## 10 Questions for Editing by Dean Atta

#### This is a step-by-step guide for anyone who has a poem they want to improve and make clearer to readers. Sometimes we are lucky and our first drafts come out near-perfect but most of the time they need work. These ten questions will help you decide what it is you need to work on.

1. **What is the most important line of the poem?**

Your initial response might be ‘All lines are equal’ or ‘I wouldn’t put any lines in my poem that weren’t important’. But the truth is there will be a line that is working the hardest that has the most impact and is doing the heavy lifting of the poem. How can you ensure that other lines support this line? You might refer to this line as the ‘striking line’ of your poem: it’s the star, it’s the gold medalist. Read over your poem and find this line and make sure you’ve placed it where it can truly shine.

##### How do the title and the first line create intrigue?

Titles are an invitation to a poem, they are like front doors: they can be big or small, ornate or simple. More detail often helps grab a reader’s attention. If your poem is about a bus, you could simply call it “Bus” but if your poem is about public transport you might want to say the number and destination it takes e.g. “6 to East Kilbride”. If your poem is about a school bus you may want to describe the mood on the bus e.g. “The School Bus of Doom”. If your title sets the scene, your first line can jump straight into the action because the reader will already be located. You do not need to repeat anything from the title in your first line.

##### How could the poem evoke the senses more?

Include at least two of the five senses. These are touch, sight, hearing, smell and taste. This will help your reader feel more present in the poem. Let’s use a bus as an example again: Does it smell like body odour or perfume? Is it quiet or noisy or do you not know because you have your headphones in listening to music? Do you see green fields or grey buildings out the window? Are the windows of the bus clean or dirty? Do you keep your hands in your lamp, hold a bag or a phone?

##### How could you be more detailed and specific?

You are on that bus looking at your hands, even empty hands can be described. Are they bare hands or are you wearing gloves. If gloves, describe their colour and material. If bare hands, are they dry or moisturised? Are your fingernails short or long, are they painted? If you describe hands with fingernails that have been bitten and look sore, the reader may wonder if that person is nervous or anxious. You can give clues without spelling things out to the reader: this is a technique called ‘show, don’t tell’.

##### Where do you repeat yourself on purpose?

Listen, listen, listen. Repetition is powerful and some words if repeated can feel like they are casting a spell on a reader. What are you trying to draw your reader’s attention to? If your poem is set in a garden, you may direct the reader to listen to the bird song, listen to a bee buzzing in the flowerbed, listen to the neighbours arguing, listen to the radio from your kitchen window, listen to your favourite song playing from your phone. Repetition can set the theme and the tone of your poem but also link together quite separate things.

##### Where do you repeat yourself by accident?

Avoid repeating words without a really good reason. If you have used an adjective like ‘happy’ several times, you might want to find more interesting ways of saying this. You could simply turn to the thesaurus to find synonyms for happy, such as ‘cheerful’ or ‘delighted’. However, you could create more original combinations of words that describe happiness such as ‘smile machine’ or ‘laughter engine’.

##### What changes through the course of the poem?

How do you show the passing of time? Is your poem a journey like a bus ride? Does it reach a physical or emotional destination? Or is it observational like sitting in a garden and noticing everything around you? Is there any action or drama in the poem? Does the bus breakdown? Does the news come on the radio and remind you of the drama in the world? Does a dog bark? Does your phone ring?

##### What do you want the reader to think by the end of the poem?

Do you want them to think about a journey they have taken? Do you want them to think about their favourite place to sit and relax? Do you want them to think about their place in the world? Their loved ones? This may not be something you say in the poem but having an answer to this question may help you read it back to see where you can place more emphasis.

##### What do you want the reader to feel by the end of the poem?

Is your poem trying to evoke empathy or create joy in your reader? Do you want to make them laugh or cry? Maybe you want them to feel less alone? You could directly address the reader and say something like ‘This poem is holding your hand.’

##### What do you want the reader to know by the end of the poem?

By sharing your observations through poetry, you give a reader insight into your way of seeing. Even if your first draft was more like a stream of consciousness, when you come to edit, it’s important that you consider if your poem has a lesson, a meaning or a message. You do not have to spell this out to your reader but you should know what you’re trying to say. Even if your poem is abstract and random and is trying to say ‘Nothing makes sense and neither does this poem’.