

Poetic Advice: A Tutor's Enchiridion

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So, it's your first time in the booth. You feel calm, pretty confident, and ready for anything, when, suddenly, you are introduced to a tutor's foe-subjective writing, where opinion is key, and the learner is relying upon you to give qualified advice on none other than poetry.

Sure, you've dabbled a bit in poetry, read pieces of Dickinson or Langston Hughes, but how do you go about giving proper advice so that people are not offended, or give the right direction if they just don't know the direction in which to turn? The answer to that question of how to go about giving advice on poetry lies in the focus of what good writing does: it conveys the human condition and spirit.

As a tutor, although reading and writing are key elements of your job, the main components are empathy and flexibility. First of all, it is probably good to remember that creative writing is the learning of people's very intimate thoughts and details. There is a place writing goes that no other discipline can touch, and this has to do with the quality of the spirit. While some may claim to write for their own pleasure, many wish to make the reader feel a certain emotion.

However, there will be instances where you may get individuals who think good poetry is abstract and difficult to understand. I had a learner in the booth who wrote a very ambiguous piece of poetry. He made very personal references and used vague symbolism. We went through the piece, and I had to read it through two times. I then had him break it up into small parts so I could get the message. It was not that he had written bad poetry. He simply accommodated to the language of him and his friends, that was intertwined in both their love of nature (I knew nothing of the names of plants he gave) and admiration for seemingly deep material. When asked what he wished to convey to the reader, my learner replied that the audience of his poem is his friends, and it is not meant for everyone to understand. He has to work to understand what is considered good poetry, so he thinks others should have to work hard to understand his as well. There was really not much I could do, besides offer some word changes and comment on the effectiveness of what I felt to be great word flow at times.

As a poet myself, I remember the time when I felt good poetry had to examine the meaning of life and leave others guessing what the true deeper meaning was. After some very effective coaching in high school and more well-rounded poetry in college (I graduated past the Hallmark Stores), I found that good poetry is clear and descriptive, and conveys an emotion, even if that very concept is simple.

I have developed a list of some tips for poetry ideas (for those with writers block) and feedback ideas (for us tutors!) that I have found helpful in both reading and writing poetry.

If the learner does not know where to begin, offer these types of brainstorming strategies to "get the ink out":

- 1) Write down what your writer's block feels like, even if it is a few short scratches, or a jumbly whirl of lines. From this outpour, tell me what emotion, idea, or conflict you can use in your writing. Look at it from all angles, and I am sure you can come up with something!

2) Write about an emotion- with one catch: there is no using emotion or feeling words. Rely on your surroundings and thoughts to portray how you feel.

3) Write in stream of consciousness. For five or ten minutes, write down everything you are thinking. Try hard not to pause or pick up the writing utensil.

4) Take a walk around the TLC to see what people, items, or happenings can spark inspiration.

What if your learner is sticking to one method of poetry? The first thing to be aware of is that this is probably his/her comfort zone. Give a lot of praise, and point out the strong points of their piece. Explain the benefits of experimentation. These are only several ideas, so feel free to add your own.

1) A dialogue poem. Write a conversation between two people discussing

- a. An issue neither agrees upon
- b. An issue both agree upon
- c. An issue that one person has no clue about

2) A letter poem. Have the learner write to a friend, favorite place, or idea.

a. Talk about the emotion he/she wishes to convey, and how this can be accomplished through the "letter"

3) A shape poem. Have the learner write a concept whose words can be made into a shape. This is more of a light-hearted activity, so you may use it when burn out is high.

4) A fragment poem. The learner is not allowed to use any complete sentences, just erratic thoughts or uncompleted ideas.

5) A perspective poem. Give the learner a perspective from which to watch a scene of

- a. A mother who gave her child up for adoption, watching children play on a playground
- b. A young girl in love watching her parents argue
- c. A father who lost his son in war, watching a graduation ceremony (or any other rite of passage in youth)

These are just a few of the ideas you can try with your learner to spark writing ideas. Most of all, remember what you have to offer. There is a reason each and every one of you was chosen to be a tutor in the TLC, so don't be afraid to bring about that quality and share it with each learner you encounter. Maybe the initials TLC actually stand for Takes a Little Confidence. As you embark upon your journey as a reading and writing tutor, may you always remember that what you have to offer supersedes any advice I could give, it's just a matter of believing you can do it.