

Thirteen Things to Do to the Poem You've Already Written: Adventures in Revision

1. **THE PHOTOGRAPHIC NEGATIVE:** Write the opposite of your poem, the poem's other. Then write the opposite of the opposite. This will either be a translation more or less back to the original, which will prove the poem, or it will translate away from the original, into what is also there.
2. **LOOKING UNDER THE HOOD.** Well, the car looks good. It's clean and the tires have air in them. But what really makes it run? You're assuming there's an engine in there, and that all the wires are connected and that all the spark plugs are sparking. But a look under the hood—would you buy a car without taking a peek? Triple space your poem, then fill in the spaces with two lines about the one line you've written. Move laterally. The poem is done, so you can stop worrying about it. Look instead at your lines, and see if they are done. Write the moment, not the poem.
3. **THE WATERFALL.** This is a more ambitious extension of looking under the hood. Take all your lines and think of them as being in a row, in one long conga line. You may need to piece together several sheets of paper to accommodate this adventure. Think of each former line as the top of a waterfall. What words, what ideas, what new lines follow from your old line? Remember, you already went in one direction. Here is your chance to go in another. Write new lines down the page from this line. In other words, write new poems from these new first lines. This is a Niagara of emotions and ideas and more words, all of which had been hiding in the calm above the falls. These were the poems you did not write in your haste to write the one you did.
4. **THE FOOTBALL SHIFT.** Or, Finding a New Partner. This is a parts of speech shift, designed to stop you from pairing up the same players the same way every time. On a separate piece of paper, put a line down the middle. Pick out all your adjective-noun combinations in the poem and list them on this paper, adjective on one side of the line, noun partner on the other. Cut the page in two along the line, and then shift one side of the paper up or down one place, so that your adjective and noun pairings are new. Remember, however, that these are all your own words, and in the general vicinity of where you wrote them and where you intended them. Replace the nouns where they originally were but with their new partners back into the poem. If nothing remarkable happens, question your use of adjectives altogether. If they fail miserably, okay. If something new happens—even once—be happy.
5. **THE RETURN TRAIL.** You climb a mountain, but half—or more—of a hike is the climb back down. And probably on the same trail. The mountain stays the mountain and that remains the point. However, the climb up and the climb down show you different things. Sometimes one way is more interesting, sometimes the other. But they

are two ready ways to look at the same walk. Read the poem you have written backward, from last line to first line. Then write it backward, making the appropriate small language changes to find a reasonably smooth narrative. Your same narrative is there, but the movement through it will be different. You may see things on the return trail, perhaps even something else altogether. At the very least you will see the back and under and shady sides of the things you have said.

6. TRANSLATING YOUR WORK. On the back side of the paper on which you've written your poem, write in plain language what your poem is trying to say. Use as many words as you need. Which is clearer? Too often we write POEMS instead of poems. Of course, a poem is not the prose that explains it. However, the best poem may be in between the two points you've created, hiding between the front and the back sides of the paper. That's the real edge. You won't know this until you try it.

7. RELAX, RELAX. This is like changing your poem into its hanging-out clothes. Relax the poem into a paragraph for the afternoon. Drop the line breaks. Is it readable? A poem is not a paragraph, of course. But why not? What is your honest answer? Don't skip answering this. And what if the paragraph is stronger, what then? Or what if the paragraph makes you want to keep writing? What makes you choose line breaks—especially if they aren't working as an honest part of the poem?

8. THE DAY BEFORE. Write the day before the main incident in your poem. If you say, when you take away your main event, *I'm so bored*, then you must ask yourself: Is it the event that made the poem good, or the writing? Take the dramatic "thing" out, and see if you have still made this writing interesting. Otherwise, you are letting the event write the poem, and you are simply its journalist. You may, as a bonus, find that the real drama of an event is not the event at all, but rather all the details that enabled it. If you take good care of these details, the event will be—as it probably should be—just one more part of the story, rather than all of it. When a bomb explodes, after all, people want to know why.

9. THE REST OF THE STORY. This is not so much revision as extension—so often, however, revision consists not of changing what we've written, but of recognizing that what we've already written makes us want to write more because there's more to say. In this exercise, write the second half of the poem. That is, begin with the last line of the poem you've finished, and assume it is a first line, and that you've only written half of what you know. Don't look at what has come before except for that line. This is often a good way of testing the drama in your poem, of getting rid of the punch-line effect, or of keeping your poem from being too precious.

10. LEARNING YOUR LINES. This is an exercise in patience, but may be the best thing you ever do for yourself in learning the craft of poetry. Take your poem and, with actual scissors, cut out each line separately and put them all into a bowl on your kitchen table. Leave them there. Walk away from them for a day. Then pull the lines out, one at a time, with at least an hour in between. The result, really, will speak for itself. When a line does stand by itself, what do you feel? Do they make you want to write other things? Why don't you? Can you tell a strong line from a weak line? Can you tell a moment of poetry—something that stands on its own in the moment, strong, unafraid, worth memorizing—from a moment of prose, which is based in plot and

needs what has come before to understand what will follow? Is the line a line, or does it need other lines to make sense?

11. BE THE AUDIENCE. Have somebody else read your poem aloud to you, cold. Make sure the person you choose is a good reader so there is no confusion here. And record it. There is nothing more excruciating, or illuminating. At the very least, read the poem aloud yourself—but the actual way you wrote it, not the way you thought or intended it. Be tough, tough enough to listen, and to take instruction from yourself.

12. SWITCH THE CAMERA. A fiction trick. Switch the point of view so that the poem is now seen through a different lens. Think of that moment when a director cuts from a close-up of an actor's face to a panned-back shot of the whole scene. In the same way, if you had originally written the poem in first person, switch to third or second person. You may find one "camera" privileges the emotion of a scene while another "camera" speaks to the insights of a character.

13. THIS POEM IS CLASSIFIED. An exercise in erasure. Taking a thick black marker, go over a poem you've written and mark over one word per line of your poem. You can be quite deliberate about this revision exercise, or you can use a random-numbers generator to arbitrarily select which word on a line you'll be blacking out. Sometimes the resulting poem won't make sense. Sometimes you'll get some real gems.

**One last piece of advice: don't discount any of this until you've actually tried it. *Thinking* that it won't work is different from *knowing*, and there's only one sure way to find out.