

Guide to form – Poetry

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. Here’s an extract from [‘The Doll’s House’](#) by Orwell Youth Prize 2024 judge, Patience Agbabi, in which the poet takes the image of a tiny replica sugar house to creatively examine the legacy of Harewood House in Yorkshire, which was built using wealth amassed from the transatlantic slave trade:

This is my world, the world of haute cuisine:
high frosted ceilings, modelled on high art,
reflected in each carpet’s rich design;
each bed, each armchair listed à la carte.
Come, fellow connoisseur of taste, let’s start
below stairs, where you’ll blacken your sweet tooth,
sucking a beauty whittled from harsh truth...

Check out this extract from 2022 Orwell Youth Prize winning poem [‘Out of Time?’](#) by Jennifer Wolfe and read about how she chose to structure her poem below:

Why have the daffodils
flowered so soon,
it’s not March, nor April,
nor nearer to June;
this used to be winter,
there’s still a wolf-moon –
yet flowers are here
this February noon.

Jennifer said:

“With all the stanzas on one side, the poem appeared very linear in its structure, especially due to the short length of line. But that wasn’t the message I wanted to deliver – so I adopted a rather more fragmentary approach, forcing people to move their eyes across the page rather than simply scan downwards along a wall of text. This not only broke up the poem and supplied end focus to each stanza, but it also enhanced the idea of change and disruption.”



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.”