



## A GUIDE TO POETRY – BY BELLA REW

*Bella Rew was a Winner of the Orwell Youth Prize 2021 with her poem [‘Two For Joy’](#). Since then, Bella has been an [Orwell Youth Fellow](#), working on collaborative creative writing projects, including a zine about the climate crisis, [Axial Tilt](#), and a Substack multimedia blog, [The Digitalis Archives](#). Bella is studying English at Corpus Christi College in Cambridge.*



You could describe poetry as every other form of literature huddled together under a trench coat. Historically, it has had a far wider range of uses than the personal, introspective style we associate it with today. There was a time when poetry rather than prose was the standard form of storytelling, in epic narratives such as Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey* and Arthurian legends like *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Medieval religious writers described the celestial spheres of the universe in poetry. Renaissance playwrights referred to themselves as poets, and Shakespeare’s famous use of iambic pentameter means his dialogue is constantly slipping in and out of poetry.

Naturally, this diverse usage also encompassed political writing – many Victorian poets such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning advocated for social change through their poetry, and powerful lyricists helped animate the American civil rights movement, from Curtis Mayfield to Nina Simone.

This range ought to feel liberating rather than intimidating! You can’t go wrong in poetry – you can tell a story, set a scene, or capitalise on one image to communicate a host of meanings. One of my favourite things about poetic writing is the freedom it gives you to show, not tell. [My Orwell Youth Prize poem](#) was written by looking out of my window and seizing upon the images I saw there – a magpie, the sunset, chemtrails... I was then able to unravel the connotations hidden in these simple and universal sights, such as the nursery rhyme attached to the magpie, and the scarified texture of the clouds, and dig into their political significance.

Most poetry is political, even if it doesn’t appear so on the surface, so don’t be afraid of letting your poems speak for themselves. . Layers of meaning can be delicious in condensed



poetic forms. Alternatively, the colloquial voice of a poem can follow a singular thread with extreme clarity, as if you were speaking directly to the reader.

All poets develop their own methods for writing poetry. In order to give you a starting point for developing your own, I thought I would share some of the techniques I use, focusing on the theme of **'Home'**. Much as we are now inspired by the writings of Orwell, poets have always been in conversation with each other, responding to or rebelling against their predecessors and contemporaries. Therefore, feel free to either rework something familiar or experiment completely outside the box. Both methods can produce incredible poetry!

### **1. Imagining.**

. When you think of the word 'home', what images come to mind? Is it the façade of your house, red brick or pebbledash or the sleek grey body of a flat? Can we move further in, perhaps to a kitchen – is something cooking on the hob? What is it and who made it? Who taught them how?

Don't stop there – details of colour, material, light and shade are what make up the bigger picture. A closer look at your own home might be a good place to start, but poetry doesn't always need to be personal – describing unfamiliar or fictional sights can make them feel closer to home, more immediate, as if you were looking through someone else's eyes.

Images are at the core of all of my poems, including the political. Sight can pave the way for other sensual explorations, of taste and touch and smell. If you're struggling to visualise, consider your immediate surroundings – why is this the place you're writing in? Are you already at home, without noticing it? If you listen carefully, the world is always speaking to you – I can hear a tap running in the other room, and earlier the birds were singing in tandem with the roar of a motorbike. Our natural environment is a kind of home, but one we feel increasingly alienated from.

### **2. Writing.**

Currently, all of these thoughts are floating around in your head. Getting them down on paper is one of the hardest parts of writing, but also a process that can reveal exciting connections and help you figure out the exact message you're trying to convey.

Sometimes the best thing to do is set a timer and write whatever comes into your brain, before picking out the standout words and phrases and building a poem around them. Alternatively, researching traditional forms such as the sonnet or villanelle can offer a useful structure for arranging your thoughts. They also place limits on your writing, which can be help for keeping your language sharp and relevant.



Don't worry if your poem is short. Some of the greatest poems of all time achieve perfection in very few lines – if you've said everything you want to say the way you want to say it, then consider your writing complete.

I always find it helpful to read my poetry aloud as I write – this allows you to unlock the sound of your poem and figure out the most natural places to put in punctuation and line breaks. Middle English poetry was often alliterative rather than rhyming, relying on the raw sounds of words to create tone and emotion, and modern spoken word poetry still employs this approach. If your political message is emotionally potent, listening to your poem as you write can result in particularly affective work.

### **3. Editing.**

It's easy to forget that editing is as important as writing. One of the most useful pieces of advice I've ever received was to try cutting the first line of all the poems I write. Often your first lines are part of a process of easing into what you actually want to say. Of course, this won't be true for everyone - but why not give it a go?

Remember, your page is your canvas. There's nothing wrong with poems written in regular lines, but several previous prize winners have done wonderfully creative things with their structure (see 2023 winner [Lara Wong's poem 'Men's Shoes'](#) and 2022 [winner Jennifer Wolfe's poem 'Out of Time?'](#)). This is another of the unique benefits of poetry which makes it such an effective and often disruptive form – all of the rules of prose writing are overturned, generating countless possibilities for fresh ways of looking at the world.

A piece of practical advice, and a favourite of my mum's, is to always leave your poem for a day or so after you think it's finished and then read it again with fresh eyes before submitting it. As I'm writing, I often get so embroiled in the minutiae of specific words and phrases that I lose an objective sense of the overall poem. If you return to your piece, you can see how it flows as a whole and you'll often find it better than you thought it was!

I created this resource primarily to stress the endless possibilities of writing political poetry, so don't be discouraged if these tips don't work for you. Poetry comes in all shapes and sizes, and so the most important thing is to find a way of writing poetry that most sincerely expresses the truth you are trying to communicate. With metaphor, imagery, rhythm, and form at your fingertips, poetry can bring an idea of 'Home' just as effectively, if not more effectively, than any prose writing.