

Workshop Syllabus: The Great, Big, All-Inclusive Critique Workshop
(Long Version)

Description/Goal: A lot of folks who don't offer critique (who aren't doing so for selfish reasons) don't offer suggestions because they don't feel qualified. I've seen it in countless comments on forums and in real-world workshops. They don't have the terminology, the technical skills, the poetic know-how, or the formal education overall.

This workshop is intended to serve the needs of readers and writers who want a more formal foundation for suggesting revisions and giving writing advice.

Objectives:

By following my critique blogs and some additional scholarship, together we will explore different writing concerns for poetry. These writing concerns include content, flow, word efficiency, imagery, literary devices, syntax, and more. During this workshop we will learn how to identify, analyze, and discuss these features of writing for the benefit of our own poetry and the poetry of others.

This is not a workshop for poets to workshop any of their own writing; it is an in-depth introduction to critique where we will explore "anonymous" poetry.

Level of expertise: Open to all

Subject matter: Critique and Understanding Writing Concerns

- Workshop page:
<https://www.neopoet.com/workshop/great-big-all-inclusive-critique-workshop>
- Need to know how to print out the workshop documents or how to print out any of the linked articles or resources? Just ask!

Introduction

The terminology for writing concerns differs depending on the type of writing, but composition scholars and educators often create hierarchies of the concerns that are pertinent to their type of writing. These hierarchies help teach students what concerns to dedicate the most time to and helps writers overall remain focused on the bigger picture during writing and revision.

Here are some examples of hierarchies for essay writing:

<https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/690/1/> and

<https://www.umkc.edu/writingstudio/Documents/Hierarchy%20of%20Concerns%20black%20and%20white.pdf>

In the Purdue University version, the concerns are described as higher or lower order; in the Uni of Missouri at Kansas City graphic, an inverted triangle is used to show what is top priority and what is lowest.

For both, thesis, focus, structure (organization), audience or meeting assignment goals are some of the highest concerns. Word choice and spelling are some of the lowest concerns for both. Why is that? Because dictionaries and automatic spell checkers can go far and in a long piece of non-fiction prose like an essay, a few typos are much less critical to the overall understanding of the piece than a clear focus and well-defined topic.

We can fit poetic writing concerns into a hierarchy just like these, but the order of our concerns will be different. For the poet, every single word should be very important. Also, we aren't writing poetry for assignments, for the most part, and we may not have an intended audience. In free verse structure may hold little concern, but for haiku and sonnets structure is a top priority.

Nonetheless, we will dedicate (hopefully) equal time to understanding each concern. We need to understand the concerns first, then we can decide how to prioritize them.

During each section of the workshop, we will first spend time discussing and learning about the writing concerns, then with the tools at our disposal we will apply our learning to a poem.

If you are new to analyzing or critiquing poetry all together, you may want to check out some of the following resources:

- <https://www.neopoet.com/swamp-witch/blog/tue-2018-01-02-1454>
- <https://www.neopoet.com/swamp-witch/blog/sat-2018-01-27-1744>
- <https://thewritepractice.com/three-easy-steps-to-critique-a-friends-poem/>
- <http://www.writing-world.com/poetry/crit.shtml>
- <https://poeticlinesense.wordpress.com/2009/06/11/how-to-critique-poetry/>
- <https://www.vaniercollege.qc.ca/tlc/tipsheets/reading-and-analyzing/how-to-analyze-a-poem.pdf>
- https://www.mgccc.edu/learning_lab/writing/poetry/poetry.html
- <https://writingcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/poetry-explications/>

Before We Begin: On "Errors"

I will preface this work by saying that critiquing, giving feedback, constructive criticism, whatever we call **it is not about tallying errors**. This is true in poetry and any other form of writing. Writing and composition scholars are still debating this stance since it became prominent in the 1980s. However, since completing my Master's degree I have fully adopted the stance that writing is not about correctness, properness, or that the best writing has the least amount or least frequency of "errors".

If you would like to read more about the academic discourse behind this pedagogy:

The most effective academic writing clearly presents the stance of the essay and contributes to the field's discourse in whatever form the writer deems important for their purpose and audience. In poetry, the most effective poem moves the reader, paints a picture, or tells a story in whatever form the poet deems important for their purpose (and perhaps audience).

Different forms, different dialects, etc., are just that: different, not correct or incorrect. To learn more about this topic, see [David Bartholomae's "Inventing the University" and "The Study of Errors"](#), see the essays in the section "Bad Ideas About Style, Usage, and Grammar" from [Ball and Loewe's *Bad Ideas about Writing*](#), see ["It's not bad grammar" by John E. McIntyre](#), see ["College Writing Center: Proper Grammar Perpetuates 'racist,' 'unjust language structure'" by Douglas Ernest](#) and see Henry Louis Gate Jr.'s ["Talking Black: Critical Signs of the Times"](#).

If you have to choose any one of those to peruse, I recommend *Bad Ideas about Writing*. Tyler Branson's "First-Year Writing Prepares Students for Academic Writing" gives a good overview of the turn away from tallying errors and the history of tallying errors in writing education:

"...more and more men and women started attending college [in the 1800s]. At the time, first-year writing instructors decided that the best way to provide this new influx of middle-class professionals with the tools to succeed in written communication was to focus on correctness and efficiency. Writing instruction back then taught that good writing was correct writing, and that you can measure good writing by counting errors.

However, people in the field of composition have come to learn a lot about how writing works ... researchers have known since the 1970s that teaching grammar and mechanics does not improve student writing. Andrea Lunsford and Karen Lunsford even recreated a famous study of errors in Freshman Composition essays and found that "the rate of student error is not increasing precipitously but, in fact, has stayed stable for nearly 100 years." What they mean is that errors in writing are a fact of life. As writing teachers, the idea that errors are a fact of life has been quite helpful because it has allowed them to prioritize higher order issues in writing ... Writing isn't a set of formulas that you plug in to get different kinds of texts. Writing is a process of brainstorming, composing, revising, having your work read by others, and then revising again. This is a complex, in-depth process that goes way beyond correctness." (page 18-19)

The discourse (as briefly described by the above links and excerpt) basically all boils down to the western world's history of using "proper" grammar, speech, and reading/writing ability to exclude people from education, from voting, and from their human rights if they could not read/write/speak in "proper" English. This is not the legacy of writing that I want to contribute to or perpetuate.

Pointing out obvious typos or simple misspellings is different than judging the merit, correctness, properness, skill, or validity of a poem based on using slang, shorthand, profanity, dialect, or non-standard grammar. Similarly, the presence of typos or misspellings does not make a poem wrong or bad or necessarily poorly written. Presence of typos (or other things that the critic may want to suggest making changes to) does not make a poet less intelligent or less deserving of fair feedback and fair treatment.

Judging the *merit of a writer* by frequency of errors is still the standard in education. The stance that learning about writing is *not* about tallying errors and then fixing them is still a controversial subject. The stance that there is *no such thing* as a good or bad writer, that everyone can develop their writing skills, is still controversial. But this workshop will operate with the beliefs that anyone can be a writer and everyone, no matter how they write or talk or read, deserves a fair chance as a poet.

In this workshop, we will never judge the merit of the poem or poet based on this complicated issue. We will only suggest changes that make sense for the poem and poet's intentions.

Remember: Knowledge of more or less spelling, vocabulary, grammar, literary devices, or other writing concerns does not determine the value of the poet or the value of the critic. We all have something to learn and something we can contribute to each other, no matter our prior knowledge or differing experiences. It is our differences that will enrich our workshop and our community as a whole.

Part One: Syntax

So, we will start by learning some of the terminology and skills needed to critique syntax. Please start by reading the section on syntax (**last section**) in my blog post here: <https://www.neopoet.com/swamp-witch/blog/wed-2018-06-06-1306>

After reading this part of the blog, please ask any questions you may have before we proceed. We will continue discussion in the comments.

Syntax Terminology

Note: I am using syntax as a catch-all term for mechanics, word choice (diction), grammar, and sentence structure in a poem. Sometimes the term syntax is not used this way. Syntax Definition: <https://literarydevices.net/syntax/>

For critiquing syntax, the reader may address grammar, spelling, punctuation, mechanics, word choice, and sentence structure (or maybe “thought structure” if the poem doesn’t use complete sentences). The pertinent “Review Request” on Neopoet’s poem submission page is “How was my language use?” In terms of those hierarchies of concerns that we talked about before, in writing essays these are considered lower order concerns. Nonetheless, for the poet, with our limited writing space and sometimes restrictive forms, every word is important so syntax becomes a higher order concern. *Critiquing syntax should include more than proofreading/spell-checking.*

How to critique syntax:

1. The first step should also be to read the poem multiple times.
2. As you read, you can take written or mental notes about what you notice (having these notes in writing is often called annotation and you can learn a bit about it in my video here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hv8wlu9IY4&t=34s> or here:

<http://davidrickert.com/2015/09/18/dont-hate-annotate-how-to-really-annot>

[ate-a-poem/](#) or here:

http://www.mcguiremarks.com/uploads/3/9/7/9/39793909/annotating_poetry.pdf)

3. Then ask yourself about what you were noticing. Did it seem like a typo? Was there some unexpected capitalization or punctuation or line breaks (and was it unexpected in a good way or a confusing way)? Does the verb tense of the poem change, if so, is it consistent (such as a flashback or hope for the future) or not? Were thoughts incomplete (keep in mind that a poem may consist of many brief phrases that make up one complete thought, or every line could be a complete thought, or any other combination)? Were there any grammatical "errors"?
4. If you answered yes to any of these questions, try to determine if they were purposeful or not. Do they create meaning in the poem (such as through the invention of new words)? Do they represent the narrator or persona of the poem, such as through dialog or internal monologue? Or do they make the poem more difficult to read or understand? Do they make the reader stumble or confuse the reader? Or do they entice the reader to want to know more?
5. Whether these syntax concerns were purposeful or not should shape your critique. If you are unsure, just ask the poet. If it is unclear whether or not the choices were purposeful is just as much a part of the critique as actually talking about the syntax concerns themselves.

Some sample phrases for critiquing syntax:

- These words _____ made me stumble because _____.
- You have a typo _____ on line _____.
- The use of punctuation _____ on line _____ seemed useful/interesting or unnecessary/out of place to me because _____.
- Did you mean to spell _____ as _____?
- I think the syntax/spelling/word choice/etc. in this poem could be made clearer/more memorable/etc. by _____.
- The poem seems wordy or needing more words to me because _____.
- The poem is clear or unclear to me because _____.

- The mechanics of this poem could be polished by _____.
- This thought does not seem complete because ____ (there is not a clear subject/action or the thought trails off without concluding).

If you need to learn more about syntax before proceeding, check out the following resources:

- <https://www.neopoet.com/swamp-witch/blog/tue-2018-06-05-1327>
- <http://grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/index2.htm>
- <https://www.time4writing.com/writing-mechanics/>
- <http://www.write.com/writing-guides/general-writing/mechanics/>
- <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/grammar>

Please ask any questions you have about syntax before we critique a sample poem.

Sample Poem for Syntax Critique

I am using existing poems from well-known poets for our samples. I would prefer if you refrain from looking up the poet/poem if you don't know it (or look at it with fresh eyes if you do know it). I would like the poems to be anonymous and I do not want who the poet is to influence the critique. Critique the poem, don't comment on the poet.

For this poem, focus on syntax only: word choice, spelling, spacing, punctuation, capitalization, grammar.

Don't comment on imagery, rhyme, meter, literary devices, content, theme or other features of the poem.

Also, don't make judgements about the merit of the syntax, just identify what stands out to you about the syntax and state why. Identify both what you like about the syntax and what you think could be different about the syntax (not necessarily better or improved, just different). When mentioning what could be different, try to keep in mind that the poet will likely want to maintain the existing meaning so try to make suggestions that don't heavily alter meaning or bigger picture (if the meaning and bigger picture are already clear).

After we have all critiqued, we will talk about the "why". Why things stand out, why they could be different, and how and why making them different affects the poem, the poet, and the reader.

anyone lived in a pretty how town
(with up so floating many bells down)
spring summer autumn winter
he sang his didn't he danced his did.

Women and men (both little and small)
cared for anyone not at all
they sowed their isn't they reaped their same
sun moon stars rain

children guessed (but only a few
and down they forgot as up they grew
autumn winter spring summer)
that noone loved him more by more

when by now and tree by leaf
she laughed his joy she cried his grief
bird by snow and stir by still
anyone's any was all to her

someones married their everyones
laughed their cryings and did their dance
(sleep wake hope and then)they
said their nevers they slept their dream

stars rain sun moon
(and only the snow can begin to explain
how children are apt to forget to remember
with up so floating many bells down)

one day anyone died i guess
(and noone stooped to kiss his face)
busy folk buried them side by side

little by little and was by was

all by all and deep by deep
and more by more they dream their sleep
noone and anyone earth by april
with by spirit and if by yes.

Women and men (both dong and ding)
summer autumn winter spring
reaped their sowing and went their came
sun moon stars rain

So, we've read and critiqued the poem. What happens now?

What if you didn't notice anything? What if you read it multiple times, followed all the steps, and read as many of the linked resources as you could stand, and still, nothing stood out to you? What if things did stand out, but you still don't know how to transform that noticing into a critique or feedback the poet can use? **What if you just don't know what to say?**

If you are stuck at this stage, have a look at my sample annotations (a sample of the first two stanzas) and sample critique to help you get an idea of where to begin. I'll explain in detail why these stood out to me.

Sample Annotated Version

	Poem Line	Annotation
1	anyone lived in a pretty how town	anyone sounds odd here, used to hearing someone/everyone, what's a "how town"?
2	(with up so floating many bells down)	[these words seem out of order, but maybe on purpose, does the parenthesis represent an afterthought or an aside to the reader?]
3	spring summer autumn winter	
4	he sang his didn't he danced his did.	["his didn't"? Not sure about that yet, why a period at the end, but no periods or other punctuation between "he sang" and "his" and between "he danced" and "his"]
5	Women and men (both little and small)	[the only capital letter in the poem is the "W" of women, is that to send a message? Or random?]
6	cared for anyone not at all	["anyone not at all" is unexpected, expected "no one at all"]
7	they sowed their isn't they reaped their same	[not expecting "isn't" and "same" after a possessive pronoun (they) since these aren't objects to be possessed]
8	sun moon stars rain	

I have only annotated the first two stanzas because at that point, it became clear to me that these were purposeful choices. There were enough unusual syntax concerns that they didn't seem like accidents. What I'm still not sure of is if the poem is supposed to be nonsensical, abstract, whimsical, or something else. By the end of the poem, I didn't know what it meant or represented. I also didn't know what feelings it evoked in me.

Sample Critique (using the sample phrases suggested above)

- The words "(with up so floating many bells down)" on line 2 made me stumble because I didn't expect that word order. I expected "with so many bells floating down". This word order is very different from what we are used to reading and I wonder if it is supposed to evoke a topsy-turvy world.
- The use of the period, but no other punctuation on line 4 "he sang his didn't he danced his did" seemed out of place to me because I expect a pause between "he sang" and "his" and between "he danced" and "his", but then there is a period at the end that makes me stop, but why add a period if not the other punctuation for a smooth flow instead of the reader zooming through the line without stopping?
- I think the word choice in this poem is very experimental and meant to challenge the reader, but it is unclear to me. Am I supposed to understand this story? Is it even supposed to be a story? Is it supposed to be the image of a real place, made abstract, or is it an imagined place?
- If the poet decides they would like to make any changes, I would like to see the poem made more explicit about what it's about. Is there an intended message? Or is it just about the experience of unique images and words brought together for a moment of whimsy? Maybe a clear title, or a final stanza that wraps up the bigger picture of the poem would work to clarify the poem. Some of the experimental word choices, word order, or spelling might be toned down a little bit so that most imaginative and intriguing choices are kept, so they stand out more.
- For example, "how town" on line 1 could be changed to something less experimental so that readers get a clear idea of where we are in the opening

line. Confusing readers from line one could be turn readers away. Why not a magic town, a dreamland, a fairy court, another world, anything like that which will clearly tell the reader they can expect an unusual poem.

Further Reading on syntax, grammar, and mechanics:

- <https://penandthepad.com/interpret-poetry-mechanics-8665391.html>
- <https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/text/grammar-poets>
- <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/section/1/4/>
- <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/section/1/5/>
- <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/section/1/6/>
- <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2014/02/the-wrong-way-to-teach-grammar/284014/>
- <https://www.quickanddirtytips.com/grammar-girl>