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ENG 254

Poetic and Narrative Form

Literature is the discipline of thought in which form and content create each other.

After writing generatively for many weeks and reading some of the greats, you have something to say, which means that you have a problem: you need to figure out how you want to say it.

Experienced writers structure a piece of writing—find the form for what they want to say—instinctively or deliberately, drawing on the bank of examples of literary forms they have internalized. Beginning writers, who have fewer examples to draw on from their more limited reading, often must study a particular form and structure their writing with strong intentionality.

Great writers—like the ones we’ve been reading—are by definition innovators of literary form; in an original work of literature, a new form is created. For this reason, rather than my telling you to fit your writing into a particular form, the examples and questions below are intended to guide and even empower you as you determine the form you’re aiming at in revising your own work.

Poetic Form

Sylvia Plath’s “Daddy” is certainly the most formally structured poem we’ve read, with regular **stanzas** of five lines each (making them **quintains**, if you want to get technical; the more commonly encountered **couplet** is a two-line stanza, a three-line stanza is called a **tercet**, and a **monostich** is a form in which there’s only one line per stanza, as in Mei-Mei Berssenbrugge’s luxuriously long-lined work about the natural world). Plath makes use of **end rhyme**, matching up, for example, “do,” “black shoe,” and “Achoo,” though there is no set **rhyme scheme**.

The other poems we’ve read present examples of **free verse**, which is in contrast to structured forms with long histories in the English language and world literature such as the **sonnet** (Terrance Hayes is a contemporary master), brain teasers like the **sestina**, the ones you’re used to from elementary school like the **haiku** (which, though presented out of context in North American elementary schools, has a magnificent history in Japanese literature; Bashō, who lived in the Seventeenth Century, is still the one to beat).

If, for a poem, the unit of composition is the line, and for a piece of prose the unit of composition is the sentence or paragraph, then what’s a **prose poem**? The contemporary writer Rosmarie Waldrop does these beautifully, writing dense, philosophical blocks of text.

As the poet, you’ll make choices around where to **break your lines**; **rhythm** and **prosody** (and serious writers will research the types of **metric foot** there are); **sound** and **syntax** as well as **images**, **metaphors** and other **figurative language**; **allusion**, **personification**, **tone**, **humor**, and other **rhetorical devices**, etc. All these can be engaged to your advantage in prose writing as well, but poetry presents its own rigors, demanding the greatest economy; and, because you don’t have to “make sense” in the same way, you have to make up for that by being—let’s say—*dazzling*.

But poetry has **content** even when it doesn't make sense. What is the **conceit** or central question, gist, inquiry, theme of your poem? What is it saying that's new to the language, what is its thought?

How does the form you've chosen not only complement that, but make it possible? Are form and content closely related, so that the one helps to reveal the mystery of the other, or are they in apparent tension (as in "Daddy," where the nursery-rhyme-ish neatness of the form seems to be in opposition to the dark and troubling content, accentuating it ironically)?

Are you "saying" anything with the form of your poem that undermines its content? By reading over what you've written repeatedly, each time marking anything that seems however faintly awkward or out of place, and making adjustments continually, you can control for this to increase your poem's integrity and power.

Poems are demanding. Is everything that you've included necessary? Can you certify that what you've written couldn't have been said in any other way?

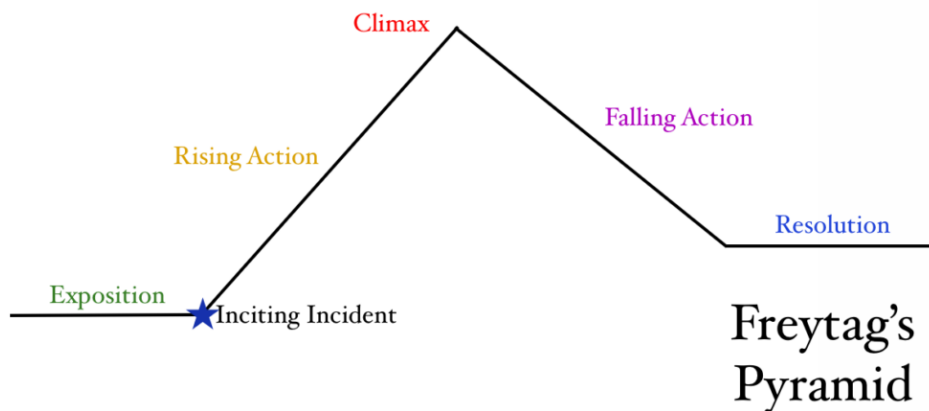
Unless you have a reason to do otherwise, please left-justify your poem when you present it; single-spaced lines are also preferred (i.e., any extra space between lines of your poem should be intentional and contribute to its meaning rather than being that way because of MS Word's presets).

Narrative Form

Not all **prose** writing is **narrative**, and poems can be narrative too. Narrative writing unfolds over time. Generally speaking, it tells a story. It can be **fiction** (short story, novel) or **nonfiction** (essay, narrative journalism).

Writing about something that really happened to you can be terrifically motivating; you have something that you want to impart, a score to settle, a memory to preserve or that you're still turning over in your mind, trying to learn from it. However, in order to allow the true form of a piece of literary writing of yours to emerge, you'll be challenged to disinvest from your own experience, to see it freshly, as if it were happening to someone else; in literature, your reader comes to your work without prior knowledge, and meaning is created at the level of the sentence and the word.

Freytag's Pyramid is the famous diagram of a classically structured story:



Long prose works are made up of shorter units so that studying structure even in the novels we're reading can help you determine the best structure for your own stories and essays. In *Swann's Way*, as for each of the novels on our syllabus in its own way, the structuring principle is memory itself. Involuntary memory, the associations Marcel makes with a sensory experience like the madeleine cookie—these thematically central pieces of the book's content are also structuring principles. In *Sitt Marie Rose*, the formidably complicated structure of the book's later sections, in which the story is told by seven different narrators in rotation, serves to refute the too-easy view of the world voiced by the character Mounir in the book's first section. These forms, more than complementing content, *are* content.

We went over some of the features of narration that are almost a grammar for fiction writing, so that unintentional shifts can really break the spell of the fiction for your reader: **perspective, point of view, and psychic distance.** (See my email of 10/28 with the passage from Gardner.) On that nitty-gritty level, grammar itself matters too, not in the sense of being "correct" (though you should "err" only deliberately; Strunk & White's *The Elements of Style* is a good refresher if you feel you didn't get enough of this in high school) but in the sense that every choice you make regarding syntax, the ways your words are put together, creates meaning for your reader. Strive for concision and to find the best words. In fiction, consider the way a character's viewpoint affects the words they choose. The elements mentioned above for poetry—figurative language, rhetorical devices, that it's necessary for every writer to reread their work repeatedly in order to identify hiccups and get to work fixing them—are also important to prose writing.

When you revise your work, just as when you write it, you should be making discoveries as you go along; more and more meaning should reveal itself to you.

All this said, when you're determining the overall structure for a piece of your prose writing—as you are finding, sculpting, bringing out the form for that work—here are some questions that may help:

1. Kurt Vonnegut said to start the story as close to the end as possible—to begin when the shit hits the fan, to use a familiar expression. Have you chosen your beginning deliberately? Is it exciting? A good beginning can do many things—it can plop the reader down in the midst of your central drama, problem, etc. or it can encapsulate the central problems of the work in some other, though no less gripping, way. If you're working on a short story, could you begin a little farther in?
2. When pondering where to end your story, consider the mood or emotion you want your reader to be left with. A good ending, like a good beginning, somehow contains the entire story or essay in miniature, and yet it doesn't tie things up neatly in a way that would reduce the achievement of the work as a whole.
3. Particularly in a story, consider the chain of consequence. What events determine the other events? Is there a hierarchy there? Think of Duras's image of the young girl on the ferry, which, because of its paramount importance, appearing to encapsulate so much of what happens to the girl after that, serves Duras as a bookend and is placed to either side of some dozens of pages of examination of the events of her life at the start of *The Lover*.
4. How is time operating in your story? Are certain events simultaneous with each other? How will your structure clarify the events' relationship to time? Because we've been focusing on memory, in many of the works that we've read there are at least two **times**:

the time of remembering, and the time of the events that are being remembered. If there are multiple perspectives in time, multiple timelines, or multiple time signatures (speeds of unfolding), is every one crucial to your story? Are they all dynamic both internally and in relation to each other, as a whole? Does each one hold up as a story? How can you use time to surprise your reader with its possibility or help your reader appreciate its passage?

5. Is your story, or your essay, divided into sections? Is every section necessary? What is the relationship between each pair of sections and among the sections overall—as a sequence, and as a whole? For example, do they relate to each other through a principle like that of **juxtaposition**, where it's surprising that they're placed next to each other? Or does each section progress linearly forward through time compared with the section before it, extending and complicating the developments of the previous section? Should your sections be shorter, longer; what is their rhythm? Do they undercut each other humorously, or battle with each other in some other way that heightens the pitch of your story to its profit? Are you ending every section with a strong paragraph, every paragraph with a strong sentence, every sentence with a strong word, and how do you know when to stop?
6. How does your structure reflect back on meaning—on any of the elements of the meaning of your piece of writing, from its theme to a **character's development** to the philosophical inquiry or agenda of the work? And does it help the reader to see that meaning rather than obscuring it? If you've attempted anything complicated in structuring your piece, does this either support the meaning that you're imparting or deliver its own kind of pleasure, beauty? If not, can you structure more simply? In other words, is your structure necessary? How does your structure guide the reader through the piece, creating their experience? In general, is everything necessary, can anything be cut?
7. Is there anything long that should become short? Not only excess verbiage or careless repetition, are you explaining something for your reader that should be clear already from the scene you've set (“telling” something you should “show”; **“Show don't tell”**)?
8. Is there anything that's short that should become long? For example, do you only briefly introduce something that's actually crucial to your story and might be unpacked with examples, or more vividly dramatized in a scene (or “shown,” to use the term from **“Show don't tell”**)? Do you perform any drive bys that leave your reader asking questions that don't deepen the mystery but might be resolved to your piece's benefit?
9. In fiction, how are you deciding when to move into and out of **summary** and **scene**?
10. In fiction, how does your structure assist you as you make decisions around how much information your reader is allowed to know at each moment of your story? Is information introduced in an orderly way, so that the reader doesn't get caught up wondering about trivialities that aren't important? On the other hand, if you're building a mystery and wanting to keep certain things in reserve, are you leaning on structure to support that?
11. How does the structure of your piece contribute to the emotional progression of that piece of writing? How about its drama, conflict, stakes—can they be heightened via structure?
12. Are you making the fullest use of repetition? Avoiding redundancy, are you drawing on the music-like potential of prose writing by allowing elements to repeat, whether literally or by suggesting each other, taking on a different meaning every time?
13. What gives your piece its integrity, its unity? Are there opportunities for its structure to be harmonious on multiple levels, so that you are presenting big and small versions of the same shape within a story in structuring your story?