

Extra Credit: Twenty Little Poetry Projects

This poetry assignment was created by Jim Simmerman, an English professor at Northern Arizona University. I first saw it in The Practice of Poetry by Robin Behn and Chase Twichell (119). Simmerman had this to say about the project "This has been far and away my best exercise--it is the most popular among the students, it's the most widely used...and, frankly, it has produced consistently good student poems, often the best ones written during the term...I designed it for beginning writers, {but} I find it also works for advanced students, particularly those suffering writer's block or hopelessly stuck in a single style. Indeed, I've since gone back to the exercise, as have published writer-friends, when I've felt blocked or stuck. It still works for me."

Please write or type your poem on non-lined paper. Pencil will not be accepted. Here are Simmerman's directions and his famous example: Open the poem with the first project, and close it with the last project. Otherwise, use the projects in whatever order you like, giving each project at last one line. Try to use all twenty projects. Feel free to repeat those you like. Fool around. Enjoy.

Twenty Little Poetry Projects
Jim Simmerman

1. Begin the poem with a metaphor.
2. Say something specific but utterly preposterous.
3. Use at least one image for each of the five senses, either in succession or scattered randomly throughout the poem.
4. Use one example of synesthesia (mixing the senses).
5. Use the proper name of a person and the proper name of a place.
6. Contradict something you said earlier in the poem.
7. Change direction or digress from the last thing you said.
8. Use a word (slang?) you've never seen in a poem.
9. Use an example of false cause-effect logic.
10. Use a piece of "talk" you've actually heard (preferably in dialect and/or which you do not understand).
11. Create a metaphor using the following construction: "The (adjective) (concrete noun) of (abstract noun) ..."
12. Use an image in such a way as to reverse its usual associative qualities.
13. Make the persona or character in the poem do something he/she could not do in "real life."
14. Refer to yourself by nickname and in the third person.
15. Write in the future tense, such that part of the poem seems to be a prediction.
16. Modify a noun with an unlikely adjective.
17. Make a declarative assertion that sounds convincing but finally makes no sense.
18. Use a phrase from a language other than English.
19. Make a nonhuman object do or say something human (personification).
20. Close the poem with a vivid image that makes no statement, but that "echoes" an image from earlier in the poem.

