

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. 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.

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.



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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 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

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.

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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.

And below, Shakespeare depicts an argument between a Jewish money-lender and the Christian who bullies him, in *The Merchant of Venice*.

SHYLOCK You call me misbeliever, cut-throat dog,
And spit upon my Jewish gaberdine,
And all for use of that which is mine own.
Well then, it now appears you need my help:
Go to, then; you come to me, and you say
'Shylock, we would have moneys:' you say so;
You, that did void your rheum upon my beard
And foot me as you spurn a stranger cur ...

ANTONIO I am as like to call thee so again,
To spit on thee again, to spurn thee too.
If thou wilt lend this money, lend it not
As to thy friends ...
But lend it rather to thine enemy,
Who, if he break, thou mayst with better face
Exact the penalty.

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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.

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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 Katherine Mansfield's 'Miss Brill' (1920), the title character is a poor and lonely old lady who enjoys a Sunday walk in her treasured fur necklet. She imagines she is taking part in a drama, as an observer and participant. This is how the story ends:

Just at that moment a boy and girl came and sat down where the old couple had been. They were beautifully dressed; they were in love. The hero and heroine, of course, just arrived from his father's yacht. And still soundlessly singing, still with that trembling smile, Miss Brill prepared to listen.

"No, not now," said the girl. "Not here, I can't."

"But why? Because of that stupid old thing at the end there?" asked the boy. "Why does she come here at all—who wants her? Why doesn't she keep her silly old mug at home?"

"It's her fu-ur which is so funny," giggled the girl. "It's exactly like a fried whiting."

"Ah, be off with you!" said the boy in an angry whisper. Then: "Tell me, ma petite chère—"

"No, not here," said the girl. "Not yet."

.....

On her way home [Miss Brill] usually bought a slice of honeycake at the baker's. It was her Sunday treat. Sometimes there was an almond in her slice, sometimes not. It made a great difference. If there was an almond it was like carrying home a tiny present—a surprise—something that might very well not have been there. She hurried on the almond Sundays and struck the match for the kettle in quite a dashing way.

But to-day she passed the baker's by, climbed the stairs, went into the little dark room—her room like a cupboard—and sat down on the red eiderdown. She sat there for a long time. The box that the fur came out of was on the bed. She unclasped the necklet quickly; quickly, without looking, laid it inside. But when she put the lid on she thought she heard something crying.