



Poetry Rocks!

Take your dreams seriously...play with them.®

Tool 1

The Leapfrog

WHAT IS POETRY?

PURPOSE

To explore the elemental question "What Is Poetry?"

BACKGROUND

What is poetry? If you ask 100 poets, you'll get 100 definitions.

According to William Wordsworth, poetry is "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" that "takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility...."

Samuel Taylor Coleridge defined poetry as "that species of composition, which is opposed to works of science, by proposing for its immediate object pleasure, not truth; and from all other species ... it is discriminated by proposing to itself such delight from the whole, as is compatible with a distinct gratification from each component part." Cincinnati poet and teacher John Drury, in his book *Creating Poetry*, says of this, "That may sound complicated, but it's the best, truest definition of poetry I know. In other words, poetry gives pleasure first, then truth, and its language is charged, intensified, concentrated."

Coleridge gave a very simple, definition of poetry, too: "I wish our clever young poets would remember my homely definitions of prose and poetry; that is, prose = words in their best order; poetry = the best words in the best order."

Some poets devise tests to determine whether what lies on the page is a poem. As John Drury shares, "A.E. Housman tested a poem by repeating it to himself while shaving; if his razor ceased to move, he knew it was poetry."

Compare that to Emily Dickinson's test: "If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry."

As for me, I prefer my poetry much less violent. I think more like Dylan Thomas: "If you want a definition of poetry, say, 'Poetry is what makes me laugh or cry or yawn, what makes my toenails twinkle, what makes me want to do this or that or nothing,' and let it go at that."

But my favorite definition is from poet William Stafford: "A poem is anything said in such a way, or put on the page in such a way, as to invite from the hearer or the reader a certain kind of attention."

So you see, you have a lot of leeway! In fact, I think this is the real joy of poetry—how we define it is up to us. And the best way to hone our own personal definition is to read and write a lot of it. Ready to begin?

WHAT TO DO

Give yourself the fun and pleasure of exploring what poetry is by, as poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge would say, taking "delight from the whole" and "distinct gratification from each component part" of a poem that you enjoy. Be playful— you can't do this wrong!

1. Read any poem that you enjoy, preferably aloud. Want a suggestion? One poem I love by a poet I love is Marie Howe's "[Hurry](#)."
2. Then grab a phrase or idea from it and use it to leapfrog off into a poem of your own in any way you like. (This works to write prose, too.) Don't worry about how to do this, or getting it right. Just allow yourself to play with another poet's phrasing or idea for ten minutes, shaping words in any way you enjoy. You can try writing in his/her same form and style, but you don't have to—in fact, don't! Unless, that is, you'd find it fun.
3. If you like what you came up with, you can develop your poem further. And we'll discuss how to credit poets whose work inspires yours in our next tool. For now, just "leap" in, immerse yourself in a poem, and play.

EXAMPLE

I enjoy the vast array of subjects and styles found in literary journals. When I read these lines from Michael McFee's poem "Address Book" in *Southern Poetry Review*, Spring 1991, I identified with this person he describes:

...I knew a guy once who, when depressed,/would take out his pocket address book/and make a list of all those people/he might describe as *friends*. Next,/he'd cross out all the people on the list/he didn't consider *good* friends. Finally,/he'd eliminate the people he couldn't call/*really* good friends, those who would gladly/ lay down their life or money for him.//And end without a single name unstruck...

This poem stayed with me, and later I tried to find it to no avail. This fact became a part of my own poem as I went "leapfrogging" off. Recently, I found this long lost poem, a stroke of serendipity so I could credit and share Michael McFee's inspiration here.

Out with the Old

Call me sentimental. On this day of
auld lang syne, Christmas trees litter the curb,
where they were dragged without ceremony.
Strands of tinsel cling, almost glinting
in January's thin sun. Some still wear
a nailed crisscross of wood, a red metal
tree stand screwed into the trunk. I've seen them
slung to the ground fully decorated –
Who could have imagined what has become
disposable? All this as I look out
my window, chewing the end of my pen,
copying names and numbers into
a new address book. Last night I searched for
a lost poem, a poem in which
a man goes through his address book
crossing out by ever higher standards
till he is left with no one, no one he
can call at three o'clock in the morning
to lend him money, no questions asked.
A morbid, self-pitying poem.
I liked it. And I may never find it,
just like I may never call these people,
many of whom have moved from one penciled
apartment to another until they
finally have fallen off the pages
altogether. Why do I remember
the first name and number I ever took?
Elisa Scalzetti a girl scribbled
at a Girl Scout jamboree on a torn
piece of purple crepe paper I kept
in my desk like a winning ticket
I never redeemed. January,
sad January. Down the hollow
of years, who thinks of me?

REFLECTION

How do you imagine the poet whose poem you used to inspire your Leapfrog poem would answer the question "What is poetry?"

What did you learn about what poetry is from playing with someone else's poetic sensibilities in this way? Try writing your own answer to "What is poetry?" in no more than two sentences.

HONE YOUR CRAFT

As you begin "Poetry Rocks," here are a number of ways that you can expand your knowledge of what poetry is and grow as a poet as well:

- Read at least a little poetry daily. Here are some good online sources:
 - <http://www.poets.org/> From the Academy of American poets. Great resource for looking up poets and poems. They also have a "Poem-a-Day" that you can sign up to receive.
 - <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/> From the Poetry Foundation, publishers of Poetry Magazine. They also have a poem-of-the-day—two in fact, one to read and one to listen to. Plus essays, features, and other resources.
 - <http://writersalmanac.publicradio.org/> From Minnesota Public Radio. I adore having Garrison Keillor read me a poem every day, and tell me interesting tidbits about writers and historical events, too. Would you?
- Other good sources are anthologies and literary magazines. You can poke around online or in the market recommendation list in the Appendix of your "Poetry Rocks" book that you'll receive at the end of this course.
- When you come across a poet whose work you like, research and read more of his/her poems. Start your own list of favorite poets and poems.

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