



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; so, if your topic is very personal or emotional, a poem may be the right choice.

Good poets have a feel for rhythm and imagery. 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 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,
its perishable relish prick the tongue,
when the man who savours life 's no longer young,
the fruits that were his futures far behind.
Then it's the kumquat fruit expresses best
how days have darkness round them like a rind,
life has a skin of death that keeps its zest.

Check out this extract from 2021 Orwell Youth Prize winning poem 'Two For Joy' by Isabella Rew (the full poem is [here](#)) and read why she chose to write in this form below:

I've befriended the magpie who perches
On my next-door neighbour's roof. I watch her
Test the sanitised air with her keen beak.
I feel her rest on my shadow's shoulder

When I take my daily walk and we greet
The sky together like a long-lost friend.

Isabella said:

"The form of my poem is a sonnet and these typically experience a volta, a 'turning point', in mood from the first octet to the following sestet. I wanted to write a love poem to the natural world and contrast this love with the painful reality of its imminent loss."



Dem tell me. Some poems, often described as **performance poetry** are 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 deal of variety.

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

Dem tell me
Dem tell me
Wha dem want to tell me
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 different style, Maya Angelou also fights back in ‘And Still I Rise’:

Does my sexiness upset you?
Does it come as a surprise
That I dance like I've got diamonds
At the meeting of my thighs?

Out of the huts of history's shame
I rise
Up from a past that's rooted in pain
I rise

Have a read of ‘New Hair Who Dis (Dear Mrs Johnson)’, a poem by Faith Falayi, who was a Youth Prize Winner 2021:

Dear Mrs Johnson,
Hello, it's me again.
I know I was in your office just yesterday
but you never give me the chance to explain.
So I'm writing you a letter
and, from student to headmaster,
I've got some things to say.

And this is why she chose this form:

“I wanted the reader (or listener) to be able to imagine the poem as a real conversation, to feel with all the energy, vibrancy and rhythm that really brings talking about black hair to life. The force of spoken word allows the reader to feel a part of the story, to be active, and hopefully, to be inspired to take part in making a change in the way black hair is received in society.”



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.

Here, Caryl Churchill combines the personal and the political in an argument about Mrs Thatcher – between two sisters. (Note: 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.

Here is the introduction to 'Here There Are No People' by Noah Robinson, who was a Junior Runner Up in the 2020 Orwell Youth Prize:

The speakers all are children. The lines can be shared out in any way between the characters. They may be played by any number of actors.

1
I don't want to make anyone sad.
Why would I want to make you sad?
If I did want to make you sad, I would tell you the story of when we got on the boat.

2
We were having breakfast.
The bombs fell.
When will the war stop?

Noah tells us more about why he chose to write in the form of a play:

“Plays provide authenticity for unheard voices, drawing attention to often under-represented perspectives. We connect most deeply to human-driven stories and the immersion created from a shared experience with an audience can inspire social change.”



Lights. Camera. ACTION! Similarly to a playscript, a **screenplay** is written to be performed, with a focus on dialogue and action.

In 1000/1500 words, you're probably going to want to stick to just one or two scenes. You can set out a screenplay similarly to a script for stage, with the character's name, what they're saying and how they're saying it, as well as brief descriptions of the setting, and directions for action.

Unlike a script for theatre, a screenplay can also include quick 'cutting' between scenes, flashbacks, and some more extreme action (e.g. you could have a car chase in a screenplay, or a big scene on a busy street with lots of characters – which would be much more difficult to act out on a stage!)

1) Begin each scene with this information, in capitals:

INT/EXT – Interior/Exterior (Indoors or outdoors)

PLACE

DAY/NIGHT

2) Give a few lines briefly describing the setting, if it's a new setting, and if it's necessary. These can be in short sentences/don't need to go into too much descriptive detail. Keep it clear and simple.

3) If necessary, describe any movement/the Point of View (POV) we are seeing the action from.

4) When characters are introduced, include a brief description.

5) Dialogue underneath character's name (in capitals). Info about how they're speaking in brackets.

6) If you're moving to a new scene, end your scene with 'CUT TO'. If you're moving to a new part of the same scene, you can simply say 'PANS TO'. End your script with 'CUT TO BLACK/FADE TO BLACK'.

7) You can split description/action with dashes/ellipsis to give a sense of the pace/build suspense.

You can find lots of examples of scripts, for TV and for film, in the BBC Writersroom Script Library: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/writersroom/scripts>.

And here's an example from Orwell Youth Prize 2021 winner, Anya Edgerton's screenplay 'A Small Thing':

CLARA

*No... it's not that.. just... we
always have to study the work of
very posh and very dead white men
and metaphors I can't understand...
It just doesn't feel...
(motions as she struggles
to find the word)
relevant.*

That hangs in the air for a beat. Flickers of agreement in the eyes around the room.



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 Rebecca's 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.

And here's an extract from '[Mending the Safety Net](#)' an article on homelessness by Ruby Alexander, who was an Orwell Youth Prize Runner Up in 2021:

Each year as the nights draw in, temperatures drop, and the glow of fairy lights on trees illuminates each window, 800,000 children across the country write a letter with their Christmas wishes and post it to the Royal Mail's special address: "Santa/Father Christmas, Santa's Grotto, Reindeerland XM4 5HQ". The magical land full of soft, powdery snow and populated by elves where these letters arrive is, in actuality, a sorting office in the urban centre of Belfast. This demonstrates that simply by changing a line in the Royal Mail's database, addresses do not have to function as destinations, but merely as routing instructions.

And here's what Ruby had to say about her article:

"Taking the time to research thoroughly made writing... an easier process because I really understood what I was writing about and was therefore able to focus on communicating the information and achieving the style of the essay I wanted."



Give it a try! An **essay** is a short piece of writing on a particular subject. Essay also means ‘to try or to attempt’ – so it’s a good chance to try out new ideas in a short, exploratory piece of writing.

Orwell himself wrote lots of essays, on a very wide range of subjects, from toads to books, the atom bomb to English cooking, and you can read many of them for free [on our website](#). As with journalism, you will want to do some research before beginning your essay, to make sure you have the facts and information you need to explore your topic properly.

More so than journalism essays offer room for your personal voice and perspective. Essays can be serious, but you can also use your voice as a writer to add humour – as Orwell does here in ‘A Defence of English Cooking’:

We have heard a good deal of talk in recent years about the desirability of attracting foreign tourists to this country. It is well known that England’s two worst faults, from a foreign visitor’s point of view, are the gloom of our Sundays and the difficulty of buying a drink.

Both of these are due of fanatical minorities who will need a lot of quelling, including extensive legislation. But there is one point on which public opinion could bring about a rapid change for the better: I mean cooking.

It is commonly said, even by the English themselves, that English cooking is the worst in the world. It is supposed to be not merely incompetent, but also imitative, and I even read quite recently, in a book by a French writer, the remark: ‘The best English cooking is, of course, simply French cooking.’

Or here is an extract from ‘It’s Not Your Fault’, an essay by Katie Sherley, which was a junior Orwell Youth Prize winner in 2021:

It’s not your fault.

It’s not your fault we live in a world that is not made for women, that we are surrounded by people telling us that we are to blame. It’s not your fault that the burden of your safety falls on your own shoulders. It’s not our fault.

I learnt that half the world was out to get me before I learnt long division. They say ignorance is bliss, they justify their apathy by telling me that it feels safe, comfortable. I know they are right. It’s just a shame that that ignorance was never an option for us.



Short and sweet. 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 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.

Read an extract from Orwell Youth Prize 2021 Winner, Max Baker’s dystopian short story, ‘The Quiet Revolution’ here:

12th August 2097: Before they knew what was happening, it was too late. Social media had already begun spreading but when COVID (and then the other diseases) swept across the globe, reality went digital. No one saw the Network clot together. Fascinatingly, its rise was neither forceful nor resisted. Empty streets continued to be empty. Soldiers remained self-isolating in their barracks. It was paranoia which held each citizen hostage.

And here’s a quote from Max talking about his writing process:

“George Orwell’s writing was always inspirational to me as it was simultaneously artistic, down-to-earth, and politically profound. His proactive approach to research and writing inspired me to explore the social and cultural trends I’ve observed during the pandemic.”