

## Guide to form

*If I can write in any form, which should I choose?*

This is the question we are most often asked. There is no 'better' or 'worse' form, but the brief notes below may help you decide.

*Stop all the clocks.* **Poetry** is often the most personal and intense genre – the one we turn to in joy or grief, at a wedding or a funeral; so, if your topic is intensely personal, a poem may be the right choice.

Good poets have a feel for rhythm and imagery. And poetry tends to the metaphorical so it may talk about your subject by seeming to be about something else. Tony Harrison explores the mysteries of life and death through a bitter-sweet fruit, in *A Kumquat for John Keats*:

You'll find that one part's sweet and one part's tart:  
say where the sweetness or the sourness start.  
I find I can't, as if one couldn't say  
exactly where the night became the day ...  
which makes for me the kumquat taken whole  
best fruit, and metaphor, to fit the soul  
of one in Florida at 42 with Keats  
crunching kumquats, thinking, as he eats  
the flesh, the juice, the pith, the pips, the peel,  
that this is how a full life ought to feel

Carol Ann Duffy uses a more pungent flavour when she plays around with conventional ideas of romance, in *Valentine*:

Not a cute card or a kissogram.  
I give you an onion.  
Its fierce kiss will stay on your lips,  
possessive and faithful  
as we are,  
for as long as we are.

Take it.  
Its platinum loops shrink to a wedding ring,  
if you like.  
Lethal.  
Its scent will cling to your fingers,  
cling to your knife.

Poetry can capture an image better than any form – but can also be hard to get right, as the speaker discovers in a haiku by Wendy Cope:

The cherry blossom  
In my neighbour's garden – Oh!  
It looks really nice.

*Dem tell me.* **Performance poetry** is more energetic and direct, closer to dramatic monologue. Its rhythms tend to be highly emphatic; it is usually forceful more than subtle – but the best has a great variety of tone.

Here John Agard objects to his school history lessons, in ‘Checking out Me History’:

Bandage up me eye with me own history  
 Blind me to me own identity  
     Dem tell me bout 1066 and all dat  
     dem tell me bout Dick Whittington and he cat  
     But Toussaint L’Ouverture  
     no dem never tell me bout dat ...

In a very particular style, more suited to a huge national occasion, Amanda Gorman recited her poem at the Inauguration of President Joe Biden. She asks, ‘When day comes, we ask ourselves where can we find light in this never-ending shade?’ and finds her answer in imagery of a re-born nation:

We will rise from the lake-rimmed cities of the midwestern states.  
 We will rise from the sun-baked south.  
 We will rebuild, reconcile, and recover.  
 In every known nook of our nation, in every corner called our country,  
 our people, diverse and beautiful, will emerge, battered and beautiful.  
 When day comes, we step out of the shade, aflame and unafraid.  
 The new dawn blooms as we free it.  
 For there is always light,  
 if only we’re brave enough to see it.  
 If only we’re brave enough to be it.

Kate Tempest is a keen-eyed observer of modern life in ‘The Bricks that Built the House’ (here in a mix of prose and poetry):

He stretches his legs out underneath the table and checks Facebook on his phone. It tells him things he doesn’t need to know about people he hasn’t seen in years. He absorbs their aggressively worded opinions and quasi-political hate-speak. He sees a photograph of his ex-girlfriend with her new boyfriend smiling at a picnic and he realises, with a strange cascade of emptiness, that she is pregnant and wearing an engagement ring. The comments are jubilant. He reads every word before he forces himself to put his phone down.

All the world's a stage. **Drama** is for performing, so points tend to be explicit, spoken by characters who argue over ideas from opposite poles.

In 1000/1500 words drama is likely to be one scene or perhaps two or three short ones; you could have a large cast, but one of two or three parts is more likely.

Polly Teale modernises the Hans Christian Andersen fairytale in her play *Mermaid*. Note here how each character has completely different feelings and intentions which clash:

LITTLE MERMAID. Just tell me what you want.

SEA WITCH. It is no small payment.

LITTLE MERMAID. Ask and it is yours.

SEA WITCH. I have heard you sing. You have the most beautiful voice in the ocean. I expect you have thought of using that voice to charm your Prince but that will never be. When you open your mouth to speak no sound will come out, for that voice you will have given to me.

LITTLE MERMAID. My voice!

SEA WITCH. Unless you win the heart of a mortal you will never utter another sound.

LITTLE MERMAID. But how will I make him love me if I cannot speak? How will I tell him who I am where I have come from?

SEA WITCH. Who you are? (*Howls with laughter.*) You think he wants to know who you are? To hear your childish thoughts. Do you think the Prince would be interested in your foolish prattle. You have only ever lived at the bottom of the ocean and know nothing of the world.

In *Top Girls*, Caryl Churchill dramatizes an argument between two sisters about Prime Minister, Mrs Thatcher. Notice how personal and the political matters get mixed up, just as they might in a real conflict. (Overlapping speech is represented by /)

MARLENE First woman Prime Minister. Terrifico. Aces. Right on. / You must admit. Certainly gets my vote.

JOYCE What good's first woman if it's her? I suppose you would have liked Hitler if he was a woman. Ms Hitler. Got a lot done, Hitlerina. / Great adventures.

MARLENE Bosses still walking on the workers' faces? Still Dadda's little parrot?

Haven't you learned to think for yourself? I believe in the individual. Look at me.

JOYCE I am looking at you.

Stop press. **Journalism** may connect with the reader by starting with an anecdote or the specific story of a typical person involved. What follows should be cross-referenced with some careful research so that the experience of one person illuminates big issues. It usually adopts a neutral tone; therefore, most journalism is third person, as in this piece by Rebecca Omonira, headlined *Syrian refugees 'turned back from Greek border by police'*:

On the edge of Europe, where the river Evros meanders towards the Aegean sea, a new tragedy involving two of the world's most troubled peoples is unfolding.

On one side of the river border are gathered clusters of Syrian refugees, desperate to escape the misery of war and put the Turkish camps behind them. But beyond the perilous currents lies Greece, a nation so economically bereft it has little time or resources for them. [...]

This summer two people smugglers left 25 Syrian refugees to cross the Evros alone at night. There were two rubber dinghies. The first disappeared across the river into the night. The second floated towards Greece, developed a leak, spun for 15 minutes and then capsized. Most of the men, women and children could not swim.

But the same journalist may use first person approach to tell a different story, as in this piece about her own volunteering, *Could I become a lifeline?*

Could I really mentor a refugee? Having only recently qualified for a 'proper' profession myself, I began to feel I had little to offer a qualified doctor say, from the Congo perhaps, trying to find work in the UK.

I confessed to Emily. She remained positive and explained exactly what I could do to help. I began to realise that what I could offer was simple things like explaining work culture in the UK, the national obsession with drinking tea and how making endless cups of tea could do wonders for your popularity. And more seriously, where to go to get specialist work advice. Emma pointed out that the untapped resources I'd have as a UK resident over someone with no family, friends or work history in the UK. I know doctors and people training to be doctors. Of course. I got excited again.

A few weeks later I was bundle of nerves and excitement again. Emily had been informed that a match had been made, and asked when would I like to arrange my first meeting with my new mentee.

*Get Shorty*. The **short story** usually focuses on the simple experiences of a character in two or three episodes. Often the protagonist will go through some significant change of attitude or outlook, perhaps as the result of a minor event, sometimes called an epiphany. Orwell himself illustrates this perfectly in 'A Hanging', about the execution of 'a puny wisp of a man' in Burma:

It is curious, but till that moment I had never realized what it means to destroy a healthy, conscious man. When I saw the prisoner step aside to avoid the puddle, I saw the mystery, the unspeakable wrongness, of cutting a life short when it is in full tide. This man was not dying, he was alive just as we were alive. All the organs of his body were working - bowels digesting food, skin renewing itself, nails growing, tissues forming - all toiling away in solemn foolery. His nails would still be growing when he stood on the drop, when he was falling through the air with a tenth of a second to live.

In 'Sonny's Blues' by African American James Baldwin, the narrator cannot understand his brother who has been arrested for the possession of heroin. However, in the course of the story, and after losing his own daughter to polio, the narrator at last comes to appreciate Sonny's suffering and how he deals with it. His understanding comes through the minor event of listening to Sonny play piano for the first time in a year. The blues band is led by Creole the fiddler:

Something began to happen. And Creole let out the reins. The dry, low, black man said something awful on the drums, Creole answered, and the drums talked back. Then the horn insisted, sweet and high, slightly detached perhaps, and Creole listened, commenting now and then, dry, and driving, beautiful and calm and old. Then they all came together again and Sonny was part of the family again. I could tell this from his face. He seemed to have found right there beneath his fingers, a damn brand-new piano. Then, for a while, just being happy with Sonny, they seem to be agreeing with him the brand-new pianos certainly were a gas.

Then Creole stepped forward to remind him that what they were playing was the blues. He hit something in all of them, he hit something in me, myself, and the music tightened and deepened, apprehension began to beat the air. Creole began to tell us what the Blues were all about. They were not about anything very new. He and his boys out there were keeping it new, at the risk of ruin, destruction, madness, and death, in order to find new ways to make us listen. For, while the tone of how we suffer, and how we are delighted, and how we may triumph is never new, it must always be heard. There isn't any other tale to tell, it's the only light we've got in all this darkness.

You could also write the opening to a novel, instead of a complete story. Note how quickly Jean Rhys sets the scene in *Good Morning, Midnight*:

*'Quite like old times,' the room says. 'Yes? No?'*  
*There are two beds, a big one for madame and a smaller one on the opposite side for monsieur. The wash-basin is shut off by a curtain. It is a large room, the smell of cheap hotels faint, almost imperceptible. The street outside is narrow, cobble-stoned, going sharply uphill and ending in a flight of steps. What they call an impasse.*