

---

# POETRY WORKSHOP IDEAS

---

Thomas Reynolds

Johnson County Community College

## Abstract

Poetry is meant to be shared, to provide an emotional experience for readers. It is difficult to define and explain. In a workshop, one might begin with some basic generalizations about openness, how readers participate in its creation, how to some degree it involves magic, both for poet and reader. During a first workshop experience, the group might begin with a few general questions to begin to dig below the surface.

**Keywords:** poetry, emotion, energy

Sharing your work with others can be daunting yet also rewarding. Ultimately as poets, we are writing not just for ourselves—to come to terms with things in our lives, as catharsis, to figure out what we think and how we feel—but also to serve our audience. We want to do something for readers, to give insight, most of all create an emotional experience for them, not just to tell them about ours.

In a workshop, one of the first things we ask ourselves is what *is* poetry? What are common traits that all different types of poems might possess? They don't have to rhyme, they don't have to be brief, etc. How do we know a poem when we read or hear one? What does a poem uniquely do as opposed to works in other genres? These are very difficult questions to address, and I'm not sure that we ever satisfactorily answer them, yet they lead to worthwhile conversations.

I mention some broad generalizations. Poems are often *open* with a great deal of white space on the page. Usually, they don't (like many prose pieces) fill up the page with words. The white space might symbolize what the reader has to bring to the poem. The poem isn't truly finished until a reader brings to it whatever they have to offer. Because each of us finishes the poem separately, the poem isn't the same—it's at least slightly different for each of us, so we don't look for consensus but celebrate diversity.

Poems attempt to generate an emotional response in readers. They don't want us to remain passive. They want to do something to us emotionally. Poetry uses concentrated language—densely packed, distilled, excess words (hopefully, ideally) evaporated.

Poetry is a bit of magic trick—for both poet and reader—one you may have seen in some iteration. A magician comes on stage and sets a small suitcase on a table and opens it up and begins removing items from it—at first small items, ones that logically could be removed from it, but then gradually, larger and larger items, a trombone, maybe a person. As writers, we want to be able to be better magicians—packing more into a poem. The more experience readers gain, the better magicians they can be—unpacking more subtle nuances, larger themes/ideas.

At our first workshop experience, we might ask of student poems a few of the following questions:

1. What might be the most energetic, powerful, significant words/phrases in the poem? Is there a word or phrase that stands out/resonates with you, and if so, which one and why?

2. Does the poem as a whole resonate with you, and if so, how? Are there ripples or echoes that extend into your own experience? Does it leave questions for us to answer? Did it evoke an emotional reaction in you, and if so, what was it? How did it accomplish that? How might it do a better job?
3. Is the title interesting? Does it provide context/perspective? If there's no title, can you suggest one?
4. Look at the first line. Is it the best way to begin the poem? Does it grab the reader?
5. Look at the conclusion. Does it end the poem in a satisfying way? Does the reader need additional information?
6. Are there passages that could be made more vivid through the use of an image, figurative language, a sensory impression?

### Author Biography

Thomas Reynolds is a Professor of English at Johnson County Community College in Overland Park, Kansas, and has published poems in various print and online journals, including *New Delta Review*, *Alabama Literary Review*, *Aethlon—The Journal of Sport Literature*, *Sport Literate*, *Spitball: The Literary Baseball Magazine*, *Flint Hills Review*, and *Prairie Poetry*. Woodley Memorial Press published his poetry collections *Ghost Town Almanac* (2008) and *Home Field* (2019). He can be reached at [treynold@jccc.edu](mailto:treynold@jccc.edu).