

# **A Poetry Primer: Things You Might've Forgotten About Poetry**

I. What is it, anyway?

## **II. Poetic Diction**

A. Fixity: immovability of a word in its place: no true synonyms

B. Energy: efficiency with which poet uses words: as much mileage as possible from every single word. “. . . the poet’s psyche speaking to reader’s psyche in a language just underneath the commonsense words, a language only these words in this order could manage to imply.”—Donald Hall

III. **Musical Pleasures:** adjacent sounds rubbing together & rhythm

### A. Rhymes

1. Direct (exact): credulous/sedulous

2. Indirect (slant, off-rhyme): “almost but not quite”  
Rhyme/spice (only vowels)

Rhyme/lame, conversion to Christianity (consonants)

3. Cliché rhyme: love/dove, breath/death, womb/tomb

4. Original: the farther apart the words, the more original  
(only *sound* is the same):

a. Vary spellings: tracks/axe

b. Vary pt. of speech: hacks(vb.)/sacks(n.)

### B. Rhythm

1. Meter: a count of syllables, usually in pairs, of which one is louder (more stressed) than the other, e.g., iambic pentameter: 5 groups of 2 syllables: “Uni/versi/ty of/Michi/gan.”

\*Note: most users of meter take pains to prevent too much regularity, preferring a looser structure

2. Free verse: lines of poetry strong in rhythm but free of regular repetitions of meter

IV. **The Line:** With meter, counting determines poem's structure; with free verse, the line determines the major way of organizing sound.

A. The shape says "I am orderly, arranged on purpose . . . nothing sloppy or inadvertent; I will reward careful reading." Donald. Hall. The line slows down the "sentence," adding pauses greater than those we'd make reading prose, *intensifying meaning and releasing sound*.

B. Line-breaks:

1. End-stopped when the *sense* stops at end of line
2. Enjambed: sense runs over into next line, *but* an enjambed line still retains its identity as a line and we still pause when reading; if we don't, it's prose
3. Free verse: lines strong in rhythm but free of the regular repetition of meter (determined "pre-consciously," reflecting poet's rhythms of breathing and speaking)
  - \*Syntactic: sentence-like units.
  - \*Of about equal length
  - \*End with a suggestive word, not "a," "an," "of," etc.
  - \*Cadence of emotional speech, listening to one's personal rhythm.

B. Good lines:

1. Stand alone with a high degree of autonomy
2. Are not just chopped-up prose
3. Are interesting, memorable and suggestive (under pressure to express more than these simple words could in another context)
4. Are aesthetically pleasing (rhythm, rhyme, sense, etc.)
5. "Take the top of your head off" (Dickenson)
6. Feel finished, un-tweakable

V. Resource for Poetry Writing Exercises: Robin Behn & Chase Twichell, *The Practice of Poetry* ISBN: 0-06-273024-X