

"UNSTRAINED MELODY" (C) 2004/2014

Tools For Easier Poetry Writing with GLENNY PALMER

One of the first questions I ask of those attending my workshops is, "Who wants to be a writer?" Inevitably, a majority raise their hands. It is always a joy to me to point out to them that they **are writers**. They are simply attending a workshop to assist them to become better writers, if that is their desire. My objective in presenting workshops is **not** to force "writing rules & regulations" upon people, but to share some very basic guidelines for techniques that **will** improve your finished product if you decide to utilise them.

One can easily identify a craftsman built piece of furniture against one built by a handyman. The difference in quality and presentation of the product lies in the craftsman's use of tools and techniques that the handyman does not use, despite the possibility that each of them may have a similar level of basic talent. And so it is with writing. The following techniques are not something that a high brow professor thrust upon our craft to dictate "what is right, & what is wrong, & what we should obey". It is actually the reverse. The question was asked long ago, "What makes this particular poem so easy to read and enjoy?" The investigation revealed that it was the techniques applied; the use of the craftsman's tools. It was revealed that a certain *discipline* had been employed in the construction of the poem. It is the basics of those disciplines that I offer here.

Having said that, I now encourage you to not feel anxious about the prospect of applying discipline to your creative processes. It is a very normal reaction to initially feel resistant to the suggestion, because we may fear that our creative flow could be restricted by "rules". The very opposite is so. Once you have become familiar and comfortable with using your craftsman's tools, you will find them almost second nature, and necessary to your writing. To become familiar and comfortable with any new tools you need to practice using them. Sometimes this can be a little frustrating, but perseverance is the key. Like the shampoo advertisement says, "It won't happen overnight, but it **will** happen!"

Please remember that all of the most celebrated poets on the professional stage today, **started off in exactly the same place that you did**. (The very first time I saw the famous Marco Gliori perform "Roo and The Blue" I said to my husband of the time, "I could NEVER DO THAT!) But it came to pass that I DID! (I just didn't realise at the time that I *could!*)

And it is possible that you are not yet aware of just what you can achieve either. The important thing to concentrate on is *what you wish to achieve*, and to understand that whatever that is, it is equally important as anyone else's achievements, however grand they may *appear* to be.

I sincerely hope that the following suggestions help you to achieve your particular poetic goals, be they humble or grand....because they *are* so very important.

Let's Get Started:

Firstly let me explain some terminologies used.

An 'unstressed' or 'stressed' syllable can also be referred to as a 'Weak Beat' or a 'Strong Beat'.

A 'Stanza' is often mistakenly referred to as a 'Verse' of the poem, but a verse is simply a single line of poetry. The 'Stanza' is the group of lines within your poem, separated from the other groups by a space.

TO WRITE POETRY WITH GOOD RHYTHM AND RHYME we need to understand some basics of our language. Our words are sounded in syllables. Each syllable in a word written below is underlined, and shown individually within the word.

Words of 1 syllable: Hat Lounge
Words of 2 syllables: Pret-ty In-come
Words of 2 + syllables: Sat-is-fy (3) In-con-sid-er-at-ion (6)

Also, there are 5 vowel letters in our language: A. E. I. O. U. (Sometimes the letter "Y" sounds like "I", so it can act as a vowel, eg. in "Sat-is-fy" above.) **Every syllable has a vowel sound.** (All letters that aren't vowels are "consonants".) When reading or listening to our speech you will see/hear that we stress some syllables more than others. These are referred to as "Stressed" "Unstressed" or 'Strong' and 'Weak' syllables. This is what creates the rhythm of our speech, and the rhythm of our poems. Now see how the above words are spoken, by using **bold** type to show where a syllable is *stressed* (Strong Beat) and non-bold type to show where a syllable is *unstressed* (Weak Beat).

Hat Lounge **Pret ty** **In come** **Sat is fy** **In con sid er at ion**

Now see where "The Man From Snowy River" is stressed and unstressed.

There was **move ment** **at** the **stat ion** **for** the **word** had **passed** a **round**
That the **colt** from **Old** **Re gret** had **got** a **way**
And had **joined** the **wild** bush **hors es**; **he** was **worth** a **thous** and **pound**,
So **all** the **cracks** had **gath**ered **to** the **fray**.

In line 1 there are 7 *stressed* syllables, and in line 2 there are 5. The poem goes on to repeat 7 then 5 throughout. This is typical ballad form. You can choose different combinations to suit your poem's mood, but once you are happy with the first stanza, and its *structure* is correct, (shown later), you must repeat that structure throughout the entire poem.

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There are usually 5 ways to group **stressed** (strong) and **unstressed** (weak) syllables: Using a 'v' to indicate unstressed, and a '/' for stressed.

v----/	= weak, strong .
/----v	= strong , weak.
v----v----/	= weak, weak, strong .
/----v----v	= strong , weak, weak.
v----/----v	= weak, strong , weak.

IMPORTANT: It is of primary importance to be aware of just *what syllable* a stress falls upon in a word. I can't stress this enough. (pardon the pun). A poem may have *perfect meter* but still be 'jarring' and *not work*, because a stress has been placed upon the *wrong syllable*. Eg. the word 'upon'. We normally speak this word as 'up-**on**.' (with the '**on**' being the stressed syllable). We do not say '**up**-on'. If a line is written with the chosen meter demanding that the stress be placed on the '**up**' it will not only sound ridiculous, but will throw the 'flow' of the rhythm completely out of whack. Eg. given that the rest of the example poem below is written in the meter of ... weak-strong-weak-strong-weak-strong etc., see where the stress *incorrectly* falls, and how it demands that the stress falls on '**up**'.. if you are to maintain your chosen meter.

'So, **up-on** hear-ing **this** he then de-cid-ed to re-frain
from verb-al-is-ing an-y furth-er thoughts.'

The above example shows what I believe to be one of the *biggest problems* that poets struggle with, regarding meter. They may have learned to 'scan' their poem, (P4) and are 100% sure that the meter is *correct*...but...the poem *does not 'flow'*. It *does not work!* Why?? Well **this** is predominantly the answer to that bewildering issue, from what I regularly observe.

How do we correct this problem in the above example? (which 'flows' perfectly apart from the 'upon.') *We re-write that line!*

'So, **hear-ing** **this** he then de-cid-ed **quick-ly** to re-frain
from verb-al-is-ing an-y furth-er thoughts.'

There is *always another way* to correctly express what you are wanting to convey, if you are prepared to put in the work to find it.

There should **never** be more than **2** unstressed syllables together, **within** a line. That is, no more than 2 weak beats to one strong beat. Eg. (the following is wrong):

"There was movement at the **sheep** station for the word had passed around.

"There was **move-ment** at the sheep **stat-ion** for the **word** had **passed a-round**

Just adding one word, "**sheep**", has completely upended the lovely even rhythm of the verse. It follows that *removing it* creates harmonious rhythm, and this is what we are learning how to do, here...to take the scalpel to your existing works, and to be aware, while creating new works.

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You may add or delete *unstressed* syllables, **ONLY AT** the start or end of a line, but *never* in the body of the poem. However, you must ensure that any preceding or subsequent lines *allow* for this addition or deletion without changing the metric structure you have been employing. An example of this is shown in my poem “Multi-Munchies”, (P5) where I have *incorrectly* added a weak beat at the start of line 2, creating *three consecutive weak beats* between the last stressed syllable in Line 1 and the first stressed syllable in Line 2. A good way to check this is to write your complete stanza out in one long line, and mark the strong and weak beats, which will expose any incorrect extra weak beats.

It is important to note that a performer can indeed make a poem sound as if it ‘flows’, despite its not being technically correct, and that is fine. It is certainly quite common. However, when you enter a competition for *excellence in writing*, you are presenting yourself as a *Wordsmith*, and are expected to submit technically correct work...*if* you wish to be considered for a *written award*. And while some of the metric structures can sound ‘dum-de-dum-de-dum’ it is somewhat difficult for me to convey that it is *necessary* to *write* your poem to adhere to the ‘dum-de-dum’ on paper, so that when it is *performed* with the proper inflections, pauses etc. it does indeed have a pleasing ‘flow’.

In time, as you progress, you may also choose to *combine* some of the 5 *different groupings of stressed & unstressed syllables* shown on P3.

Using a ‘v’ to indicate unstressed, and a ‘/’ for stressed, an excellent example is:

```

/   v   /   v   /   v v   /
Hump ty Dump ty sat on the wall
/   v   /   v   /   v v   /
Hump ty Dump ty had a great fall
/   v   v       /   v v   /   v v       /
All the King's hors es and all the King's men
/   v   v       /   v v   /   v v       /
Could n't put Hump ty to geth er ag ain.
```

The succession of stressed and unstressed syllables in a poem is called the **METER** (the rhythm). Learning to correctly mark the stressed and unstressed syllables as shown above, is called **SCANNING** your poem. In order to identify any problems in your poem, you need to develop the skill of **SCANNING**. Practice will see you actually develop the ability to scan *as you write*...as I said earlier, it will become second nature, but only after you have practiced and practiced. The end result is well worth the effort in getting to know this craftsman's tool.

I would like to mention here that until you become proficient in using these tools, it is best to stick to maintaining *consistent stresses* in your *line endings*. If all of your previous lines end in, say, an unstressed syllable, and you then begin using stressed syllables on your line endings, it has a negative impact on the established ‘flow’ of the poem, and detracts from its overall enjoyment and quality.

Punctuated Contractions give me hives! Eg. hist'ry for history. Mem'ry for memory. And even *worse* usu'ly for usually! (‘Normally’ is a good substitute here.) This is *Forcing The Meter* and is totally unacceptable from folks who call themselves ‘Wordsmiths’. But as Australians are notorious for dropping syllables in their everyday speech, if the full word is typed—and is a common use word like history—and the writer has displayed a decent level of applied talent—and I can see the author's intention in requiring it to be seen as a reduced syllable word, I do allow it. Other judges may not.

RHYME:

NEVER use a word just for the sake of a rhyme. If the word doesn't "lift" the poem then "lose" it! You will find that our ear expects to hear rhyme by about the 4th line, but once you are experienced you may succeed in "playing" with rhyme. If you are having difficulty with a rhyme, try reversing your line. Eg. Change "The lining on the cloud was silver" to "The silver lining on the cloud." You will find "cloud" considerably easier to rhyme with than "silver".

Also, **do not** rhyme singular words with plural ones. Eg.:

"I couldn't have done it without you,
I wouldn't have wanted to try,
Everything's special about you
From your smile to the boy in your eyes."

Replace "eyes" with "eye" and see how much more powerful the imagery is.

The rhyming *pattern* of your poem must be consistent throughout, just as the structure of the meter must be, as explained on page 3. The rhyming pattern is established as follows. (Using my poem "Multi-Munchies")

I **have a friend** named **Ped-ro**....(rhyme "a")

And an-**oth-er one** called **Hai**.....(rhyme "b" as it doesn't rhyme with "a")

Guis-**ep-pe, Ling** and **Ghan-di**....(rhyme "c" as it doesn't rhyme with "a" or "b")

Nad **jir a, Blue** and **Guy**.....(rhyme "b", as it *does* rhyme with line 2, "b")

So the rhyming pattern for this stanza is: (a) (b) (c) (b)

Now recognise the metric *structure* of this poem's first stanza (above), so that if you were writing it, you could apply the same rhyming pattern and meter to the rest of the poem, to create not only a technically correct piece, but one that is pleasing to the ear, with no "jarring".

The meter of this poem is: **3** stressed syllables per line, throughout the poem (shown in bold). So, using the above example, the *structure* of this poem is... A metre of **3** stressed per line throughout, with an **(a) (b) (c) (b)** rhyming pattern.

The *structure* of "The Man From Snowy River" is...A metre of **7** then **5** stressed throughout, with an **(a) (b) (a) (b)** rhyming pattern.

Avoid "**assonance**" where rhyme is required at the end of a line. "Assonance" is the repetition of a vowel sound, and is frequently used by songwriters. Eg. in the song "Don't It Make My Brown Eyes Blue":

"I'll be sad when you're gone,
I'll just cry all night long..."

"Gone" and "Long" are NOT true rhyme, they are similar sounding vowel sounds = "assonance". "Mate" and "Gate" are true rhyme. In performance poetry you can get away with assonance in place of rhyme, but no credible written competition would award a prize to this usage. In any case it is nice to know that your work can stand the scrutiny of the reader, (who could be me) and that all the effort you put into writing is building a favourable reputation for you, and that your work will stand the test of time.

“**Alliteration**” can make your work interesting. Alliteration is an effect achieved by the repetition of the consonants at the start of your words. Eg. “The ramparts reeled from the ravenous raid”. Greatly exaggerated, alliteration becomes a tongue twister.

An ‘**enjambéd**’ line is when what you are saying on one line, flows over into the next line. A good example is in, “Clancy Of The Overflow”, by Banjo Paterson. (NB. that is “*Paterson*” with one “t” – **p l e a s e!** He was not “Patterson” as I’ve seen displayed at championship comps, in outback travel brochures, and even in that pommie shiela’s book of verse. It gives me hives). Anyway, onward with “enjambéd”.

“I had written him a letter which I had, for want of better
Knowledge, sent to where I met him down the Lachlan, years ago; ...

Clever use of enjambéd lines helps to avoid monotony in the presentation of a poem. Care should be taken to observe the punctuation of these lines, eg. you would not pause at the end of line 1 above, at “better”, but where the comma is situated after “knowledge”, at the start of the 2nd line.

In a stanza of my poem “Old Days Old Ways ,Gone”, I have playfully used a type of enjambment as follows:

Yes they knew that the fight would be over all **right**,
That it wouldn’t take more than a minute,
Before you would set right, while the rest of the **blight-**
-ers found reason to get stuck back in it.

“**Internal rhyme**” is when a word in the middle of a line rhymes with the word on the end of that line. This is also shown in “Old Days Old Ways, Gone”:

Can you tell me what made the old **days** and old **ways**
disappear from when I was a *kid*?
When a codger could name every **spade** as a **spade**
And he wouldn’t get fined twenty *quid*.

When a bloke could get **blind** and say what’s on his **mind**
Telling someone to go straight to *buggery*,
Without risking **detention** and gross nervous **tension**
In court up on charges of *thuggery*.

The first stanza is not as good an example as the second, because the “mid” rhyme is not really in the middle, and “spade” DOES NOT RHYME with “spade”...it is the same word! This poem is a good example of a successful *performance* poem, written in an entertaining manner, but using a good amount of “poetic licence” (which means it is really just a bit of doggerel). This is actually a gross example of adding too many weak beats. Last stanza, line 2, ends with 2 weak beats...and horror of horrors, line 3 begins with yet *another* 2 weak beats, resulting in *four consecutive* weak beats, creating the pause not previously employed in the prior structure. It’s a fine example of what NOT to do for written comps, but of what still works in performance. All of this does not mean it has no value. It is in my book, and brings joy to many people via reading or seeing it performed. Hopefully it also demonstrates that I don’t take myself too seriously...something I would highly recommend if you want to ENJOY your writing! (I’m actually rather impressed that I could possibly deviate to such an extent!)

ENTERING WRITTEN COMPETITIONS is one way of helping you to assess your development, provided that you ensure they are run by reputable organisations whose intention is *to foster the growth of writers*. Such an organisation will supply you with “judges comments” that should always be honest but encouraging [usually a return Stamped Self Addressed Envelope (SSAE) is required]. Always remember that judges are people, and as such have very differing outlooks. This is why an award winning poem is often not even given a place in previously entered competitions. Many writers’ services groups offer individual critiques of your work, and this can be very beneficial. As with any other services you engage, compare prices and reputations. I offer such a service also. Avoid competitions that ask you to contribute money to an anthology. These are known as “Vanity” publications, and usually everyone “wins” an award to encourage them to part with their cash.

Entering performance competitions is the “apprenticeship” of any aspiring performance poet. The experience *s t r e t c h e s* your comfort zones, which always results in growth, both in poetry skills and personally. I am told that the awful “performance anxiety” that all public speakers and entertainers experience, has a really sound explanation. Apparently our primal brains remember that in caveman days, if one was rejected by the group, he most definitely would die! Loners did not survive in those days. So, when your knees are knocking, hands sweating, heart racing, mouth drying, head spinning, that is perfectly normal, because **you really are facing the fear of death!** Of course the worst that really can happen in these times is a possible pelting from rotten tomatoes, so it’s not that bad, and you do get less fearful the more you keep risking it.

A FEW FINAL WORDS OF WISDOM: Please never, *ever* write “...he **did** go”, or “....she **did** say” etc. Try to write *as you would speak*.

“IT’S” IS “IT IS”, BUT “ITS” **ISN’T!**

Only **EVER** use an apostrophe between the “t” and the “s” if you are saying, “It is.”

And ‘separate’ is spelt ‘ar’ *not* ‘er’....tell your local realtor....pleasee.

Good Luck & Happy Writing! I sincerely hope these tips assist & encourage you.
Glenny P.

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