



Do you think poetry is all “roses are red, violets are blue”? Think again. Novel Novice Poetry is on a mission to expose you to verse that goes far beyond what’s found in textbooks, greeting cards, and pastel-colored book compilations.

From the modern poets to the mystics, the ancients to the romantics, the laureates to those who rest on their laurels, we’ll cover the gamut here. The goal? To help you see that poetry is anything but a bunch of end rhymes ... and to encourage you to find new appreciation in this beautiful art form.

Along the way we’ll feature:

- [Featured Poets](#)
- [Featured Poems](#)
- [Poetry Collections and Themes](#)
- [Form and Function](#)
- [Creative Writing Prompts](#)

Let’s discover if there’s a budding poet within you.

Let’s play with words.



### Lemon’s Sweet and Sour

I have a thing for small books that are all cute and different and feel good and fit snugly in any size bag I carry. Now, full disclosure, I often discriminate against books for their covers as much as I allow them to influence me in a positive way. I am not the kind of woman who buys a book with a rigor mortis insect on the cover. I just don’t. It’s gross. Nuff said.

But unexpectedly small size or not, dead bug or not, *Mosquito* fell into my hands last summer and hasn’t been far from my side since.

I am so proud of myself when I come across a heretofore unknown poet. I love discovering unexpected imagery to make me rethink my own writing, I even love ~~hate~~ reading enviable lines that make me want to manipulate words as dexterously as **Alex Lemon**.



Lemon. Even his name is wordplay.

After reading a mere stanza or two of Alex Lemon's first collection *Mosquito*, the book quickly became the title I do not shelve but rather leave out for regular reading and admiring. Just one small reason why:

When I say *hello*, it means bite my heart.  
Let the blackfly spin invisible & delirious

on vinyl. Let it save me from what I can't  
know. Send posthumous letters in neon,

scribble love unreadable.

(from "Corpus," featured in *Mosquito*, by Alex Lemon, ©2006)

Lemon's second collection is *Hallelujah Blackout* and, like the first collection, it delves erotically, lyrically, masterfully into the trippy comings and goings of this former brain surgery patient

He has taken the easily mundane and often overwrought subjects of illness and recovery and made them explosive. I have much love for the poet who can make a hospital stay memorable through words and not just because of his descriptions of the stench of disinfectant, the slice of the scalpel, the chorus of pumping machines.

This isn't *Grey's Anatomy*. This is a magician who has taken common words like *flesh*, *blood*, *brain*, *surgery*, and *pain* and developed them into a new vocabulary for the poet.

I anxiously await Lemon's memoir *Happy*, due out this month. And I just discovered that he has another forthcoming poetry collection – *Fancy Beasts*. The Amazon summary of this book bums me out a little because the subject matter seems to be moving away from Lemon's illness-related writing. But I'll give it a shot. The guy hasn't let me down yet.

**Further reading:** Check out [his website](#).

**Get the book:** All of 'em, but especially *Mosquito*.

*Whether you're a reader or you're a writer too, is there one specific topic – for Lemon, it's illness – that you find yourself seeking out or writing about over and over again?*





## Leave It to Vanna White

In my MFA program, we once had a long and drawn out class discussion about the font that was used in poet **Lynn Emanuel**'s collection ***Then, Suddenly***. The offending character that began this argument? The question mark.

The font style used to typeset her book employed a question mark that was especially curly. Fat on the bottom and skinny on the top. I loved it. Adored it. Wanted to hug it and squeeze it and call it George. My fellow poets? It distracted them. Infuriated them. What's the deal with the upside-down-looking piece of punctuation they wanted to know.

Not surprisingly, that argument ended in a stalemate and a stance of agreeing to disagree.

What's the point you may wonder?

Well, while a discussion about punctuation may seem silly, it's actually very important. Covers make books. Fonts make books. And there are also elements that make poems... or break them, as the case may be.

For me, personally I find **the ampersand** confusing, sometimes offensive, and always an interruption.

An ampersand, for those unfamiliar, is this symbol:

**&**

It stands for "and" and is conveniently found on your keyboard above the number 7.

And that location, as far as poetry is concerned, is where it should stay.

Every poet's got a gimmick, whether they're aware of it or not. For some (like e.e. cummings) it's the lowercase letters. For others, they refuse to title their poems. And still more poets are having a love affair with the loud and complicated ampersand.

But I dislike the interruption of the ampersand. It's obnoxious and jarring. Because, inevitably, every time I come across one, I can no longer just read and enjoy the poem. I am forced to sit back and wonder, "Why is this poet using the ampersand instead of the word 'and'? What message are they trying to send?"

Plus, it's lazy. Just type out the word "and" for pete's sake.

*Please chime in. The ampersand – does it have merit in poetry or not?*



## Poetic License

In the introduction to *Poems of Paul Celan*, the translator Michael Hamburger writes:

Many of these persons may have no existence or significance outside the poem. It is the poem that creates them or discovers them.

My happy interpretation of that? You can make stuff up if you want to. **Poetic license.**

Create new words. Use wonky spellings. Cross out entire phrases. Develop a brand new form.

The great thing about poetry is that you can forget about grammar, punctuation, and all the rules they made you learn in seventh-grade English while diagramming sentences. Poetry is the place where rules are bent, broken, and tossed out the window. (This is an occupational hazard... sometimes you can get so carried away forgetting the rules that when you need 'em it's tough to pull them out of the cobwebby corners of your mind!)

This isn't to say that punctuation doesn't matter – it certainly does (see my diatribe on the [ampersand](#)). That omission of a comma, it's a big deal. That proper noun that isn't capitalized... it's significant. (Think about it: God or god... mother or Mother. Each word has a different weight.)

Poetic license means that you can let go of all that's "expected" of a "typical" poet. But it also means that you're taking on a bigger challenge – to use language very deliberately to get your message across, to use as few words as possible to evoke an image or feeling.

**Frank O'Hara** was a great poet who made up words at his leisure or used unexpected adjectives to describe something ("the sky was a thumb"). Ann Lauterbach makes great use of **free verse** in her collection *Hum*, alternating her form between short and long lines.

The point is, for as many poets as there are who follow the rules, use **iambic pentameter**, attempt **syllabics**, write proper **sonnets** (and bravo to you), there are just as many fantastic poets who make their own rules. And their poetry is all the better for it. I think just knowing that the rules are there to be broken makes it that much easier for people to pick up a pen or sit down at the computer and start typing. Very careful academic verse has its merit, but you're not married to it – write for the sake of writing, for getting something down on paper.

*What kind of poetic license have you taken?*



## Write a Love Poem

Everyone has someone or something to love, whether it's your boyfriend or girlfriend, your best friend, your mom or dad, your dog, the teddy bear you sleep with every night, or your favorite slice from the local pizza shop.

This creative writing prompt is about **writing a love poem**.

Now, plenty of people hear the words "love poem" and start thinking of roses and violets and hearts and flowers. But love poetry can be anything and everything but the cliches. In fact, I hope that's how you'll choose to see it in this exercise.

The idea is to not try and capture the feeling of love as a whole. Love can be impossible to define. What will create a bigger impact, and enable you to target your poem's driving force, is to choose one day or one experience or one moment and describe it lovingly in your own voice. Maybe your love is very sarcastic, perhaps you express love casually or in text message language ([poetic license](#), rmb?). Be authentic, be true to yourself. Don't try to mimic how someone else expresses love.

With all this in mind...

- Choose one person or thing you love and write a love poem about them that is at least 10 lines long.
- You can even choose to write your love poem *to* someone, like a love letter poem.
- Write the poem without stopping or thinking very hard about it. Don't try to nail it on the first try. (Get a refresher on [revision](#).)
- Avoid using the following words: heart, love, tear, joy, Valentine, devotion.
- Sharpen your imagery: what colors, sounds, sights, shapes, and textures represent the words you're being asked to omit in the preceding bullet point? Draw a picture for someone through words instead of just using a common word.

*Do you have a favorite love poem?*



## Epigraph, Not Epitaph

Most poets make use of **epigraphs** in their poems from time to time. An epigraph is the quotation that comes after the poem title before the verse begins, or it's the quote you may see at the beginning of a chapter or section of a book.

Two things to remember: 1) An epigraph sets the theme for what is to follow; 2) do not confuse an epigraph with an epitaph which is the inscription on a tomb or gravestone. (Though no one ever said that an epitaph couldn't be used as an epigraph!)

A quick look through a handful of poetry books on my shelves produced some of the following epigraphs:

the heat, the stench of things, the unutterable boredom of it all..." ~H.D., *Notes on Thought and Vision* (epigraph of the poem "Her Island" in Rita Dove's collection *Mother Love*)

Here I comes." ~Ann Lauterbach (epigraph of the poem "Dressing the Parts" in Lynn Emanuel's collection *Then, Suddenly*)

Here then, faintly discolored and liable to come apart if you touch it, is the corsage that I kept from the dance." ~James Salter (epigraph at the start of the collection *Shroud of the Gnome* by James Tate)

John and Mary had never met. They were like two hummingbirds who also had never met."  
~From a freshman's short story (epigraph of the poem "John & Mary" in Stephen Dunn's collection *Different Hours*)

And, for those of you who adore the *Twilight Saga*, you'll recall that Stephenie Meyer's epigraph of choice in *Eclipse* was the poem "Fire and Ice" by Robert Frost. Very telling, eh? An epigraph sets the stage – whether obviously or very obscurely – for the poem it precedes. They are incredibly fun to use and helpful for keeping the writer on track in their ultimate message.

So for this creative writing prompt:

- Choose one of your favorite quotes – whether it's a line from a song, a poem, a novel, a movie, a newspaper article, or the silly refrain that your best friend says at least five times a day.
- Use that quote as an epigraph that gets you started on a new poem.
- Write at least 15 lines.
- Avoid end rhyme.
- Set the poem aside for a day or two and then go back and reread and revise.

Listen to people, let the words of others reach you. Use life and experience and reading to influence and enhance the writing you do for yourself.

*What's one of your favorite quotes?*



### **Creative Writing Weekend**

This has been a poetry-infused week for me. I'm hoping to continue that momentum this weekend and plan on writing and revising until I have at least five solid final drafts of poems. So I thought I'd invite you to do the same.

Novel Novice will have a new creative writing prompt for you, starting with the one below, and continuing through Sunday. (Maybe even more than three prompts, if I'm feeling especially inspired!)

Let yourself go. Write away. Use your computer. Use pen and paper. Use crayon and construction paper. Use tracing paper and colored pencils. Mix up your mediums and your writing locations. Don't think about what others may say about what you're writing – write for yourself. Worry about your audience later.

### **Creative Writing Weekend – Prompt #1**

Take an already written work and insert at random, or very deliberately, a paragraph or section from another text. It could be a health textbook, an Anthropologie catalog, the sports section of today's newspaper, an email from your best friend (or worst enemy). After you've mingled the new language into your poem, study the possibilities for rewriting.

A little extra inspiration from Robert Frost himself:

*I never write except with a writing board. I've never had a table in my life. And I use all sorts of things. Write on the sole of my shoe.*

Have at it, you talented writers!