



# Liberate your words

National Schools Poetry Award



## The Poetry Kit

*Be prepared to play with words*

Bill Manhire

Kia ora, welcome to The Poetry Kit.

In this Kit you will find writing exercises, links to useful and inspiring creative writing websites and tips on writing from internationally acclaimed poets.

Each year Victoria University's International Institute of Modern Letters updates the Kit as a free, downloadable resource for students and their teachers in the lead up to the National Schools Poetry Award and beyond. Each year we add more exercises, so the Kit will continue to grow.

Writing poetry is about allowing the unexpected in so the word-magic can happen. One way to invite the unexpected is to use a writing exercise that will open you up to the surprises and potential of language. The exercises in this Kit may spark a poem or an idea for your Poetry Award entry. They will, at the very least, get the pen moving across the page.

You can download a Poetry Award entry form and check out winning poems, judges' reports and writing resources from previous years at: [www.schoolspoetryaward.co.nz](http://www.schoolspoetryaward.co.nz).

We look forward to reading the poems of Aotearoa New Zealand's senior secondary students.

Katie Hardwick-Smith

National Schools Poetry Award Coordinator

*Poetry is that art of the marvellous; a simultaneous compression of language and an endless expansion of meaning.*

Fred D'Aguiar

## Poetry writing tips

*prepared by Brian Turner*

1. A poem need not make plain sense, or be explicable, but it has to have an inner logic. It has to take the reader with it.
2. Craft is paramount – and craft entertains craftiness. The importance of technique – working at shape/form – cannot be underestimated. Technique is freedom.
3. Strive to strike the right note. Work on the tone. This often means discovering the appropriate voice. Unless the reader believes a poem is important to the poet, it won't affect the reader or linger in his or her mind.
4. Follow your ear. Dredge your mind. Go where you are led until you can't go any further, then stop and look around. Ask, what have we here?
5. Revise, revise, revise. Shape, cut or add if necessary. If you are uneasy about some aspect of a poem – an image or a phrase – then usually you have cause to be. There is nearly always something that needs to be fixed.
6. Sentiment's okay, to a degree, sentimentality or sop are not.
7. What you say is important; how you say it equally important.
8. If you want to be taken seriously then you have to take your writing very seriously. Don't be without a notebook.
9. Read other poets; read widely, and think hard about what you read. Find ways of working that suit you. Learn to recognise what it is that starts a poem off in your head.
10. Look and listen. Writing is a way of conversing with your sub-conscious and bringing it to life. Sound is often just as important as sense.
11. Read and reread your work.
12. Lineation/line breaks may be instinctive but not random.
13. Don't use figures of speech you are accustomed to seeing in print unless you know what you are doing and why – for ironic purposes, for example.
14. Verbs and nouns make for good writing. Beware of adverbs and be suspicious if you find too many adjectives plonked in front of nouns.

## Poetry Websites

<https://www.starlingmag.com> **Starling**

An online literary journal showcasing the best new poetry and prose from young New Zealand writers.

[www.wgtn.ac.nz/turbine](http://www.wgtn.ac.nz/turbine) **Turbine | Kapohau**

An online magazine run by Te Herenga Waka Victoria University and featuring work by emerging and established poets and prose writers.

[www.wgtn.ac.nz/bestnzpoems](http://www.wgtn.ac.nz/bestnzpoems) **Ōrongohau | Best New Zealand Poems**

This site includes poems considered to be some of the best poems published in New Zealand during the preceding year, plus audio recordings of selected poems, read by the poets.

[www.nzepc.auckland.ac.nz](http://www.nzepc.auckland.ac.nz) **New Zealand Electronic Poetry Centre**

Local poetry, features, audio and links to other poetry sites – this site is constantly being added to. You can listen to New Zealand poets reading their work.

[www.trout.auckland.ac.nz](http://www.trout.auckland.ac.nz) **Trout**

An online journal of arts and literature from New Zealand and the Pacific Islands.

<https://4thfloorjournal.co.nz> **4<sup>th</sup> Floor Literary Journal**

An online journal with poems and stories by Whitireia Polytechnic's creative writing students, current and past, and other new and established writers.

[www.poetryfoundation.org](http://www.poetryfoundation.org) **Poetry Foundation**

This American site has articles and news about poetry, teaching resources and events, audio and podcasts of poets reading their work and interviews with poets.

[www.poets.org](http://www.poets.org) **The Academy of American Poets**

American poets, their poems and (sometimes) their advice for new poets – this site is a rich resource for writers of all ages and interests.

[www.poetrysociety.org.uk](http://www.poetrysociety.org.uk) **The Poetry Society**

Writing tips, teaching and learning resources, events, competitions, publications and even the world's largest knitted poem. There's something for every poet here.

[www.thepoetrytrust.org](http://www.thepoetrytrust.org) **The Poetry Trust**

The Poetry Trust is one of the UK's flagship poetry organisations, delivering a year-round live and digital programme, creative education opportunities, courses, prizes and publications

[www.poetryarchive.org](http://www.poetryarchive.org) **The Poetry Archive**

A rich online collection of poets reading their own work, with special sections for teachers and students.

Find out more about the International Institute of Modern Letters and the courses we offer:

<http://www.wgtn.ac.nz/modernletters/>

Subscribe to the IIML newsletter for information about readings, book launches, competitions and more.

Email: [modernletter@vuw.ac.nz](mailto:modernletter@vuw.ac.nz) with 'Subscribe' in the subject line.

You can also follow us on [Twitter](#) or visit our [blog](#).

## Exercise One

*Poems are like dreams, in them you put what you don't know you know.*

Adrienne Rich

### Finding a poem

1. Write a memory of a grandparent or, if you didn't know your grandparents, use an older person that you've known. Don't write this as a poem; write it as a straightforward memory. Think of a specific moment (e.g. having a cup of tea, telling a story, making cheese on toast) rather than a broad outline of their life.

2. Now write a poem using only the words from that piece of writing. You can leave out any words you don't want to use. You can repeat words or lines. You just can't add any words that are not on the page.

You may want to write the poem in three or four line stanzas. If there is one line that you really like, you could try repeating that line at the beginning of each stanza.

Has the poem changed the meaning, ideas or feeling of the original piece of writing? It's quite interesting if it has - it shows you are moving away from 'what really happened' and into the slightly magic world of the poem. It sometimes happens that you can tell a more complex and powerful truth about someone or something by rearranging the 'facts'. Equally, your poem could end up being about something completely other than your grandparents. One way to mix things up a little more is to cut your poem up into separate lines or words and, by shuffling them around, build another poem. Many interesting and original poems have been created this way.

## Exercise Two

*Poets weren't always writers. Like musicians, they were originally performers as well who created invisible worlds out of sound.*

Dana Gioia

### Repetition

When something is repeated in a poem, the repetition opens possibilities for meaning and atmosphere. It could be that we want an idea or feeling to escalate in importance. It could be we want to create a sense of incantation or chant. Repetition creates a certain rhythm in a poem. It intensifies meaning and creates a sort of gathering of forces - a forward momentum. Sometimes when we repeat something over and over, its original meaning seems to disappear.

Look at 'Motion' by Octavio Paz. Write a poem in the style of 'Motion'. Use the 'If you are' 'I am' structure. Notice how he uses concrete details to evoke big imaginative pictures, places and ideas. One thing, or action, 'speaks' to the other e.g. 'If you are the water's mouth/ I am the mouth of moss' 'If you are the forest of the clouds/ I am the axe that parts it'. The connections he makes are not random – moss grows where there is water, forest and axe make sense together even if cloud and axe don't.

Have fun. Don't worry too much about getting things right in the first instance. Just write. Let your instincts take you where they want to. Then look at the poem. Do the question and answers link at all?

### Motion

If you are the amber mare  
    I am the road of blood  
If you are the first snow  
    I am he who lights the hearth of dawn  
If you are the tower of night  
    I am the spike burning in your mind  
If you are the morning tide  
    I am the first bird's cry  
If you are the basket of oranges  
    I am the knife of the sun  
If you are the stone altar  
    I am the sacrilegious hand  
If you are the sleeping land  
    I am the green cane  
If you are the wind's leap  
    I am the buried fire  
If you are the water's mouth  
    I am the mouth of moss  
If you are the forest of the clouds  
    I am the axe that parts it  
If you are the profaned city  
    I am the rain of consecration

If you are the yellow mountain  
    I am the red arms of lichen  
If you are the rising sun  
    I am the road of blood

"Motion/Movimiento" By Octavio Paz, Translated by Eliot Weinberger, from *Collected Poems* 1957-1987, copyright ©1986 by Octavio Paz and Eliot Weinberger. We found this poem at [nobelprize.org](https://www.nobelprize.org/awards/1982/octavio-paz).

You may also want to look at Billy Collins' poem 'Litany' which follows a similar structure to Paz's poem, but takes a humorous approach. [Find 'Litany' at poets.org](https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/litany-billy-collins).

### Exercise Three

*The poem is both the winding road and the wild horse that gallops past us as we read.*  
Andrew Johnston

#### Painting poem

For this exercise everyone needs a print of a famous painting. Art postcards work well.

Take a few minutes to look at the painting and then answer these questions about it. Each question should have a one or two line answer:

What is the first detail you notice?

What time of day is it and what does this mean?

What is the main colour(s)? What does it make you think of?

What do you hear in the picture? What does it sound like?

What is happening in the picture? And why?

There is a detail in the picture you haven't noticed till now. Write a line or two about it.

Write a line that follows from the last but including the word 'always'.

If the painter had moved a fraction to the right, what would also be included in the scene?

Bring someone (yourself?) into the poem in some way.

You have a maximum of five lines to finish the poem. In those five lines, try to repeat a word or phrase from somewhere near the beginning of the poem.

(This exercise is from Peter Sansom's book *Writing Poems*. *Writing Poems* is published by Bloodaxe Poetry Handbooks, 1995)

## Exercise Four

*Aim for the chopping block. If you aim for the wood, you will have nothing. Aim past the wood, aim through the wood; aim for the chopping block.*

Annie Dillard

## Ten minute spill

Write a ten-line poem. The poem must include a proverb, adage, or familiar phrase (e.g. a stitch in time saves nine or don't count your chickens before they hatch), but you need to change it in some way. Also, include five of the following words:

cliff	blackberry
needle	cloud
voice	mother
whir	lick

This is an exercise devised by the American poet, Rita Dove. She puts a final boundary on the poem – it has to be written in ten minutes! You may or may not want to pick up that particular challenge.

(This exercise is from *The Practice of Poetry*, edited by Robin Behn and Chase Twichell, HarperCollins, 1992)



## Exercise Five

*The voyage of discovery lies not in finding new landscapes, but in having new eyes.*

Marcel Proust

### Exercise for a group of students

1. Write a title at the top of your page – it has to be the name of something e.g. ‘The Vase’ or ‘A Giraffe’ or something that can be seen. Stick with an insect, animal or inanimate object. It doesn’t work so well with people.
2. Don’t let anyone see what you have written. Fold the top of the page over so the title you have written is hidden from view.
3. Pass the page to the person on your right. No one must look at the titles!
4. Now write five lines, each line describing the object in YOUR original title. Don’t use the name of your object in your description.

When everyone has finished their five lines, unfold the title, see what you have got. Read the pieces aloud.

Try it again, this time passing the page to the person on your left.

Some of you might find this exercise produces a whole poem, or it may only need a few tweaks. For others it may offer one fresh, original image that you could use as the start of a poem. In that case, try to keep the rest of the poem as fresh and original as the lines from the exercise.

## Exercise Six

*Everybody needs his memories. They keep the wolf of insignificance from the door.*

Saul Bellow

## Rhyming the Past

### 1950s

My cricket bat. My football boots.  
My fishing rod. My hula hoop.  
My cowboy chaps. My scooter.  
Draughts. Happy Families. Euchre.  
Ludo. Snap. My Davy Crockett hat.  
My bicycle. My bow and arrow.  
My puncture kit. My cat.  
The straight and narrow. Fancy that.

Snakes & Ladders. Alcoholics.  
Pick-Up Sticks. My comics.  
My periscope. My pirate sword.  
The ocean main. The Good Lord.  
My fort. My raft. My tunnel.  
My flippers. My togs. My snorkel.  
My magic wand. My colour-changing silks.  
My catapult. My kite. School milk.

My xylophone. My knucklebones.  
My boxing gloves. My ukelele.  
My bubblegum. My bongo drums.  
The Royal Tour. Aunt Daisy.  
My flat top. My crew cut.  
My pack of cards. My tree hut.  
My Hornby train. My autograph book.  
My secret code. My sideways look.

The Famous Five. The Secret Seven.  
Tarzan of the Apes. My idea of Heaven.  
The empty sky. Haere mai.  
My View-Master. Sticking plaster.  
My Go outside and play. My ANZAC Day.  
My tip-up truck. My saying fuck.  
My Did you not hear what I said.  
My Mr Potato Head. My Go to bed.

My Do you wanna bet.  
My chemistry set. My I forget.  
My clove hitch. My reef knot.  
My I forgot.  
Korea. Measles. Mumps. Down in the dumps.  
My Just William. Counting to a million.  
The Invercargill March. My false moustache.  
The King and I. Reach for the Sky.

My stamps from Spain and San Marino.  
The Winter Show. The Beano.  
Cinerama. Orange fizz.  
My toy soldiers. Suez.  
My pocket knife. Eternal Life.  
The Black Prince. My fingerprints.  
My plink-a-plunk. You dirty skunk.  
My plunk-a-plunk. Invisible ink.

Bill Manhire (from *The Victims of Lightning*, VUP 2010)

Nostalgia doesn't need all that many years before it puts in an appearance. A few months after '1950s' first appeared in the *Listener*, several high school teachers told me that they had used it with great success in the classroom. Apparently students loved the opportunity to list off all the items that had mattered to them a few years earlier. Even nine and ten-year-olds can be nostalgic.

More recently, a Year 5/6 teacher sent me a set of poems by her students. One sample:

Chocolate dips. Fish 'n' Chips.  
My trip to Bali. My chocolate Smarties.  
My guitar. My toy car.  
My crazy hair. My bandana.  
My cat Rata. My brother Manawa.

My soccer skills. My soccer ball.  
My new surfboard. My friends and all.  
Me leading the haka. My little brother.  
My number 10, and my colour red.  
My cosy house and my nice warm bed.

The rules for rhyming the past, as I extrapolate them, are:

1. The poem must be a memory list
2. It should include only (or mostly) *things*
3. The word ‘my’ should be there pretty often
4. The poem should rhyme – the more the better.

Because the mood will be comic and exuberant, if a little tinged with *saudade*, it means that rhyme – which is often so disastrous in the poems of new writers – can have its day.

The emphasis on *things* means that you are steered away from the more dangerous reefs of metaphor.

Likewise, feeling speaks through objects rather than through explicit statements about emotion.

With luck, the texts will be good performance pieces.

(This exercise by Bill Manhire was taken from *The Exercise Book*, edited by Bill Manhire, Ken Duncum, Chris Price and Damien Wilkins, Victoria University Press 2011. See page 13 for details.)

## Exercise Seven

### The Box

Write a poem in four stanzas of four lines each.

The poem should be about a box that you are familiar with, or is precious to you in some way. (N.B. I advise my students to refrain from writing about TVs or coffins in this exercise)

Stanza 1: Describe the box, focusing on its shape, colours, materials, smell and so on.

Stanza 2: Describe where the box is.

Stanza 3: Describe what is in the box.

Stanza 4: Describe what the box means to you, or what you get out of it.

This exercise comes courtesy of Cliff Fell. He says ‘I learned [it] from an English poet Jacqui Brown, the poet who taught it to me (in England, in 1993) as a poem-writing template. Jacqui said she’s learned the exercise from another English poet, Kit Wright.’

## Exercise Eight

### Gates

In Gabrielle Zevin's novel, *Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow*, there is a scene in which (no spoilers) a central character is walking through a series of gates approaching a Japanese temple.

As they pass through the gates, they have a vision that each gate represents a pivotal or significant event or decision in their life. When they walk in the space between the gates, they reflect on the time in their life that came after the events or decisions. They walk on for a bit, and they inevitably come to another gate. They see the gate as a symbol of leaving one space and entering another. That life is walking through a series of these gates, always arriving somewhere new.

This is something a poem can do, I think. We enter the poem like a gate, a space where we pause and consider, we look closer, and we walk forward in a state of between-ness. Life and reflection plays out, and at the end the poem may have changed us (even just a fraction). It gets at the magic of it, for me. A poem can act like a gate through which we arrive somewhere new.

For this exercise, think of 3-5 significant points in your life, note them down in chronological order. They don't have to be huge events, just things that stick in your mind or rise to the surface without thinking too hard. Write a poem in as many parts, in which each section builds out of or speaks to the event ('gate') before. Each section can be the length you feel it needs to be, or try making each section 10 lines.

An example:

Gate 1: my family moved house

(Write ten lines)

Gate 2: I fell out of a tall tree and broke my leg

(Write ten lines)

Gate 3: I took part in a climate change awareness march

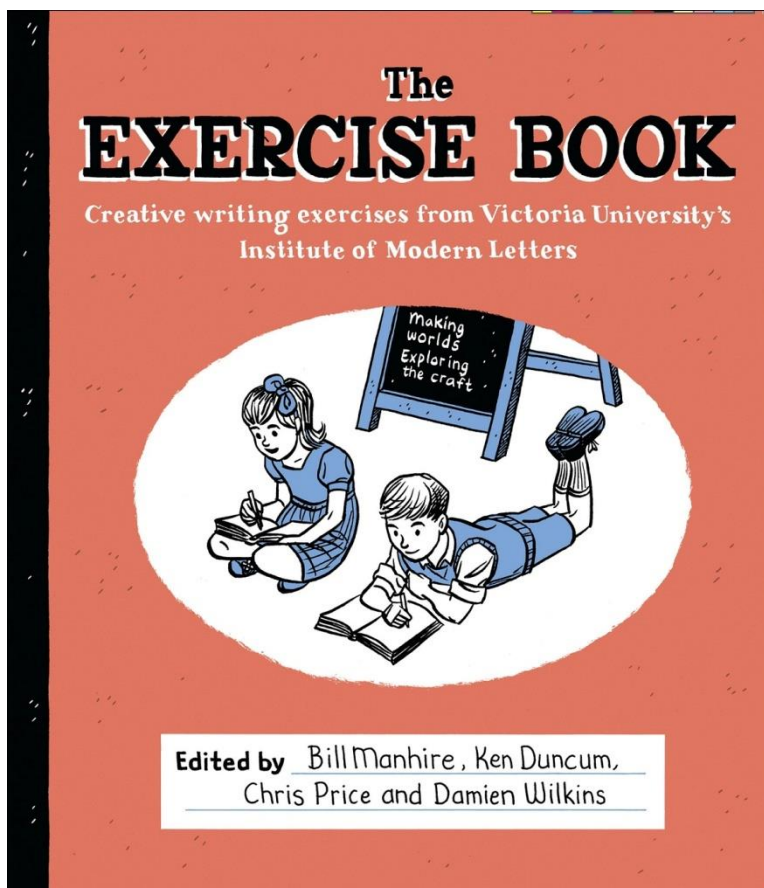
(Write ten lines)

Remove the 'gates' from the poem and see how the poem speaks to itself as a whole. You might like to play with the poem to give it more internal sense (chop it up, give it a harsh edit, or write into it further), or perhaps it will remain in parts with a typographical marker to stand in for the gates. It's up to you and the poem!

— Morgan Bach

*Note: New Zealand poet Kate Camp does something a little bit like this exercise in her poem 'Then' (published in Realia, Victoria University 2001). Her poem changes the order of the parts so they aren't strictly chronological.*

## THE EXERCISE BOOK



In 2011 Victoria University Press published *The Exercise Book: Creative writing exercises from Victoria University's Institute of Modern Letters*. The book is full of exercises – in poetry, in fiction and scriptwriting – designed to get the word-work going.

We have posted some of the exercises from the book on our blog:

<http://modernlettuce.wordpress.com/>

Among them are poetry ideas from:

- [Bill Manhire](#)
- [Chris Price](#)
- [James Brown](#) and
- [Aleksandra Lane](#)

We plan to post more exercises on the blog in future, so check in from time to time. Or go the whole hog, and [get the book](#).

Finally, here's a poem about eating poetry ...

### **Eating Poetry**

by Mark Strand

Ink runs from the corners of my mouth.  
There is no happiness like mine.  
I have been eating poetry.

The librarian does not believe what she sees.  
Her eyes are sad  
and she walks with her hands in her dress.

The poems are gone.  
The light is dim.  
The dogs are on the basement stairs and coming up.

Their eyeballs roll,  
their blond legs burn like brush.  
The poor librarian begins to stamp her feet and weep.

She does not understand.  
When I get on my knees and lick her hand,  
she screams.

I am a new man.  
I snarl at her and bark.  
I romp with joy in the bookish dark.

(We found this poem at [poets.org](http://poets.org).)