



# Narrative Poetry:

## Telling Your Story Through Poetry

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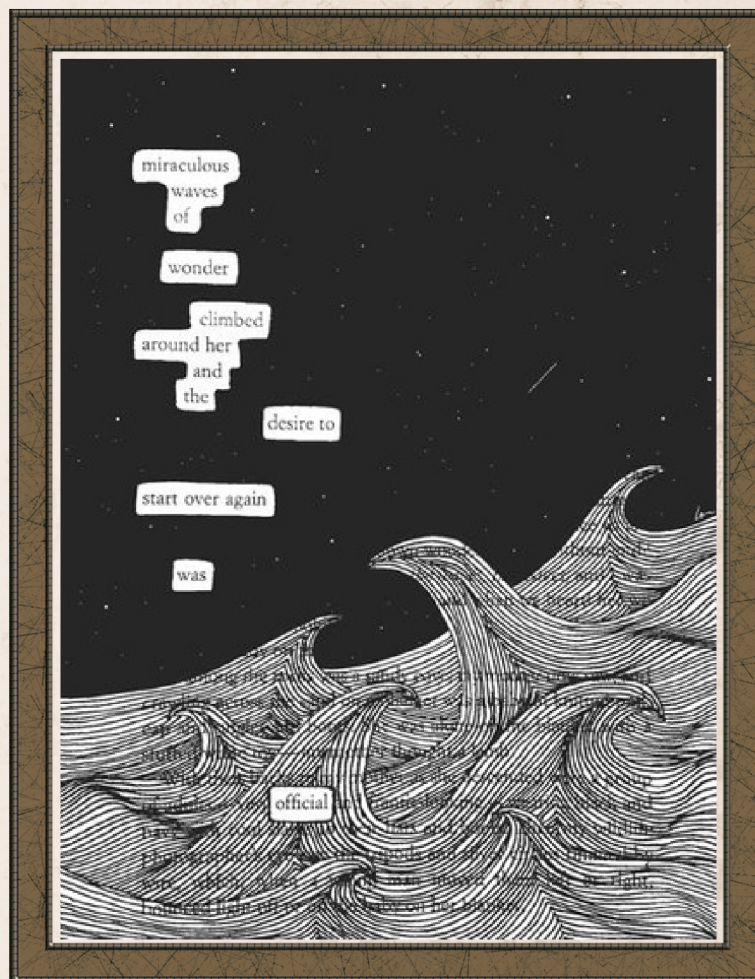


# Intersection of Memoir and Poetry

"When we're writing memoir, we're writing the small moments. When we think about memory, memory does not come in a linear narrative. Memory comes to us with lots of white space around it—and that's where the poetry is."

Jacqueline Woodson

(from "Making Your Words Matter"  
<https://podcast.shewrites.com/making-your-words-matter/>)







# Table of contents

**01**

**Introduction: What  
is a narrative poem?**

**02**

**Types of Poetry**

**03**

**Specific  
Characteristics**

**04**

**Free verse**

**05**

**Examples**

**06**

**Tips**

**07**

**Give it a go!**



# Introduction: What is a narrative poem?

**Definition:** a form of literature that combines the elements of poetry with the elements of storytelling.

- Oldest form of poetry, evolved from oral traditions of storytelling
- Does not need to follow meter and rhyme schemes
- Can be free verse: enjoy writing without restrictions! Tell a story how YOU would like





# Types of Poetry



## Narrative Poetry

Tells a story. A plot or some sort of action taking place (e.g. epic poem: follows life and adventures of a hero)



## Dramatic Poetry

Written with the intention of being performed (e.g. a play by William Shakespeare)



## Lyric Poetry

Doesn't necessarily tell a story or have a plot. Elements such as rhythm and rhyme used to create overall feeling or effect (e.g. Emily Dickinson, Bob Dylan)



# Narrative Poetry Key Characteristics

1. **An emphasis on storytelling**
2. **Experimental language:** expect the unexpected
3. **Non-linear story structure:** jump backwards and forwards in time
4. **Free-verse:** form dependent on poem's story
5. **Mythological elements:** common in the past
6. **Internal characterization:** allows writers to capture thoughts, feelings, and internal challenges





# Free Verse

## Characteristics

- **Cadence and flow:** built from language poet uses
- **Form following language:** poem's line lengths, stanza breaks, internal rhymes are defined by words poet uses
- **Non-uniform lines and stanzas:** one line can have 2 words and the next can have 12. One stanza can have 8 lines and the next can have 1
- **Experiments with space:** as seen in "Swan and Shadow"
- **Prosaic qualities:** straightforward language and sentence structure
- **Concise imagery:** using formlessness to create meaning, as seen in "The Red Wheelbarrow"

JOHN HOLLANDER

### SWAN AND SHADOW

Dusk  
Above the  
water hang the  
loud  
flies  
Here  
O so  
gray  
then  
What  
When  
Where  
In us  
of where we take shape in the dark air  
this object bares its image awakening  
ripples of recognition that will  
brush darkness up into light  
even after this bird this hour both drift by atop the perfect sad instant now  
already passing out of sight  
toward yet-untroubled reflection  
this image bears its object darkening  
into memorial shades Scattered bits of  
Light No of water Or something across  
water Breaking up No Being regathered  
Soon Yet by then a swan will have  
gone Yes Out of mind into what  
vast  
pale  
hush  
of a  
place  
past  
sudden dark as  
if a swan  
sang

### The Red Wheelbarrow

so much depends upon  
a red wheelbarrow  
glazed with rain water  
beside the white chickens.

William Carlos Williams





# Examples

## Written

### One Day

by Amy Ludwig VanDerwater

It was a deep August Day  
on damp creek soil  
just me, my sister  
and a long roll of foil.  
I folded tiny shiny ships.  
She made a long canoe.  
We built bridges, dams, and docks  
for our salamander crew.  
Each salamander silver-sailed, winked in  
the sun.

If I could live one day again  
this would be the one.

## Spoken


### Ode to Thrift Stores

by Ariana Brown

[https://youtu.be/PFZJoU44u](https://youtu.be/PFZJoU44uOo)  
Oo







*Slow progress is still progress.*

## Tips

1. Make an **outline** (or don't)
2. Remember the best poetry written is through the **spontaneity of language**, and you can't plan for exactly what you might write
3. **Give yourself time.** Your poem will take time to finish and revise... so lean into the beauty and mystery of poetry, and let yourself be swept by language. You do not have to have a finished poem by the end of our allotted 10 minutes









# Give it a go!

## Lifescapes Poetry – 10 minutes

### Where to start:

1. **Choose a topic.** Pick something specific from your story that you want to write about. Perhaps it's a pet you had at the time, a favourite song of yours, a concert/show you went to, someone who was in your life at that time, what hobbies you were doing, a time you go in trouble, a time you were rewarded...
  2. **Make your voice heard.** If the narrator of the poem is experiencing a particular emotion, make sure that this feeling is coming through in the words and tone you choose
  3. **Skip the build-up.** Skip introducing the characters or the scene, get straight to action and into the heart of your story
  4. **Imagery.** Use specific, detailed, concrete imagery
  5. **Repeat yourself.** Repetition is an effective and powerful strategy for long poems (e.g. in Martin Luther King's famous speech he says "I have a dream" eight times
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# Time to Share!





# Thank you!



**"Remember: Memoir is your present negotiating with versions of your past for a future you're willing to show up in." – Margo Jefferson, *Constructing A Nervous System: A Memoir***