

Pieces of Eight: Pocket Poetry Exercises for One Writer or Many

1. Write a twenty-six word poem in alphabetical order, a la Robert Pinsky's "ABC": "Any body can die, evidently. Few go happily, irradiating, joy, knowledge, love. Many need oblivion, painkillers, quickest respite. Sweet time unaffected, various world: x = your zenith." <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/1999/02/18/abc/>
2. Write a counting poem or count down poem or a poem that relies on math of some sort, one number per line. Here's the closing stanza from Mary Cornish's "Numbers": "Three boys beyond their mothers' call, / two Italians off to the sea, / one sock that isn't anywhere you look." <http://www.loc.gov/poetry/180/008.html>
3. Write a poem relying on anaphora, a repeated word or words at the beginning of each line, as in this example from Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself": "Where the panther walks to and fro on a limb overhead, where the buck turns furiously at the hunter, / Where the rattlesnake suns his flabby length on a rock, where the otter is feeding on fish." Try writing a poem in which every line begins with "Because" or "Thank you."
4. Write a poem that relies on the same syntactic pattern throughout, as in Sam Hazo's "Seesaws": "The braver the bull, the wiser the cape. The shorter the joke, the surer the laugh. The sadder the tale, the dearer the joy. The longer the life, the briefer the years."
5. Write a poem in which you repeat the same word or color in every sentence. From Julie Sheehan's "Hate Poem": "The history of this keychain hates you. . . . The goldfish of my genius hates you. My aorta hates you. Also my ancestors."
6. Write a question poem in the style of Pablo Neruda's *The Book of Questions*: "Why do trees conceal / the splendor of their roots? Who hears the regrets / of the thieving automobile? Is there anything in the world sadder / than a train standing in the rain?" Or compose a dialogue poem, preferably one whose answers don't correspond too closely to the questions being asked. Or try a poem which has a question as its title: Why are you still writing about birds? What is it about hands? How many gargoyles does it take to protect a city? Where do shadows go at night?
7. Write a list poem, such as all the things you might find in a junk drawer, a taxidermy shop, a purse, a glove compartment, an alley, or a personal effects bag.
8. Write a poem that masquerades as a prayer, a fax, an apology, half of a phone conversation, a want ad, a deposition, a will, an advice column. Choose a title that narrows your focus and get started, i.e., spell for ridding a house of ghosts, a prayer for old boyfriends (especially the ones you dislike).