

How Writers Write Poetry 2015

CLASS THREE • Discussion Topics

How to use these questions:

These discussion questions are based on the video and required reading for each class. You can use them to lead a discussion with your group, or you can use them to think about the class videos and readings on your own. You do not have to use them in the order given below, and you do not have to use all of them. Onward!

Class 3 Questions for Beginning Writers

Choose one or more of the options below to discuss with your group:

From Mary Hickman's talk:

Mary Hickman suggests that since prose poems eliminate the line, these poems need to rely more heavily on sound and rhythm to create tension and to push the poem forward. Look at the short prose poems (you can read these poems in the Class Three Transcript) that Hickman reads in her talk, and notice how you experience their rhythm and sound: what are your impressions of pace? How is each of these poems using sonic effects to create tension and momentum?

Optional discussion activity: Look back at Carl Phillips's poem "Catallus 85," which you read for Class 1 (a link to this poem can be found in the Class One Readings document) in which the line is crucial to the construction of the poem and notice how you experience its rhythm and sound. Do you notice distinct differences in your impressions of pace and tension when you compare these two poems?

From Marvin Bell's talk:

Marvin Bell states that the key to free verse poetry is syntax (syntax = the way in which linguistic elements (as words) are put together to form constituents (as phrases or clauses)). How might you think about syntax differently in a free verse poem versus in a more formally structured poem?

From Gillian Conoley's talk:

Gillian Conoley discusses the ways in which poems use the line and the whole space of the page to create meaning. What do you think is the relationship between the line and the page? Do you think lines should align? What does it mean if they don't? How do you decide the way to arrange a poem on the page?

Optional assignment preparation question for beginning writers:

The Class Three Assignment for Beginning Writers asks you to write a prose poem. To get you started, read through some of the prose poems read by Mary Hickman in her talk (links to these poems can be found in the Class Three Readings document, or you can read them



in the Class Three Transcript). How are these poems effective as prose in ways that they might not be if they were lineated? How do you decide where to put emphasis when reading them? What do those choices tell you about how you might choose diction in your own prose poem?

Class 3 Questions for Experienced Writers

Choose one or more of the options below to discuss with your group:

From Mary Hickman's talk:

Mary Hickman discusses privileging parataxis over hypotaxis in the prose poem. You might think of parataxis as using a collection of words or phrases without imposing a hierarchy on the order in which you use them, and of hypotaxis as using these words or phrases in a hierarchical order. As a poet, do you tend to use parataxis or hypotaxis more often in your work? Do you believe that one offers advantages over the other in general, or in particular contexts? What might your preference for parataxis or hypotaxis suggest about how you want your poems to work or what you want them to convey?

From Marvin Bell's talk:

Marvin Bell addresses about the relationship between syntax and the line. How does your syntax inform your lines, and vice versa? Which comes first, the line break or the thought? Do you usually compose with the unit of the line in mind, or does the line break come after you've already decided what speech we will write? What poems stand out in your mind because the relationship between syntax and the line is especially effective?

From Gillian Conoley's talk:

As Gillian Conoley discusses, we traditionally think of a poem as literary speech, collected in lines on a certain part of the page, printed and bound in a certain kind of book. In other words, the question "What is a poem?" is predetermined by where and how you find a poem. The poems that Conoley discusses resist being put in a certain part of the page. They write across margins, gutters, headers, and footers. They write in multiple fonts. Some poets have left not only the page but the book as well: for example, one poet is writing a poem in the DNA sequence of a bacterium; others refuse the page in favor of walls and buildings. If a poem is no longer determined by where you find it, then how do you know it's a poem? What are other poems that resist being paratextually situated to productive ends? What spaces might you colonize with your poems, and what new meaning-making elements would those spaces lend to the poems themselves? For a more specific example, look at the prose poems discussed in Mary Hickman's talk, such as "I Love Karate" (a link to this poem can be found in the Class Three Readings document). What makes these poems rather than flash fiction?