

## Writing History: The Prose Poem

The birth of prose poems – poems that don't rhyme – has ensured generations of fascinating, inventive poets who might not otherwise have become famous.

The beauty of a prose poem is that it can come in many different forms, and it is an incredibly liberating thing to write. Some look like a paragraph in a book, some are arranged in stanzas and some are crazily scattered across the page. Many prose poems are used to convey extreme emotions or situations, whether directly or indirectly, and to comment on what is happening in the world around us.

Now, in the middle of a pandemic, there is no better time to record our feelings through poetry.

**Q: So it's a chunk of text that doesn't rhyme. Isn't a prose poem really just a small story?**

A: Yes and no. Like a story, it tells us something, but unlike a story there doesn't have to be a plot or the usual logic. It's more like a photograph of or signpost towards the emotions. Most prose poems don't fill in all the possible detail – they just focus on a few strong images or lots of details strung together, and try to create feeling rather than one definite message.

### Step 1: Brainstorming

The main strength of a prose poem is that it can start in a huge variety of ways, so your best approach is to **begin gathering lots of ideas** about things you notice. **Keep a journal and make notes on your life** every day – write everything down that you can think of, no matter how silly it feels. When writing about your experiences and feelings in the time of Covid.19, you might want to consider the following things:

- What you see, hear, smell and notice around the house
- Familiar and special objects
- Details about the people you are living with
- Things you keep hearing on repeat
- Things you miss from freer times
- What you would really like to do/say/experience and can't
- How you are reacting to what is happening – are you calm? Angry? Worried?
- Your thoughts and dreams
- What you see outside when you exercise

With all these things, consider a) what your feelings are about them, b) how you might describe them in a piece of creative writing and c) how you would want your audience to feel when reading about them.

## Step 2: Try to Free-write

Choose one image or sentence from your journal, which really speaks to you about what is happening right now in lockdown. You can use news headlines, pre-existing lyrics and lines, or things you hear, as well as your own thoughts. If you are really stuck, try starting with:

I'm sick of...

From my window, I can see...

I wish I could...

This is the BBC news...

Now set a timer for 2 minutes and write whatever comes into your head after this sentence. Do not try to make it make sense or follow a pattern! Do not worry about spelling, punctuation or grammar! Things like song lyrics, random detail or sound effects can creep in, if you let them, and they add richness to the poem that is being created. The trick is just to keep writing. Here is an example of free writing:

This is the news at 6. From my window, I can see two pigeons picking at something on the path. There is nobody around. The pigeons are the same colour as the tarmac except for a sunset blush on their chests. Really wish I could go to the shop for some chocolate. Sweet chocolate. In other news Mum hasn't stopped singing that song Blue Moon since yesterday dip dip da doo drip drip drip on and on and on like a tap. Can I turn it off please? Can people catch tiredness like sickness? There are wild mountain lions in peoples' gardens in Colorado. I want to run and run like somebody's dog off the lead.  
When will it be time to come out and let go?

Now go through what you have written (no embarrassment!) and choose about ten phrases or sentences that you think you can work with.

Repeat the exercise with a different starter. Read through and highlight again. See what happens as many times as you like.

Remember: some free-writes will produce great results, and others won't. Don't be afraid to experiment or discard what you don't like.

### Step 3: Crafting the poem

Now take the lines you have highlighted, and experiment with putting them together in different ways. You can try:

**A Stack Poem:** putting your favourite phrases in a block, a new line for every different one. This is one of my favourite ways of developing a poem because it is easy to change things around.

For an example, read anything by Michael Rosen or, if you want a challenge, *The Wasteland* by T.S Eliot, or *Musée de Beaux Arts* by W.H. Auden

**A Paragraph Poem:** putting the lines into a paragraph, which charts the movement of your thoughts in a way that makes some sort of inner sense to you.

For an example, read Emily Berry's *Ghosts*.

**A free verse poem:** putting your sentences into a series of small stanzas that don't rhyme. Each sentence can be whole or stretch across different lines, depending on what words you want to grab the reader's attention. You can sort the verses by topic, by the vague parts of any story they might tell, or any way that instinctively feels good to you.

For examples of free verse poems, read *The Stolen Orange* by Brian Patten or *This is Just to Say* by William Carlos Williams.