



Poetry Rocks!

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Tool 17

The Persona

WHAT IS POETRY MADE OF?

SOUND

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

PURPOSE

To expand on your competency with Sound by focusing *on diction, syntax, and voice as you write a persona poem.*

BACKGROUND

The persona poem, a first-person poem written from the perspective of someone or something else, is a long poetic tradition. The word *persona* comes from the Latin for mask; when you write a persona poem, it is as if you slip on a mask of a person, place, or thing the way an actor “slips on” a character.

If you want to learn more about persona poems, [The Poetry Archive](#) is a great resource. Also, pages 155-157 of my writing guidebook, [Spinning Words into Gold](#), discuss persona poems. Kathryn Stripling Byer’s poem “Circuit Rider” appears here as an example.

Persona poems can be written from the point of view of an object, or even a place, as well as any person's. Giving human qualities to anything that isn't human is a form of Figurative Language called personification, so a persona poem from the point of view of an object or place is, in a sense, using personification throughout its entirety. One example is Sylvia Plath's poem "[Mirror](#)."

WHAT TO DO

Play with diction, syntax, and voice by writing a persona poem.

Be sure to pick a subject that you'll really enjoy "being"—any person or object is fair game! You may want to start by making a list of people/objects. Then, give that person or object a voice. What would he/she/it like to speak about? What does he/she/it have to say?

EXAMPLE

The following persona poem began with a conversation with some fellow writers in which we recalled different subjects our past English teachers had given their students. Two that came up were "What do socks say to each other in the dryer?" and "How many ways can you open a jar?"

Over dinner a few nights later, I shared this conversation with my family. These writing topics really hit a nerve with my stepdaughter, who was in middle school at the time. "I hate having to write about things like that!" she said. "Socks can't talk! And there's only one way to open a jar! You screw the lid off." I empathized with her frustration. But I couldn't help disagreeing with her, given the way I love a good writing challenge: while I wasn't very interested in talking socks, there surely was more than one way to open a jar!

A few days later, I learned that an acquaintance of mine who'd had what could be called a "hard-knock life" was leaving her husband. I pictured her using this juncture as an opportunity to get a degree at a community college so that she could get a better job. And then I wondered, What would someone in her circumstances write if she were confronted with this topic in her English composition class? This poem is how I imagined her response.

Starting her imaginary essay with the word *okay* was a definite "voice choice," as was saying "if he *was*" rather than the grammatically correct subjunctive "if he *were*." (If you want a quick review of the subjunctive—and a great source for grammatical answers on all manner of subjects—check out "[Grammar Girl](#).")

I'm not 100% sure this woman would have used the expression "laced with shards," but I liked this wording too much not to use it. After all, I believe she would be writing as well as she could!

This is a heavily enjambed poem. We'll be discussing enjambment, where phrases or sentences are interrupted by line breaks in judiciously chosen places, when we get to the Form/Shape of poems, but since enjambment plays a big role in my capturing the voice of my character, I'm pointing out some of the line break choices I made and why:

- Line 1: "Okay, assuming you really want"
This woman "really wants" far more than what's inside the jar.
- Line 2: "what's inside—"
I wanted to have "what's inside" stand alone. What is inside this woman? The husband? The choices we've made?
- Line 8: "There's running"
"Running" is a way to get out of a bad marriage. So breaking the line here gives an extra meaning as well along with the meaning in the sentence "there's running hot water over a lid."
- Lines 17 and 18: "though your mother told you/this wasn't a good idea"
What "your mother told you" and what she told you "wasn't a good idea" was a lot more than simply banging a jar against a counter edge.

You can look for more double meanings and extra emphasis that the enjambed line breaks create as you read.

English Composition 1504

How many ways can you open a jar?

Okay, assuming you really want
what's inside—
the peanut butter, the jelly,
the pickles in brine—
try turning, twisting, first with
your hand, then with a towel
or dishcloth, whatever you can find.

There's running
hot water over the lid before
or after twisting. You don't always
think of this.

There's tapping around the lid
in circles with a knife handle,
bringing the knife down a little harder
each time, there's banging the jar
against the counter edge,
though your mother told you
this wasn't a good idea.

There's handing it to your husband,
he's got a stronger grip, but you can't
because he's not there anymore,
and if he was, he'd do anything but
take lids off jars, he'd go on drinking,
knock you around trying to open
you, leave you alone
with these children crying for
peanut butter, for jelly,
for everything you can't get at,
even for the pickles
now laced with shards
because you just
flung the damn jar to the floor

REFLECTION

How would you describe your own voice as a writer? What changes in your own voice did you make to take on the voice of the person or object you personified?

HONE YOUR CRAFT

Collect persona poems.

Write several more persona poems yourself, consciously choosing words and phrasing to create a voice other than your own.

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