

Creative Writing 1

Art of Poetry



Level HE4 – 40 CATS

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Venus of Poetry, Julio Romero de Torres, 1913

Contents

Before you start

Part one **Getting started**

The tools of the trade
Seeing the world anew
Assignment one

Part two **Reading and developing your ear**

To read or not to read?
Developing your ear
Assignment two

Part three **Poems: form and content**

Finding the form
Gathering and organising material
Assignment three

Part four **Language and construction**

The language of poetry
Drafting
Assignment four

Part five **Redrafting and editing**

Your final submission
Assignment five

Appendices

Glossary

Reading and resources

Before you start

Welcome to *Creative Writing 1: Art of Poetry*. Your OCA **Student handbook** should be able to answer most questions about this and all other OCA courses, so keep it to hand as you work through this course.

If you are new to OCA, make sure you work through OCA's free online induction course *An Introduction to HE* on www.oca-student.com before you start.

Course aims

The chief aim of *Creative Writing 1: Art of Poetry* is to help you write better poems.

- Develop your understanding of poetic techniques and traditions.
- Introduce the principles involved in drafting, editing, and presenting creative work and in responding to constructive suggestions/criticism.
- Develop your reflective skills.

Your tutor

Your tutor is your main point of contact with OCA. Before you start work, make sure that you're clear about your tuition arrangements. The OCA system is explained in some detail in your **Student handbook**.

If you haven't already done so, please write a paragraph or two about your experience to date. Add background information about anything that you think may be relevant for your tutor to know about you (your profile) – for example your experience of writing so far, your reasons for starting this course and what you hope to achieve from it.

Email or post your profile to your tutor as soon as possible. This will help them to understand how best to support you during the course.

Arrange with your tutor how you'll deal with any queries that arise between assignments. This will usually be by email or phone.

It will be helpful for your tutor to see some of the work that you produce in between assignments. It's particularly important that your tutor sees regular evidence of your development if you're planning to have your work on this course formally assessed.

Make sure that you label any work that you send to your tutor with your name, student number and the assignment number. Your tutor will get back to you as soon as possible after receiving your assignment but this may take a little time. Continue with the course while you're waiting.

Formal assessment

Read the section on assessment in your **Creative Writing Student Guide** at an early stage in the course. Your **Assessment and how to get qualified** study guide gives more detailed information about assessment and accreditation. For assessment you'll need to submit a cross-section of the work you've done on the course:

- the three course assignments of your choice selected from assignments two to five
- your reflective commentary on the course as a whole (1,000 – 1,500 words)
- your tutor report forms.

Your writing diary

Your writing diary is an integral part of this and every other OCA course. If you're new to OCA courses, read your **Creative writing student guide** for further information.

Use your writing diary to record your progress through the course. Your writing diary should contain:

- your preliminary drafts
- your thoughts on the work you produce for each exercise
- your ideas and observations as you work through the course
- your reflections on the reading you do and any research you carry out
- your tutor's reports on assignments and your reactions to these.

If you wish, you can post your writing diary as an online blog.

Keep a notebook to record observations, phrases, potential subject matter – anything to stop the germ of a poem from getting lost. You may also find it useful to keep a commonplace book to store all the visual or written material that catches your interest and which might be useful or excite your imagination.

Planning ahead

This Level 1 course represents 400 hours of learning time. Allow around 20% of this time for reflection and writing diary development. The course should take about a year to complete if you spend around 8 hours each week on it.

As with all OCA courses, these course materials are intended to be used flexibly but keep your tutor fully informed about your progress. You'll need to allow extra time if you decide to have your work formally assessed.

Creative Writing 1: Art of Poetry is divided into five parts. Each part of the course addresses a different issue or topic. As well as information and advice, each project offers exercises to encourage writing. The exercises slowly build up and feed into the assignments that you'll send to your tutor.

The anthology, *Staying Alive*, provides a great range of modern poetry and is invaluable for 'dipping into' as well as closer study. Each part has suggestions of poems to consider and ways of thinking about them.

To start with, your assignments will consist of about six poems of not more than 20 lines each. (Your tutor may encourage you to submit longer pieces later in the course.) You'll be expected to redraft one or two of your poems in the light of your tutor's comments and submit them along with new work in the next assignment. This redrafting is a crucial part of the whole writing process.

Along with the poems, you'll send a short commentary (around 500 words) on the writing process, so that your tutor can learn more about the thinking that has gone into each poem and be helped to know what advice to give. There are no set rules about what should go into your commentary, but you may wish to consider the following:

- how you set about the exercises and how useful you found them
- your choice of subject matter
- how you tackled the drafting process and how each poem changed in the drafting
- how far the finished pieces measure up to your expectations and where they fall short
- guidance you might need in further redrafting and development.

The first assignment is a diagnostic assignment that will allow your tutor to get a feel for your writing and help them to decide how best to support you.

Managing your time

Each part of the course should take about 80 hours to complete. You'll need to decide how to divide this time in a way that works effectively for you.

The time you spend on each part of the course will depend on how quickly you work, the time available to you, how easy or hard you find each exercise, and how quickly you want to complete the course. Don't worry if you take more or less time than suggested provided that you're not getting too bogged down in a particular part of the course and that your tutor is happy with the work you're producing. If it helps, draft a rough study plan and revisit this at the end of each part. The course structure is intended to be flexible, but it's always useful to bear deadlines in mind.

Reading

A reading list for the course is available at the end of this course guide and on the OCA website.

Referencing your reading

Whenever you read something that you might want to refer to in your projects and assignments, get into the habit of taking down the full reference to the book, article or website straight away. You must fully reference any other work that you draw on if you plan to go for formal assessment. To do this you should use the *Harvard system of referencing* – see the **Harvard referencing system** study guide on the OCA website. Getting down the full reference at the time will save you the frustration of having to hunt for the details of a half-remembered reference long after the event. Referencing other people's work accurately will also help you avoid unintentional plagiarism.

Assessment criteria

Here are the assessment criteria for this course. These are central to the assessment process for this course, so if you are going to have your work assessed to gain formal credits, please make sure you take note of these criteria and consider how each of the assignments you complete demonstrates evidence of each criterion. On completion of each assignment, and before you send your assignment to your tutor, test yourself against the criteria - in other words - do a self assessment, and see how you think you would do. Notes down your findings of each assignment you've completed in your writing diary, noting all your perceived strengths and weaknesses, taking into account the criteria every step of the way. This will be helpful for your tutor to see, as well as helping you prepare for assessment.

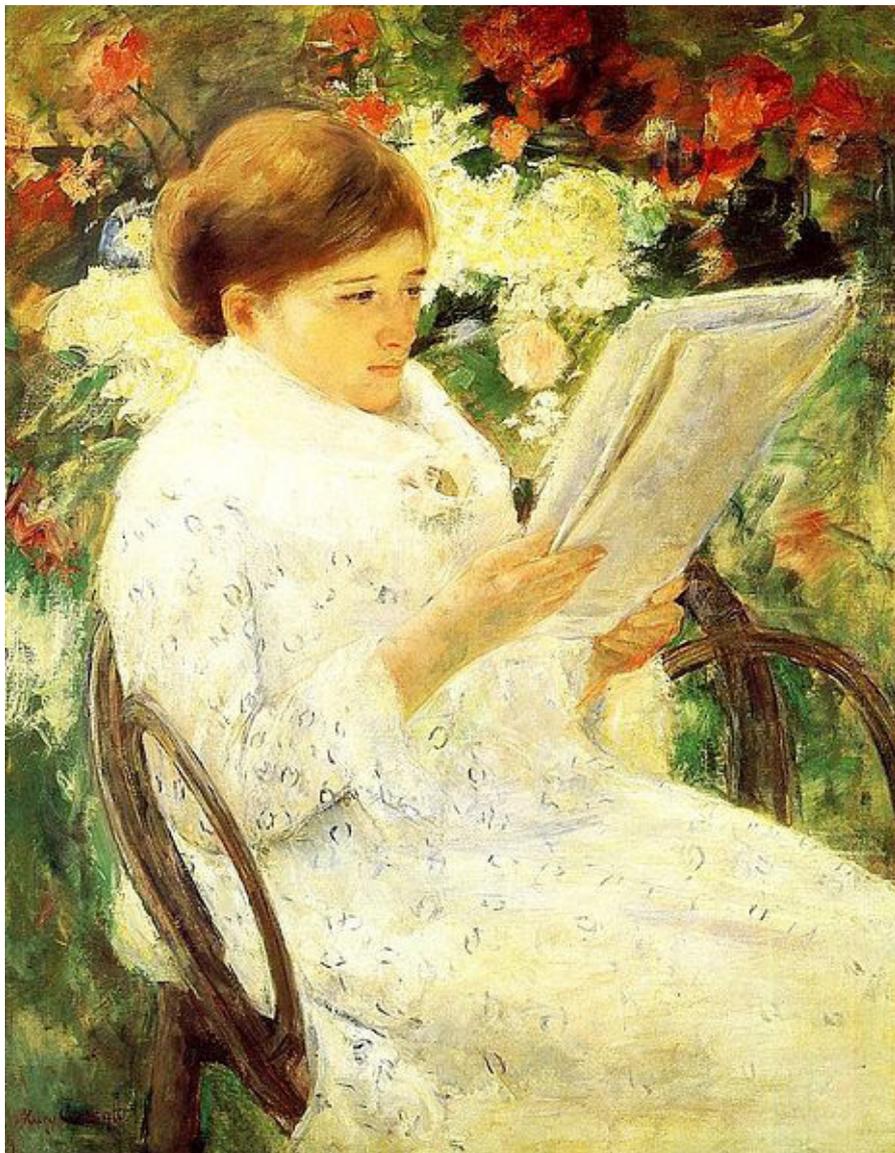
Assessment criteria points

- **Presentation and technical correctness** - Grammatical accuracy, punctuation, layout, spelling, awareness of literary conventions, and the ability (where appropriate) to play with these conventions and fit them to the student's needs.
- **Language** - Its appropriateness to genre, subject matter, and characters. Avoidance of cliché, employment of a wide vocabulary, awareness of the rhythmic powers of language, and an ability to make appropriate use of imagery. Above level 4, we are looking for the development of an individual voice.
- **Creativity** - Imagination, experimentation, inventive exploration of subject matter, originality, and empathy.
- **Contextual knowledge** - Evidence of reading, research, critical thinking and reflection. Engagement with contemporary thinking and practice in the specific genre (e.g. Poetry).
- **Craft of writing** - Technical competence in the student's chosen genre (e.g. in prose, in areas such as narrative, plotting, setting, voice, tense, characterisation, etc; in poetry, in areas such as phrasing, idiom and rhythm.)

Creative Writing 1

Part one

Getting started



Woman Reading in a Garden, Mary Cassatt

The tools of the trade

What will you need in order to embark on this course? At first sight, this may seem a trivial question; but it deserves some thought. You will need some material aids towards the production of poems, and a few other resources which will stimulate your thinking and enhance your background knowledge. In many ways, these two categories overlap.

Material aids

You will need somewhere to work. In a sense, you can work anywhere, since your primary workplace is your head; however, it's good if you can manage it to be able to retreat to a space where you will not be too much distracted and interrupted, and where you don't have to keep clearing away. A room set aside for the purpose would be wonderful, or somewhere like a garden shed (as long as you can keep warm in it); but it might be a particular table or corner of a room. The idea is to develop good working habits, by means of the Pavlov's Dogs principle of association: When I sit here, I write.

In your chosen place of work, have a supply of pens that you feel comfortable with. Then, paper. Lined? Unlined? Pristine? Rough? Respect your prejudices – I don't like blue ink, so a collection of black biro's sits ready where I work, and with them a stack of rough paper to start on, backs of business correspondence and the like, since a pristine page intimidates me at first. I like unlined paper for early drafts and notes, lined for later versions. Find out what suits you.

Your working space, by the way, may be simply a scrap of paper (the proverbial back of an envelope) when you are out; so it makes sense to have something to write on in a pocket of every jacket you may wear. This isn't as absurd as it sounds: I guess that over the years I've wasted the seeds of hundreds of poems by not noting down images, words, ideas that floated through my mind and weren't helped to take root.

Keep a notebook to hand for ideas that float up, as they often will, for poems other than the one you are working on, and something solid, probably A4, as your writing diary. In your writing diary note down what you have done and discovered and learned and found problematical – everything to do with the writing process. As you go along, the contents of your log may seem haphazard, but later you will see it as a record of your development as a poet.

You will need a computer (or something to type on). Some people can work on these from the start; others abhor the idea, but everyone needs to print out later drafts and final versions. This is not simply for the sake of legibility: print has the effect of distancing the work from you just a little, so that you can examine it more objectively.

At this point, however, a word of warning: beware the seductions of the computer! You can do such pretty things with centring, changes of font and so on, but these effects have little or nothing to do with the quality of the writing. They tend to distract you from the recognition that poetry works first and foremost through the ear, not the eye. (Playing with the shapes of poems, by the way, is not a modern trick: seventeenth century poets experimented with it, George Herbert for one.)

You will need a wastepaper basket, not too small. There are blue-moon occasions when a poem arrives in almost its final form; but expect, most of the time, to be making a great many jottings and redraftings. It is worth keeping the redrafted forms of a poem together: you may believe that a poem is complete but discover, after a while, that you are not satisfied with it, and among the drafts there may be ideas worth reconsidering. Sooner or later, though, you will need to clear the decks. Besides, some poems just never work. The stuff you throw out, however, is not so much waste as part of the making and learning process, like a carpenter's woodshavings which now and then he sweeps up.

Other resources

Since words are your tools and your materials, certain books are essential in learning to use accurate and trenchant language. First, you will need a decent dictionary, which should include an etymological component. (See Appendix for suggestions.) The etymology is the history of the word you are looking up. One of the most fascinating things about language is the way that words carry their history with them. While this may not always be evident in the overt meaning, it will still be there in the tone. Why, for instance, the vagueness, and the pernicketiness at times, of the word *nice*? An etymological dictionary will throw light on that. I felt as excited, recently, as an archaeologist with a crucial find when I realised that the words *anxiety*, *anguish*, *anger*, all descend from a root word to do with the throat – with strangling or throttling. The body-language of emotion is built into words, and makes itself felt.

As well as a dictionary, you will need a thesaurus. Much of the wealth of English lies in the immense range of its vocabulary, some derived from Germanic and some from Latin sources, some from elsewhere, so that very few apparent synonyms mean exactly the same thing or share an identical tone. However, just because we have such a range of vocabulary available to us, it's easy to approximate, and to be sloppy in a 'know-what-I-mean' way.

Besides prompting you towards a more precise choice of vocabulary, though, you will find that looking into a thesaurus for the right word may often suggest a slightly different slant on what you are wanting to express.

There are other reference books with which you may already be familiar, and some useful ones are mentioned in the Appendix. You may not, however, want to keep them in your writing space because they offer, besides treasures, enormous temptations towards using up more time than you can really spare. Experiment!

There are certain books which are not reference books in the same sense as a dictionary, but which underpin English poetry from its earliest days. These are sources of myth, and the chief of them is the Bible. Whether or not you have a religious faith is irrelevant: it's the stories, especially the stories of the Old Testament, that have provided material, references and metaphor for readers and writers of poetry over the centuries, and still do. However much you know already, make yourself more familiar with them: these are magnificent stories that enrich the imagination.

Other major sources of poetic material and inspiration in English poetry are Greek myths, and the stories of the Trojan war and what followed it. There's no one source, and whether you use a children's version, Robert Graves's eccentric dictionary, or embark on one of the many translations of the Iliad and the Odyssey, you will gain by exploring these extraordinary stories.

Along with all these other aids, you need time. How much? Where will you find it? How will you defend it? Everything will depend upon your individual circumstances, and to some extent on your body clock – do you work best in the early morning, say, or in the middle of the night?

One thing you will discover is that the making of a poem can't be hurried. As you develop a poem, you will find yourself like a bird on eggs: each poem needs brooding time and hatching time. Something else happens too. At first it's likely that you will be happy with a poem you've completed, almost grateful to it, delighted with your new offspring. It is essential, though, to put it away for a bit and leave it alone, to give yourself time almost to forget it. When you pull it out again, you will be better able to judge if it needs more shaping, and to work on it to good effect. For example, there may be unnecessary lines at the start; or perhaps the syntax is wobbly; or perhaps you haven't found the real end. Never assume that your new poem can't be improved upon!

Somebody once said about painting that a piece is never finished – that you abandon it at an interesting point; and the same can be said about poems. When you start writing, there may well be an element of beginner's luck; but as you continue, you will develop two skills: one, in judging the effectiveness of a poem, and the other, in making it more telling.

Seeing the world anew

Good writing depends on good observation; yet it is difficult to look at things freshly, not as they have been shown to you by others or as you have assumed them to be.

When I say 'see', I do not mean simply with the eyes. You have five senses through which to engage with the world. Babies use them all instinctively and intensely; but most of us have given up the full use of touch, taste, smell and even hearing long before we are adult, and we need to re-educate ourselves in the use of them. Even our sight, on which we depend so heavily, is seldom finely attuned to detail and difference.

Here are a few exercises which are not directly about writing to exercise and develop our underused senses.

Exercise: Undermine your reliance on sight

Do something you have done many times before, but this time without using your eyes.

For example, try crossing the room; organising a bath; taking a particular book, such as a dictionary, off the shelf; walking down the garden and picking a flower; selecting the right size of saucepan, or a particular pair of shoes; and all without looking. (It is not often pitch dark, so don't cheat: if necessary, use a blindfold.)

Notice everything you are doing to substitute for sight, and – this is important – observe your state of mind. Make notes in your writing diary.



Self portrait (eye detail) Albrecht Dürer, 1498

Exercise: Examine an object

Again with your eyes shut, spend time – enough time – examining an object. Ideally, get somebody else to choose the object and put it into your hand, so that you haven't made prejudgements about it.

Note texture, temperature, smell, any sounds the object makes, as well as its size, shape and weight.

Finally, open your eyes and compare what your various senses have conveyed to you. Record these in your writing diary.

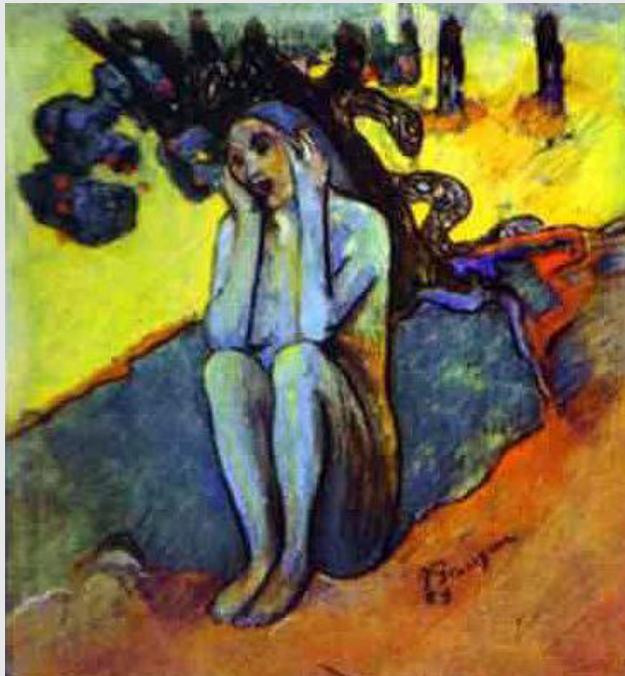


Edgar Degas, hand study 1868

Exercise: Let sounds in

Give your ears a break by gradually reducing ambient sound, as far as that is within your control. What is still audible?

Then plug your ears as completely as you can. There is sound inside us as well as outside. We are all, in self-defence, in the habit of shutting out sound, refusing to register it; but how far can you move towards the condition of silence? How does that condition make you feel?



Paul Gauguin, *Eve - Don't Listen to the Liar* 1889

You might even try walking down the street with earplugs in. What was that experience like for you? Make notes in your writing diary. These exercises are intended as a first step in helping you to observe better and make better use of your resources. The more accurately you use your senses, the more you will find that you need to distinguish between the words at your disposal in order to record your observations with precision. Dissatisfaction with the first word that comes to mind is an excellent step towards good writing.

From the notes you have made on the processes and outcomes of these exercises you will probably find that memory and emotion have come into play as you experimented and that through those you have the germ of a poem or two.

Exercise: Smell

Before you eat, smell what you are eating: really smell it, distinguishing the different elements as far as you can, as a wine taster tastes wine. Try smelling with your mouth open: it can be different.

Then, before you take a bite, look at what is on your plate as though you were a painter, observing the shapes, textures and colours before you. Notice your response to what you see and log the results.



Merchant's Wife at Tea, Boris Kustodiev 1918

These exercises are intended as a first step in helping you to observe better and make better use of your resources. The more accurately you use your senses, the more you will find that you need to distinguish between the words at your disposal in order to record your observations with precision. Dissatisfaction with the first word that comes to mind is an excellent step towards good writing.

From the notes you have made on the processes and outcomes of these exercises you will probably find that memory and emotion have come into play as you experimented and that through those you have the germ of a poem or two.

Assignment one

For your first assignment, write five short pieces, each of which makes particular use of one of your senses. I have said 'pieces' rather than 'poems', because for the moment the idea is to concentrate on the content rather than the form of the writing; so if what comes would like to stay as prose, let it.

Then, for your sixth piece, write about a situation in which you are deliberately trying to shut off one of your senses, to hold at bay for example a din, or a stench, or your reaction to a texture you loathe; or else choose a situation where a sense is shut off for you, as in the pitch dark or when you have a terrible cold.

Try not to exaggerate or to strive after the expression of feeling, but to write as objectively and accurately as you can. You can write in the first person, 'I'; but consider trying some pieces in the third person. Who is this 'he', or 'she'? It may surprise you to discover to what extent, while you concentrate on the immediacy of the sensory record, your imagination will have come into play, and most probably your memory as well.

Then think about what you have written while at the same time looking at the notes and rough drafts and crossings-out that you made. How did you reach the finished piece? (Well, you may not consider it finished, so let's say, each piece as far as you have managed to take it.) Write a considered commentary of about 500 words on what you found, for example what arrived easily and what you wrestled with, and what 'model', if any, you had in your head, in the process of writing. Send this, along with the six pieces, to your tutor.

Reflection

Don't forget to review this assignment against the assessment criteria. Review how you think you have done against the criteria and make notes in your writing diary.

Make sure that all work is labelled with your name, student number and assignment number and send it to your tutor. You don't need to wait until you've heard from them before continuing with the course.

Important note

The total line count for submitting poems to your tutor against each assignment is up to 80 lines and up to six poems.

Although Assignment one is not formally assessed component of the course, the assessors do want to see it, so that they gain a comprehensive view of your development. So, if you are applying for formal assessment, **do send** assignment one in with all the others.