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### The Art of Revising Poetry

Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg

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# *The Art of Revising Poetry*

Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg - August 6, 2020  
The Story Center of Mid-Continent Public Library

## **Some Things To Consider in Poetry-Writing**

by Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg

1. Poetry is largely image-based. The specific-ness of images is what brings the poem alive and gives readers something tangible to hang onto and use to enter the poem fully. Look at what you perceive with your senses – what you can taste, touch, feel, see and hear, and focus on communicating those experiences as ways to illustrate larger abstractions. Don't just say "trees," but focus on a specific tree – "the black green clump of cedar trees along the driveway."
2. When it comes to abstractions – words that connote emotions or ideas (democracy, loneliness, love, freedom, etc.) – it's best to use them as sparingly as possible or not at all. Let the images illustrate your points. For example, Adrienne Rich writes, "We walk on tiptoe" in "The Fact of a Doorframe" to illustrate the need to move carefully.
3. One of the main rules in poetry, which has to do with going for images and avoiding abstractions, is "Show, don't tell." Use strong images, and trust your images to communicate for you. In this way, poetry lives in the realm of the symbolic. Don't say, "it's nice outside," but instead say, "the sun is shining like a red sport scar, balancing itself on the lip of the horizon."
4. Line breaks (how and where the end each line) is what makes poetry look like poetry and not prose. Generally, there's two ways to break lines – by the rhythm of the words, or by the meaning you want to evoke. For example, you could write:  
I like to dream. It makes me happy.  
It shows me how to wake with images  
of elephants and apples.  
Here I broke the line where the rhythm naturally dipped. But I could also build in other meanings to break lines differently:  
I like to dream. It makes me  
happy. It shows me how to wake  
in a school of elephants and apples swimming  
into the mouth  
of the old ocean.  
Here the breaks imply that dreaming "makes me" (makes me alive? makes me what?) And that it shows me how to wake (and also how to wake with images).
5. The first word and last word in each line weigh more than the words in the middle. The first line and last line of the poem weigh more than the lines in the middle. This has to do with how the eye takes in poetry. Also, short lines tend to be read more slowly, and long lines tend to be read faster. Avoid one word lines unless that one word is very strong and needs to be on its own line (a rare thing).

6. Rhythm and sound everything in poetry since poetry exists part way between prose and music. Read the lines how you have them on the page and listen for where you need to revise or adjust. Listen to both the sounds of the words and how those sounds add up. For example, rust, brisk and luck have very different connotations in their sound than dream, lamb and lush. Also, tap out the rhythm of a poem to hear where the stresses and lulls are, where the missing notes and extra notes are too.

7. Poetry is made by avoiding clichés, worn-out ways to say things, and finding fresh ways to use language. Anything that looks like it belongs in a greeting card probably is a cliché.

8. It's also very important to try not to be so logical in poetry so that you can find a deeper logic and way of connecting with your topic. By diving into images and letting the rhythm of the words guide you, you can find those greater connections even if they don't look very logical.

9. The most important way to know what a poem needs is to read it aloud, preferably alone, perhaps standing on a chair in the basement to take you out of the ordinary. Listen to what's happening.

10. Poems are community things, for the most part. A private poem full of code words and secret allusions is just a private poem, which is fine, but which isn't fair game to send out into the world. If you want to write poetry that reaches others besides yourself, you need to cut the secret references, and write for someone who doesn't necessarily know you or understand you or care about you even. If you can make your poem real and alive for a reader you've never met, then your poem is something that carries your perceptions, ideas, experiences of language, etc. out into the realm of community. Remember that all (non-private) poetry is written for readers as well as for writers.

## **Some Considerations About Revision**

by Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg

1. It's not about the actual poem or prose you're writing. It's about diving into language, story and silence more deeply to see what you discover.

2. It's also about what you're writing ("Do I contradict myself? Very well then, I contradict myself. I contain multitudes!" – Whitman). It's about putting your ear to the piece of writing and listening carefully. What wants to be said? What needs more space or more words? Where are the too-compressed notes, the places begging for harmonics?

3. It's all about composing. Writing is a kind of music – the individual sounds of each syllable, and the ways in which you can add up syllables to create rhythms. Revise by sound and rhythm as much, if not more than, meaning.

4. In other words, how do we help this piece of writing become more alive?

5. Lean into the rules of craft as they serve you in making the writing more alive.

6. Turn away from the rules of craft as they block you from bringing that life to the writing. Here's what William Stafford says:

First, we can remember the usual warnings: "Show me, don't tell me. Avoid clichés. Get images and sense impressions into the lines. Don't just say "love," beauty," "heart," "tears." When you find yourself terribly fond of what you are saying, watch out! You can't do it with adjectives...." We can observe these warnings. We can curvy our writings by applying remedies. But somehow just observing such rules is not enough. They trim away, but they don't supply the fire we need. And they don't invite us to cut loose with our whole sentient being."

7. Look at what your writing has to show you about this particular piece and about what else may come from it. Stafford again: "Could your poem (or prose) be revised *outward*, be the start of something you have just glimpses and then not developed? Could you poem (or prose) be revised *inward*, dropped back on itself (for instance, at the end) to live by its stronger elements and not doiled up for admiration of readers who like merely to nod their recognitions?"

8. In the words of Anne Lamott, write shitty first drafts. Everyone does.

9. Revision is a romance: you know who you're dating, and your first night together was glorious even if a bit wordy. Now you're going to start really getting to know each other, even after the rush of infatuation. It's about moving from the first attraction to deep love.

10. Revision is also all about writing (editing, on the other hand, is about editing). Treat this as a time and place to create something with words.

11. Like writing first drafts, you can't rush revision. Sometimes you need to grow into revising something. It's a practice, it's evolutionary, it's magical, it's ordinary. Respect it.

12. Pay attention and don't pay attention as you revise. A good way to do this is to copy things over by hand, or retype them (or parts of them).

## **Common Mistakes and Tips for Revision**

Kelsey Donner & Sara Krauss, UR Writing Consultants

### **Common Mistakes**

It's the little things that make the difference. Common errors are typically the easiest things to fix in poetry and writing in general; taking the simple extra step to fix those errors can make a dramatic difference in the quality of your writing. Here we have some mistakes that professional poets and professors come across with the work that they come across in students' poetry.

**Q: What common mistakes have you noticed in student poetry?**

*Dr. Sascha Feinstein: Poet*

**A:** Young writers tend to state emotion, e.g., “I hit the ball with anger,” or, more simply, “I feel angry.” Similarly, there’s a tendency to explain what actions or images mean. I tell students over and over again to use specific imagery and to let the image do the talking. Avoid commentary whenever possible. This is crucial. If I had to teach just one thing to young writers, it would be the power of the image. Students also need to embrace the simple truth that art demands tension. (You can write poems without any tension, but you’ll want to publish those with Hallmark.) For this reason, my very first assignment often asks students to write a poem that unites opposites. Without some kind of tension, there’s no room for development.

*Professor Tarfia Faizullah: University of Richmond Faculty, Poet*

**A:** The main issues I find with student poetry are incomplete sentences, poor grammar, and attempting to be pretentious with their writing.

*Caityln Paley: University of Richmond Alum '09, Poet*

**A:** The thesaurus is a great resource but it’s a bad idea to substitute words you would never use. The diction of the poem ends up sounding forced and unnatural. It’s often unnecessary to repeat the information the title contains in the body of the poem.

### **"Killing Your Darlings": How to Revise Poetry and Why You Should**

In order to improve our writing, we sometimes had to acknowledge that sections we loved or even felt very proud of had to be cut in the final draft. We often get so caught up in our favorite pieces of our writing that we fail to see them at face value. We need to recognize that accepting this stage of the revising process will only improve our final products and, most likely, make us even more proud of the overall piece than the tiny passages that we clung to so feverishly before revision. As Intro to Creative Writing Professor Tarfia Faizullah says, revision "allows us to constantly improve upon what we have already written so that we may get closer and closer to enacting the complexity of the world." You might be thinking this is easier said than done, and you would be correct. Writers often base their poetry on personal feelings or events, which is hard to detach yourself from when you shift into revision mode. It can be difficult to both accept that further revisions to your poetry are needed and that not everyone thinks your line about comparing the melting snowman to the melting polar ice caps is as poignant as you do. This is one of the best things about poetry – more than any other form of writing, poetry imparts many different interpretations depending on who reads it. Below are some tips to help you remain detached throughout the revision process.

### **Three Scenarios That Deter You From Revising**

1. *The “sense of completion.”* Perhaps you are not actually emotionally attached to your poetry, but rather you simply don’t have the time, motivation or energy to revise it. You are feeling what Keith Hjortshoj describes as the ““sense of completion”” in his guide *The Transition to College Writing* (67). It already took you forever to write the poem and now that you have, it’s finished and you don’t want to think about it anymore.
2. *Emotional attachment to your poetry.* Poets often base their work on personal thoughts, feelings, or experiences. Writing in such a way can make you feel very vulnerable and protective of your work, because it is a reflection of you.
3. *“Stage fright.”* As Hjortshoj describes it, this “stage fright” results from feeling that, once your poem is finished, it must be perfect and untouchable, and can no longer be changed. (71)

### **Tips For Revising**

1. **Like academic writing, poetry has a diverse audience** who will interpret your work in different ways. When someone offers you constructive criticism on a line or two of your poem, try to see where he or she is coming from before you defend it from the doom of the delete key. Put yourself in your reader's shoes as a way to remove yourself from the thoughts and feelings you were having when you wrote the poem. This will help you understand their constructive criticism and see your piece more clearly.
2. **The first thought isn't often the best thought.** In the words of distinguished poet Sascha Feinstein, there's a reason we tell friends to think before they speak – "because their first thought probably isn't their best!" Feinstein points out that this is also true of your own poetry. We often write about something that upsets us or has otherwise marked us in some way, and our poetry is a way to work through our emotions. As Feinstein says, "when we're overwhelmed with emotion, language tends to fail us. We need to go back to our emotional bursts and inspired ideas in order to shape them into art."
3. **The one time it's good to procrastinate.** If you feel attached to the subject matter of your poem, don't read through or think about the poem for a few days or a week if you have the time. This will allow you to clear your head before beginning the revision process.
4. **Stretch the truth.** If you write with total honesty about a poignant event in your life, you will most likely become defensive when the poem is critiqued because you are protecting the truth. Writing poetry is perhaps one of the only instances in your life in which you will be praised for fabricating lies. As Professor Tarfia Faizullah suggests, it is much more important to privilege "what the poem needs to be a stronger piece of writing rather than privileging what 'actually' happened."
5. **Read aloud.** Reading your poem out loud can help you determine what pieces of your poem might not be working or flowing well.
6. **Rely on memory.** UR alum and poet Caitlyn Paley suggests putting your poem away for a while, then jotting down the lines you can recall from memory. This will help you get rid of your weaker lines.

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Hjortshoj, Keith. "How Good Writing Gets Written." *Transition to College Writing*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2009. 56-78. Print.  
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## 10 Easy Tips to Revise Your Poems

By Sonya Fehér

So you've got a lot of poems to edit and you don't even know where to begin? I can help. Whether you've composed many poems in a short period or you've got a stack of poems that you've been writing for years but never get around to revising, you can edit your poems using these strategies.

1. If you originally typed the poem, write it out—double-spaced. A poem that's typed looks cleaner than a handwritten one. When you're editing, it's helpful to *not* have it look so finished. Even if you handwrote the poem originally, try rewriting it as a double-spaced version to give yourself room to edit and to refamiliarize yourself with the poem. Handwriting allows you to take time with the poem and

see what you like, what you want to change, if the poem is missing anything, or if there are any areas you need to cut.

2. Go through the poem and underline the concrete nouns (that you can see, touch, taste, hear, or smell) and the strongest/most specific words, phrases and passages. You can do this part with a friend too. Read the poem aloud and then have your friend tell you what language s/he remembers, what lingered and made an impression.

3. Circle any words or phrases that you need to replace: clichés, [abstract nouns](#), repeated words, and any vague areas that need to be made more specific.

4. Write any notes to yourself in the margins about changes you know you want to make later or areas where you know you haven't written enough. You can use the strong passages you've underlined or the beginning of image or idea that needs developing as writing prompts to expand the poem.

5. Check the beginning and ending of the poem. Were you just warming up in the first few lines or stanza(s)? Can you give your poem a stronger start by cutting the beginning? Same thing for the ending. Did the poem end before the writing did? Cut any excess lines or stanza(s): where you were wrapping up, explaining what you'd said before, or trying to figure out how to end. A poem is not an essay for your freshman comp class. Make sure you didn't do the tell 'em what you're going to tell 'em and tell 'em what you told 'em phases. All you need is to tell 'em.

6. Make the language cuts and additions—at least the easy ones—and work on word choice. A [thesaurus](#) will really help here.

7. Type the poem and reread it. Do you see any changes you want to make that you missed in the handwritten version?

8. Look for patterns. For instance, are most stanzas about the same number of lines? What do the line breaks look like now that the poem is typed?

9. Read the poem out loud. Listen for the rhythm of the poem. Do you have a natural flow that is interrupted by hard sound where you need a soft or a word with extra syllables or not enough? Do you have natural [alliteration, assonance, or consonance](#) that you want to develop through word choice? Be sparing as this can quickly turn sing-songy or trite. I particularly love Mary Oliver's chapter on "Sound" in [A Poetry Handbook](#). This book is a must-have for beginning poets and a good return to fundamentals for more seasoned writers.

10. Give your poem a working title. If you titled it when you wrote it, make sure your original still fits.

## Poets on Revision

If you've ever found yourself discouraged by the prospect of revision, take heart from the insights into the revision process that poets share in *Seeing the Blue: Advice and Inspiration for Young Poets*, compiled by Paul B. Janeczko (Candlewick Press, 2002).

Here's a small sampling:

**Naomi Shihab Nye:** "Now I see *revision* as a beautiful word of hope. It's a new vision of something. It means you don't have to be perfect the first time. What a relief!"

**Georgia Heard:** "To revise is a poet's life. To see and then to see again is what a poet's life is all about. I revise my poems not for the sake of revising, but to clarify what I see with my eyes and what's in my heart."

**Nikki Grimes:** "Good poetry requires a *great deal* of revision! Most of my poems go through ten drafts, minimum. (Groan.) That said, if you don't write honestly, no one will care what your poem has to say, no matter how cleverly written or technically competent it is."

**Adam Ford:** "It's always exciting when a poem tumbles straight from your head onto the page, but sometimes it still needs a little extra work. It's a rare poem whose first draft is as good as it could ever be."

**Bobbi Katz:** "Be prepared to revise. And revise. And revise."

**Lillian Moore:** "I tend to write poems slowly because I enjoy seeking the right word and revising until I think I have it. For almost every poem I have written over the years there has probably been a wastebasket filled with rough drafts. Most of all, I want a poem to say what I really felt or saw or heard--that is, to be true."

For more resources, events, and offerings, please see <http://carynmiriamgoldberg.com> and join my monthly newsletter list. Upcoming events including an online poetry writing and revision class and the Brave Voice retreat with singer Kelley Hunt (from our homes to yours)