

# Rhythm, rhyme, simile and metaphor

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Lisa Samuel's chapter *Three Steps Towards Poetry* provides some great exercises for getting your poem on to the page and for ensuring that your ideas link together. Once you have some written ideas to edit, you might like to consider ways in which **rhythm** and **rhyme** feature in your poetry, as well as **similes** and **metaphors**. Attention to such devices can enhance your poem's capacity to evoke humour, emotions and imagination.

## *Rhythm*

The way a poem sounds when you read it aloud, its heart beat, can critically shape your perception of that poem, in much the same way that the heartbeat of your patient can. Is the beat arrhythmic? Does it have a low ejection rate? Does the blood pump slowly through a long trudging valve, or does it gush and rush and skip frantically?

Read this line out loud:

Does the blood pump slowly through a  
long trudging valve, or does it gush and  
rush and skip frantically?

Notice how the words before the comma are slow to say and thus reinforce the subject of slowness. Notice how the words after the comma speed up. Using alliteration and onomatopoeia in poetry can be useful toward informing the rhythm of your poem.

You may also recall from your high school days in English class that some poems have procedural didactic rhythms, such as the iambic pentameter. This means that the rhythm is predictable. Iambic pentameter, for example, looks like this:

De da – de da – de da– de da– de da

De da – de da – de da– de da– de da

A haiku, in contrast, is a three-line poem that has five syllables for the first line, then seven for the second line, and five syllables for the third line. It may look more like this:

De – da – de – da – de  
de – da – de – da – de – da -de  
de – da – de – da – de

Similarly, some syllables may predictably begin with hard consonants or soft vowels, or simply hidden in the middle of a word. So depending on the chosen words, your haiku might actually look more like this:

De da – de – da de  
de – da – da – da de da – de  
de da – de – da de

Here is an example of a haiku I wrote (27):

### Haiku III

The scent so striking  
soft purple leaves inviting  
fleeting like my youth.

De – da – de – da de  
de – da de – da – de da de  
de da – de – da – de

A predictable rhythm can be very soothing for the reader and can offer the poem a sense of flow. This can be particularly effective in romantic or melancholic poetry. Disruption to an established rhythm can be just as effective. It can alert the reader to a change in the subject matter and can create a sense of urgency or even alarm. So it is worth having a look at your poem's rhythm and checking whether it is reinforcing or at odds with the message you are conveying.

### *Time, slime, crime and rhyme*

Rhyme can function in a similar way to rhythm by creating a sense of predictability and flow. If you are considering using rhyme in your poem it can be very useful to first write the draft of the poem that does not rhyme, so that you can establish a strong storyline or message without the complications that rhyme can add. When we are new to writing poetry we can easily slip into cliché and stereotypes and superficial-sounding poetry by rhyming. We find a word that rhymes and although it carries a different meaning from our intention we pop it in any way for the sake of rhyming. The reader is left wondering, what does time and slime and crime have to do

with rhyme? Such oddities almost always have the unwanted effect of distancing the reader from the heart of your poem.

If you are creating poetry as a demonstration of your critical reflection then this kind of distancing outcome can be disastrous.

However, this book includes multiple examples of critically reflective poetry where rhyme has been used effectively to support the predictability and flow of the poem. The poems of Josh Coulter, Anna Perera, Demi Poynter, and Hannah Smiley included in this collection, are great examples of the message being supported by both rhythm and rhyme.

### *Which words in your poem are the most critical?*

Here is a strategy I use to identify the important words and allow other words to change/be replaced to facilitate rhyme.

Below is a poem I wrote called *Pet of Ten Years* (27), where rhythm and rhyme feature. Most of the poem follows a common rhyme pattern:

**a, b, c, b** (this is a common pattern in a four-line rhyming stanza).

The middle stanza follows a different pattern; the first two lines do not rhyme while the remaining five lines do.

When I wrote this poem I thought about the message I was trying to convey, that my dog – who had been the centre of my world for so long – might be ignored once my baby was born. I wanted this message to be strong in the final lines of the poem. Therefore I wrote those lines first, “but you won’t even see me there — as you rock your sleeping bub.” Then I wrote ‘up’ the two lines before them; “come six o’clock I’ll look to you — for the daily walk then grub.” By writing the lines in this order I was able to ensure that the final lines were strong and that I wasn’t left trying to find a rhyming word for my (important) final line. I did not want to risk having an altered meaning on that final line for the sake of rhyme. Rather, I moved that risk higher up in the poem and had to find a word that rhymed with “bub.”

Why didn’t I use the word baby? Aside from there not being many options that rhyme with baby, I wanted the character of the dog to come through and colloquial words like bub and grub seemed more effective towards supporting that character development.

## PET OF TEN YEARS

I feel nothing, I replied  
but the dog believed me not.  
Nothing is a myth, a luxury  
your mind decays with rot.

Listen up!  
He chastised me  
hear the tone in my woof  
these next eight months of growth  
are going to be tough.  
Feeling nothing is not enough.  
Feeling nothing is but a myth.

Admit it now, his tail twitched  
you feel everything and yearn  
I'll be replaced before too long  
as your feelings grow and churn  
come six o'clock I'll look to you  
for the daily walk then grub  
but you won't even see me there  
as you rock your sleeping bub.

Finally, and in returning to the former section on rhythm, *Pet of Ten Years* provides a clear example of how the rhythm is disrupted with **“Listen up!”**

### *Similes and metaphors*

A simile is a comparison between two things that (often at first seem very different and unconnected, but) share something in common. For example, “the decrepit fence hung from the post like an old man from his cane.” The simile encourages us to think of the fence and the old man as sharing a common thread. The thread is not always clearly spelled out and this allows room for the readers own interpretations to surface based on their personal experiential knowledge of fences, old men, canes, and so forth. The reader may interpret the commonality to be that of dependence, both the fence and the old man are dependent on something else to stand erect. Likewise, the reader may see the common thread in terms of age, ageing and decay. The simile can therefore serve to raise more than one thread of commonality between two seemingly disparate things/objects/concepts/emotions.

A metaphor is when one thing is described as being something else. It is “a figure of speech in which a word or phrase is applied to an object or action to which it is not literally applicable”; “a thing regarded as representative or symbolic of something else.”(28)

Gather ye rosebuds while ye may;

Old Time is still a-flying:

And this same flower that smiles today

Tomorrow will be dying.

-Robert Herrick, *To the Virgins, to make much of time*

For example, **“Beware of jealousy, my lord! It’s a green-eyed monster that makes fun of the victims it devours,”** from William Shakespeare’s *Othello*(29). Jealousy (an emotion) *is* a monster (a mythical creature associated with fear and danger). In my view, the metaphor is a more assertive poetic device than the simile. It leaves less room for the reader to draw their own associations and conclusions. Metaphors have been used effectively in poetry to map two conceptual domains.(30) Some metaphors take the form of an underlying conceptual mapping; *A is a B* (such as Bob Dylan’s **“Time is a jet plane, it moves too fast.”** Others are more extended or allegorical, such as **“Two roads diverged in a wood, and I – I took the one less travelled by, – And that has made all the difference,”** by Robert Frost (30) or Robert Herrick’s *To the Virgins, to make much of time*, where virgins are likened to flowers.

When reading through your poem ask yourself these kinds of questions:

- **What is the most important element in this part of the poem?**
- **What is this [...] like?**
- **If this [...] that I’m writing about were something else, what would it be?**
- **What experience have I had that was similar to this one or informed how I feel about this one?**
- **Could this section of the poem be more effective if I used a different metaphor/word/sound/pause instead?**

As Lisa Samuels has suggested in the previous chapter, it is a good idea to keep all drafts of your poems so that you can feel free to make changes without the fear of losing anything. Try different metaphors out for the same section of poem. Write the same section of your poem as a simile and as a metaphor – read them both out loud. Which one sounds better? Which one do you feel more comfortable with?

**Ask yourself: does this simile/metaphor add anything to the poem? Is it necessary? Does it evoke emotion or imagination? Does it move the story deeper?**

**Is it too cryptic?**

Asking and responding to these kinds of reflective editing questions can be really helpful towards improving your poem's ability to engage the reader on multiple levels. Robert Sullivan's poem *King Tawhiao's Garden*, provides a wonderful example of imagery and metaphor working together to create a sense of tension between history and freedom.

**King Tawhiao's Garden**

The entrance to the king's food garden  
was the old tree surrounded by carvings  
on Pukekawa, opposite Auckland Museum,  
where he defended the city  
from the great tribes to the north.

I am but a dolphin diving in the backdrop  
of this tree, swimming through the earth.

- Robert Sullivan, Poetry NZ, Yearbook 2, Nov 2015,  
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