Writing Assignments: Poetry

1) Write a poem of at least 10 lines using at least five items from your "character list."

2) Write a poem in a voice not your own. You might choose to write in the voice of some historical figure, in the voice of someone you know, or in the voice of a made-up character (perhaps someone from your story).

3) Write a poem in a traditional form (sonnet, villanelle, sestina), or with a set syllabic count, or make up a form of your own.

4) Write a poem with a controlling metaphor (the likeness or connection between two things—ie., life and baseball—should be carried throughout the poem) or with at least three metaphors from the same context.

5) Write a poem in imitation of another published poem. If you choose a poem that's not in our textbook, please make copies for the rest of the class and hand the copies in along with your imitation poem. When preparing the "imitation poem," try to decide what is essential to the "original poem." Is it rhyme scheme, meter, imagery, subject, language, tone? Several of the above, or something else? Write a poem of your own that includes those essential elements (it should be similar in form and length to the original, but it doesn't have to be exactly the same). Turn in the poem as usual; by your name, put "Imitation of '(Title of Poem)' by (Author)."

6) Write about a domestic task, such as knitting, doing dishes, installing an air-conditioner, or watering plants, OR about a ceremony, such as baptism, transferring a car title, or being graduated. At last once in the poem, contradict received wisdom. Dare to contradict your own beliefs, if you wish. Ten line minimum. (Kevin Bath, EH 200)

7) Write about a game you played as a child—preferably a folk game, such as

kick-the-can, capture-the-flag, scissors-paper-stone, hopscotch, or jump rope, and not a commercial game like Monopoly or Space Invaers. Use at least two figures of speech, but make sure they're not clichés. This poem must be in blank verse or in a fixed form (sonnet, ballad stanzas, heroic couplets, terza rima, etc.) (Kevin Bath, EH 200)

Creating a 14-er

Compose a poem in which the lines end with the words below in the order given. Find possible connections between the words, so that your poem gives a sensible or logical account of something specific. We haven't discussed rhythm (syllable count) or accents (meter) yet, so use any rhythm you want to; but if you make your lines 10 syllables each, you will have written a Shakespearean sonnet.

Give your poem a title:

_____quiet
_____kiss
_____riot
_____abyss
_____trees
_____June
_____peas
_____prune
_____crystal
_____bar
_____pistol
_____guitar
_____brooded
_____concluded

—Dan Waterman

Journey to Nowhere

Write a poem in which you undertake a journey to an unknown destination. The poem does not necessarily have to have a formal plot, but it does have to leave you, at the end of the journey, in a wholly unexpected place: either in the midst of a strange landscape (mental and/or physical) or in the midst of a threatening or exciting discovery. Along the way, you must use at least two similes and at least two metaphors. (Try to let metaphor and simile suggest related or resonant images, both real and figurative. In other words, let them help lead you forward).

Begin the poem with a predicament: the speaker of the poem is lost, or is looking for someone or something, or is being propelled forward against her will, or is on a seemingly ordinary journey (going to the grocery store, for example) that turns weird.

The poem should be at least one page long (longer is fine). You must also use a more or less regular line length. Try to stay within 8 to 12 syllables per line.

Good vs. Bad Poetry

Reading: Excerpt from Chapter 11 ("Judging a Poem") of *Poems: Wadsworth Handbook and Anthology*, by C.F. Main and Peter J. Seng.

I had my students read the chapter on "judging a poem" before they wrote any poetry. The chapter provides a down to earth, respectful discussion of the topic of "good versus bad poetry." The bad poem examples are hilarious and, thus, memorable, and their inclusion lets the instructor off the hook; he or she doesn't have to point to awkward student drafts to discuss what makes a poem "bad."

The chapter covers the following subtopics: "Good and Bad Poems," "Kinds of Bad Poems," and "Liking Versus Judging Poems." The poems in between the subtopics are out of date, so I skipped most of them, but the accompanying text is intelligent and persuasive.

After discussing the reading in class, I had my students write a bad poem according to the textbook definition on pages 280 and 284-5. At first, they seemed surprised, but they soon got into the exercise. When they'd finished writing, I picked up all the poems and told them to get into groups of two. Then I redistributed the poems. I told them to read the poems to each other and discuss what was "bad" about them. As soon as they began to read, they burst into laughter. After they discussed the poems with their partner, I had each group read the poem out loud and discuss it.

The goal of this exercise was to get my students to apply what they'd just learned about bad poetry, in a memorable way, so that they could, hopefully, avoid pitfalls in their own writing. I also wanted to give students the psychological relief of doing what writers fear most—writing a bad poem—and seeing that it's actually kind of fun. This exercise had the added bonus of breaking the ice between students. —Melissa Huseman

An Experiment in Comparison

Text: Andre Breton's "Free Union"

In Andre Breton's poem "Free Union," the speaker freely associates the parts of his lover with a wide range of images. He compares her tongue, for instance, to glass, stone, a doll, and the communion host. He makes these comparisons using simile, a comparison which uses "like" or "as," ("a tongue like a stabbed communion host"). He also uses metaphor, a comparison which does not use "like" or "as" ("a tongue of rubbed amber and glass" or "matchstick wrists"). Some of the comparisons make immediate sense ("thoughts like flashes of heat lightning") and others are more mysterious ("feet of initials").

For next week, write a piece in which every line or sentence makes a comparison. You can write about a person (my friend with eyes of…..or the man with legs like…), a place (my city with streets of, buildings like, etc.), an animal, or whatever you like.

Like Breton, you might choose to compare various parts of your subject to three or four different things; the last 6 lines, for instance, compare the woman's eyes to (at least) six different things. Try adding details to your original comparison ("Woman of mine with champagne shoulders like a fountain of dolphin heads under ice," "Woman of mine with belly unfolding like the fan of days") and making "free unions," comparisons that might not make sense at first glance. To create some free or mysterious comparisons, you might try writing very quickly, putting down whatever leaps into your mind, without questioning it. You may construct your piece in lines, as Breton did, or as prose. Finally, have fun. The point is not to produce a finished product, but experiment with as wide a range of comparisons as possible.

—Meier/ 200-003

Poetry for Special Occasions

Valentine's Day Assignment:

> Write a love poem. Don't be sentimental. Complementary Readings: Sexton's "Us," Amachai's "A Pity. We Were Such a Good Invention," Lorca's "Somnambule Ballad," Sakanoe's "Love's Complaint," Catullus's "We should live, my Lesbia, and love," Tsvetayeva's "An Attempt at Jealousy," and Verlaine's "Sentimental Dialogue." (Robin Behn, EH 504)

April Fools Assignment:

> Write a poem which tries to do something radical, something you have never attempted before, in form, content, or both. Anything goes, especially self-indulgence, as long as we like it (or aren't too embarrassed for you). (Thomas Rabbitt, EH 504)

Halloween Assignment:

> Resurrect and assume a persona, but do not directly reveal the identity of your possessor.
> (Thomas Rabbitt, EH 504)2**0 Advanced Poetry Assignments**

These assignments, designed for advanced undergraduate students and for graduate students, should be accompanied by complementary readings (suggested here or devised by you), in-class discussion of techniques, and (possibly) journal assignments.

1) The Uses of Narrative:
   Assignment: Write a poem in which you tell a story or a fragment of a story, or in which a story "off the page" is referred to or influences how the poem is spoken. Choose your point of view thoughtfully. Try to write a title and a first line or two that will make us want to keep on reading. In your poem, use at least two deliberate enjambments and one fully end-stopped line. Also use at least one example of either inverted syntax with colloquial speech or balanced syntax. Try not to plan out what you will say before you write the poem. Keep writing until you surprise yourself. Try not to end with a "conclusion."

   Complementary Readings: Frost's "Out, Out—," Stafford's "Traveling Through the Dark," Millay's "Recuerdo," Akhmatova's "Requiem," Forche's "The Memory of Elena," and Bishop's "In the Waiting Room." (Robin Behn, EH 504)

2) Dramatic Monologue:
   Assignment: Write a poem spoken in the voice of someone other than yourself. Be sure to have this voice establish his or her situation, circumstances, and/or reason(s) for speaking. Use at least one metaphor, and write at least thirty lines. If you like, have this voice speak directly to or about another character.

   Complementary Readings: Pound's "The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter," and Gallagher's "The Kidnapper." (Robin Behn, EH 504)

3) Lyric Poetry:
   Assignment: Write a poem that includes at least one fragment or image from a dream and/or from a partial memory of childhood. Somewhere in the poem, ask a question or ask for something. Do something out of the ordinary with syntax.

   Complementary Readings: Merwin's "When you go away," Thomas's "Fern Hill," Simpson's "My father in the night commanding no," Levine's "Starlight," Lawrence's "The Piano," and Celan's "The Fugue of Death." (Robin Behn, EH 504)

4) The Mind in the Act
   Assignment: Poems as a model of consciousness. Write a poem in which the reader can observe the speaker's mind moving. Begin with an observation or an abstraction, and feel free to wander from mode to mode as you continue, employing, perhaps, a bit of narrative, an allusion to another text, a direct address to someone, some description, shift of time or place, etc. Have a reason to begin speaking, and see where it leads you. Minimum of 40 lines.

   Complementary Readings: Hass's "Meditation at Lagunitas," Graham's "Mind," and Larkin's "Church Going." (Robin Behn, EH 504)

5) Ode/Elegy
   Assignment: Write an ode or an elegy. Somewhere in the poem, use anaphora.

   Complementary Readings: Neruda's "Ode to My Socks," Keats's "Ode on Melancholy," Auden's "In Memory of W.B. Yeats," and Roethke's "Elegy for Jane." (Robin Behn, EH 504)

6) Animal Poem
   Assignment: Write a poem about an animal, or that mentions an animal. Include at least one fact about the animal most readers wouldn't know. Look up the derivation of the animal's name in the OED.

   Complementary Readings: Digges's "Tartarchos," Rilke's "The Panther," Hardy's "The Oxen," Dickinson's "A Narrow Fellow," Williams's "The Sparrow," Kinnell's "St. Francis and the Sow," Hollander's "Adam's Task," Plath's "Black Rook in Rainy Weather," Montale's "The Eel." (Robin Behn, EH 504)

7) Find the most mawkish rhyme/verse/poem you can (e.g. Kilmer's "Trees" or a Hallmark card). Write a poem in which you try to transform the original objectionable sentimentality into honest emotion. Identifying which is which, reproduce both pieces. (Thomas Rabbitt, EH 504)

8) Write a poem which begins with an ordinary thing, such as an apple or a sewer grate, and ends with a metonym of that thing, but which is not about that thing. (Thomas Rabbitt, EH 504)

9) Transform the lyrics of any popular song (any genre) of the last three or four decades into a poem. Don't stick so close to the original that you might be accused of theft, but don't get so far away that any relationship is spurious. Reproduce both song and poem for the worksheet. (Thomas Rabbitt, EH 504).

10) Write a poem which uses an actual current headline (including publication and date) for its title (e.g., Frozen ears found in doctor's office, *The Tuscaloosa News*, August 15, 1984). Your poem will employ a regular pattern of syllable count and a parallel pattern of true rhyme. (Thomas Rabbitt, EH 504)

11) Write a poem in which you transform a myth (not necessarily Greco-Roman) into a contemporary parable. Your poem will incorporate a regular pattern of stress count and a parallel pattern of mostly slant rhyme. (Thomas Rabbitt, EH 504)

12) While someone from the South Bronx might find rural Alabama, its cows, kudzu, snakes and shack, strange and frightening, someone from Gordo could find in the northern reaches of the Jersey Turnpike the ultimate industrial nightmare. Write a poem which explores, perhaps symbolically, what is surreal in an environment alien to you, but which you have actually visited, if only to pass through. (Hugo, of course.) Your poem should employ repetition as its major device. You may work in any form, received or invented. (Thomas Rabbitt, EH 504)

13) Write an unambiguous poem which explores the sound—indeed noisy—possibilities of ambiguity, as in puns and homonyms, as well as the tenuous ambiguities of sounds, as in onomatopoeia and assonance. (Thomas Rabbitt, EH 504)

14) Write a serious poem based upon a joke. Identifying which is which,
reproduce both poem and joke to turn in. (Thomas Rabbitt, EH 504)

15) The Poet as Observer (techniques: hypotaxis and parataxis)
Assignment: Write a poem that begins by describing a place or scene. Take your time with the description. See if you can use description as a method for discovery—not just noting down what you had in mind to say about the scene but using the language to lead you to notice new things. Write until the language itself becomes interesting to you, then use that sense of voice, wording, language-play to suggest ways to continue the poem. As you begin describing, favor either a paratactic or a hypotactic mode of sentence-making. The poem might begin and end with description, or you might vary the mode after a while, or at a particular point, stepping out of description and into some other way of talking or being in the poem. As the poem continues, can you keep to the method of sentence and phrase-connecting—paratactic or hypotactic—, or must you evolve into the other method at certain moments as you either continue or vary from the descriptive impulse?

Give the poem a title that indicates the place or scene or that does some other important work for the poem. Write at least 30 lines.
(Robin Behn, EH 404)

16) The Poet as Image-Worker (technique: kinds of metaphor)

Assignment: Choose one of the following:

a. Include in your poem a situation or an image-fragment from a dream. Imagine that the reader is also in a dream-like state, and will accept anything you say as truth.
b. Adapt Tadeusz Rozewicz's title and method ("Homework Assignment on the Subject of Angels") for your own purposes. Pick an object or entity and describe it at length, making ample use of metaphor as you go. Another poem that shares this

method is David St. John's "Dolls."

c. Like Shu Ting, write a poem that is made up of "Bits of Reminiscence."
d. Write a poem like David St. John's "Iris" in which the tenor and vehicle of the metaphor become, finally, indistinguishable.

(Robin Behn, EH 404)

17) The Self among Images (technique: thinking about the line)

Assignment: Think of an event or moment from your life, or from the life of an invented character, that is unforgettable but hard to describe. It might be a moment you remember, but don't know why you remember it. It might be an event that was pivotal, such that things after this moment were different from things before this moment. Or it might be a moment in which time seemed to pass in a different way—more slowly, or more quickly than usual, or in which different moments or sense of time coincided or collided. Now enter this moment by referring only to things, images, sensations. Include actions—parts of the story—as fragments, as when Justice says, "Long after the future./ When the umbrella had been closed forever."

(Robin Behn, EH 404)

18) The Poet as Storyteller, Tale-teller, Balladier: The Narrative Impulse

(techniques: representing and/or manipulating time in a poem, paying attention to beginnings and endings)

Assignment: Choose one of the following:

a. Write a narrative poem based in a historical event or time. See Robert Hayden.
b. Write a poem like C.D. Wright's "Woman Looking Through a Viewfinder" in which someone is "looking through a viewfinder," literally or figuratively, at a story.
c. Write a narrative poem that covers a great deal of time, perhaps a whole life. See Justice's "A Dancer's Life" and

Sexton's "The Rowing."

d. Write a narrative poem with an unreliable narrator. See Jarrell's "Seele Im Raum."
e. Write a narrative poem of any kind.

(Robin Behn, EH 404)

19) The Poet as Storehouse of Inventor of Memory (technique: exploring kinds and uses of rhymes)

Assignment: Write a poem that deals with childhood in some way. Feel free to use any of these poems to suggest an approach. In your poem, make use of at least three different kinds of rhyme. You might employ them in a regular pattern, or you might include them as "occasional" rhyme, here and there throughout the poem in the middle of lines or at line ends.

Complementary Readings:
Bishop, Elizabeth—"Sestina," "First Death in Nova Scotia," "In the Waiting Room"
Jarrell, Randall—"Protocols"
Rukeyser, Muriel—"from Eight Elegy. Children's Elegy," "Children, The Sandbar, That Summer"
Stafford, William—"School Days"
Justice, Donald—"Sonatina in Yellow"
Sexton, Anne—"What's That?," "The Fury of Overshoes"
Atwood, Margaret—"Game After Supper"
Strand, Mark—"Where are the Waters of Childhood?"
Jensen, Laura—"Kite"

(Robin Behn, EH 404)

20) The Poet as Prophet, Priest, Visionary (technique: figures of speech)

Assignment: Choose one:

a. Write a poem that mixes formal with very informal dictions, and that allows wit and language play to have free reign. Or write a poem using a diction you don't usually associate with poetry.
b. Write a poem in which you create an interesting dance of words on the page without trying to create an underlying meaning that makes "sense" in the usual way. Assume that art and experience are two different things. Use the language not as an expression of other things it refers to, but as a thing in and of itself. Focus on your excitement about language, rather than creating something the reader can "follow."
c. Write a poem in which the events described and the time it take to read the poem are the same.
d. Write an ars poetica. (Robin Behn, EH 404)