, and how all the major ideas and images were taken directly from my Sprint. Much as I love the word *luscious*, I changed it to *luminous* because I liked the repeated sounds in the word "moon." (I pay close attention to the sounds in words, always.) I also couldn't miss how many times I wrote "a good year for peaches." I honored that instinct by using this phrase as a refrain at the end of each verse. Just so you know, I took this poem through multiple drafts before I was satisfied with it.

Eat A Peach, Amanda

We pull off to savor
the taste of summer sun—
peaches, too warm to be moons,
too luminous, too ripe
to leave unhandled though they bruise
like human flesh. A peck for peach butter,
peach pie, peach preserves. Enough gold
to last the winter. You smile back
at the farmer as he gives you one,
tells you it's a good year for peaches.

I tell you to eat it slowly, as if
there'll never be another.
Let its juice run down your chin,
stain your soon-outgrown clothes.
Keep on, feast on peaches
until you are sated—how I want you to
remember our rain-washed drive
through Gaffney, orchard after orchard laden,
lush with the scent
of such a good year for peaches.

This farmer's scraped through
the past four years of
late spring freezes, the years
since you were born, when peaches
came in hard and dry and small.
He's offered you his finest freestone,
dropped its weight

in your cupped hands,
a keepsake of this moment
in the grace of a good year for peaches.

REFLECTION

In what ways did you find your Sprint invigorating? Challenging?

After you've drafted a first poem from your Sprint, try recycling it to see if there's another perspective on your chosen subject or maybe even a new subject altogether.

HONE YOUR CRAFT

It's fun to think about the subjects that your favorite authors and poets choose to write about. Pick one or two of these writers and make a quick list of their writing topics. Do any of them spark any ideas for you? And what objects, events, phenomena, people do you find fascinating?

If you haven't started keeping a list of ideas for poems you could write, why not start now? You can use small notebook, index cards, or even or your cell phone's memo feature to capture them. Keep your "capture tool" handy to gather ear-catching snippets of conversation, phrases to describe encounters from your day, and interesting random thoughts.

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