

Online Writing Workshop:

Found Poetry by Dorothy Alexander

Online version of workshop given by Dorothy Alexander for Dumfries & Galloway Arts Association at Crichton Campus, Dumfries, February 2006.

FOUND POETRY

What can it do for you?

help to release your creativity

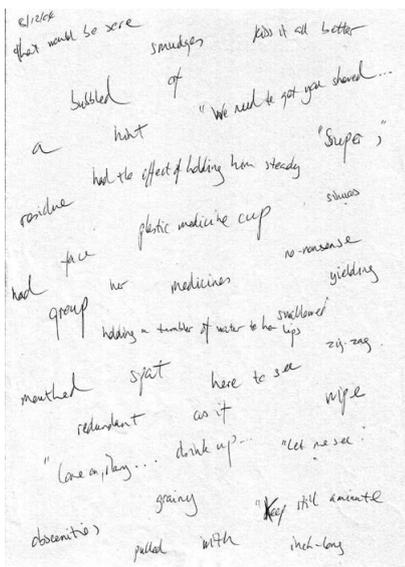
introduce an element of play into your work

help you grow as a writer

Found poetry has three main elements:

- randomness
- rearrangement
- rules

Try the following exercise to familiarise yourself with their use.



1. Take a book or magazine (preferably one that you would not otherwise dream of reading) and write down its details, as you will need these later.

Make a stock of words by opening it randomly and placing your index finger on it without looking at the words on the page (close your eyes if you have to). This is very important – there must be no thought given as to page or words chosen.

Copy the word or phrase thus indicated onto a sheet of blank (i.e. unlined) paper. Repeat this step, scattering the words across the page until it is



What is found poetry?

“Found poetry is the rearrangement of words or phrases taken randomly from other sources in a manner that gives the rearranged words a completely new meaning...”¹

¹‘Found Poetry’ in Wikipedia : www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Found_poetry

“In its purest [modern] form, found poetry is poetry assembled from non-literary sources – can labels, road signs, clothing tags, picture titles, advertisements, etc.”²

²See Austin, Linda J., *Poetics, Found Poetry* in www.thewritersezone.com

comfortably full. Try not to write them down in straight lines, give them room to breathe.¹

doc 1

¹ See attached document 1 (derived from a prose chapter of my own work 'Cage')

2) Make up a prose paragraph from these words using the following guidelines (you might find that two or three pages of found words will give a better effect).

First, the rules:

- do not add to the words or phrases you have written down
- you can delete words
- you can change their tense
- you can repeat them
- always credit your source

Do not worry at all if what you get is bizarre.

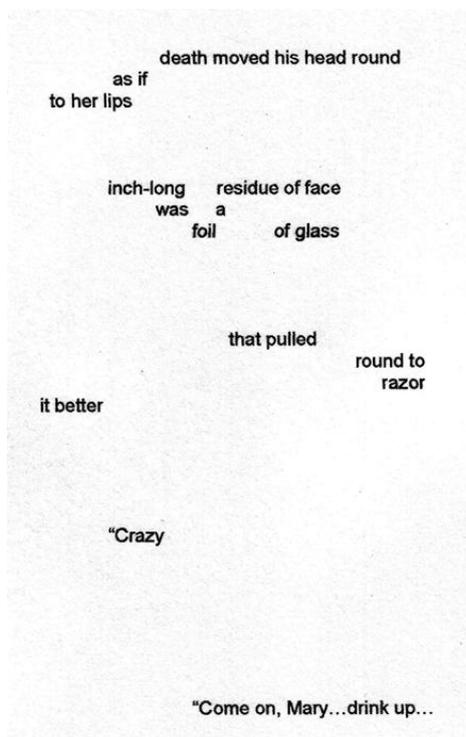
Do not worry at all about grammar, punctuation etc., just write down a torrent of words.

Don't ever stop to wonder if what you are doing is 'poetic' or 'right', just write it down.

Do take a word that resonates with you somehow and mentally move it about the page(s): let it gather other words to it.

Work quickly. That way you are less likely to be waylaid by the 'literary policemen' of your rational brain.

Have fun!²



doc 3

² See attached document 2

³ See attached document 3

sweet-black the obscenities that pulled with non-sense sinuous death moved his head round to kiss it better "Super," "Come on, Mary...drink up... wipe this one look from John rigid "Just a response a notion taut as if mouthed holding a tumbler of water to her lips The smell made her feel nauseated "Crazy His neck was very stiff his razor was smudges of barked crescentoes intense half-smiled He's from "Let me see." redundant "that sounds like a good idea surface difficult for him to speak not "Okay," was foil a hint of glass "We need to get you shaved...He chewed on nothing "Keep still a minute inch-long rim residue of face grainy medicines spat zig-zag dry affectionate to this that would be sore bubbled yielding plastic medicine cup swallowed turned away

doc 2

3) With this in mind, draw a shape around a part of your prose paragraph – be as creative as you like.

You are now ready to *find* your poem using one of the following methods.

a) From within the shape you have drawn, scribble out words you don't want (or underline the ones you do) to leave you with the words of your poem standing out from the rest.

b) Note words and phrases that you like from within the shape on a separate sheet of paper, and move them around/work with them until you get a poem that you are happy with.³

You can vary this by using the words outside the superimposed shape.

Once you have tried one method, try the other. One might work well for one text but not for another. In this case it would be good to have your work typed up and on computer to better enable you to play around with it.

The more conventional method of writing a found poem would miss out step two of the above exercise and would not involve drawing shapes around the text as we did in step three. Now try going straight from a collection of words and/or phrases to a poem!

Some further suggestions

Look in your store cupboard, go to the supermarket, find things with labels to give you material to work with.

Never be stuck: on a long journey note down words that you see on traffic signs, advertising hoardings etc., waiting at the doctor's or dentist's compile lists of words and phrases from magazines, posters on the wall, health promotion literature (vary it by adding in things you overhear/announcements etc.).

Use a variety of texts to make your stock of words and phrases; mix up literary and non-literary texts, written text with things found in the environment, your own words and those of someone or something else.

Always remember to keep it random.

Break the rules. Be adventurous. Come up with your own ideas for finding words and phrases, e.g. use numbers to generate your material. Take risks. Combine the seemingly bizarre.

Remember, there is no 'right' or 'wrong'.

Always credit your source.

Use the techniques of steps one and two to generate prose.

Look out for work by the following writers: John Cage, Samuel Beckett, David Antin, Susan Howe.

Type 'found poetry' into Google and explore the entries there.

Although often associated with early twentieth century surrealist and dada writers, found poetry is not just a modern phenomenon. In the fourth century, for example, Faltonia Betitia Proba "shuffled 694 lines of Virgil to narrate a Christian history of the world"! And it is still perfectly possible to use literary texts as source material, including your own.

*Kelly, S.B., The Book of Lost Books, Viking, London, 2005, p 94.B

[Found poetry] requires the poet to draw upon not only mental creativity but his or her own unconscious attitude regarding the nature of language. Structurally it is similar to the process of creating a visual collage. Stylistically, it is similar to the visual art of "appropriation" in which two- and three-dimensional art is created from recycled items.... Appropriation art often plays upon a double-edged meaning wherein the object's new artistic meaning makes a political or philosophical comment on its original purpose, and the same can be said for the way found poetry can contain clever wordplay or evoke ironic contradictions in the way we use language."

'Found Poetry' in Wikipedia :
www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Found_poetry

What found poetry can do for you as a writer

It can help release your creativity by putting you in a more challenging relation to words. (This is why randomness is important; it takes you out of yourself.) By confronting you with material that is not of your own choosing, and by imposing rules which exert pressures similar to those of metre and rhyme, you are forced to think in different ways. It can allow subconscious themes and issues to emerge. In your efforts to recombine the words you might find that you become more aware of words as you have to physically engage with them as things-in-themselves.

It is good for days when you are stuck. It generates unusual word combinations. It can spark off ideas for other work. You can use the material generated as a reservoir of phrases/ images etc. to plunder in the future.

It introduces an element of play into your work, which is always to be recommended.

It can help you grow as a writer.

However, it pays to take heed of the following:

"Found poetry is all about being a good editor, having a good ear, learning how to shape a poem. It will push your poetry to another dimension as long as you are *"crafting,"* not merely presenting a "list" of lines. Found poetry is *not* a poetry-generating machine. *Good found poetry takes work.*" (Austin) (my italics)

Some suggested links

Scottish Poetry Library

www.spl.org.uk

The Poetry Society

www.poetrysociety.org.uk

Jacket Magazine

www.jacketmagazine.com

How2

www.how2journal.com

American poetry website

www.poets.org

New Horizons – Found Poetry

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