A SHORT COURSE IN CREATIVE WRITING

as taught by

Robert D. Sutherland

at Illinois State University, 1974 – 1992

Author of
The Farringford Cadenza. A Novel;
Sticklewort and Feverfew;
Language and Lewis Carroll

Primetime Monographs #1

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SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF COMPETENT WRITERS AND OF GOOD WRITING

I have listed below some of the characteristics of competent writers and of good writing. The list is intended to be suggestive only, and it is based on my experience—such as it is—as reader, writer, critic, and editor. Attention to the following points will, I think, result in the improvement of a person's abilities and skills as a writer. Presenting you these observations does not reflect an assumption on my part that you aspire to become a professional writer. I am convinced, however, that your development of the following skills, traits, and habits *will* help you to become a more *effective* writer.

GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS: BASIC SKILLS and HABITUAL BEHAVIORS

Good writers (regardless of the genres they work in) tend to be characterized by:

1. Powers of **KEEN OBSERVATION (**They tend to see a great deal—both generalities and particulars; they have both panoramic vision and an eye for details.)

2. A good **VISUAL MEMORY** (They see clearly, and remember what they see; they are able to recall it clearly, recreating the experience in their mind's eye.)

3. Powers of **CONCENTRATION** (They are able to keep their eye on the ball, to fix and focus, to avoid being deflected or sidetracked from the particular effect that they are trying to achieve.)

4. A capacity for **REFLECTING ON EXPERIENCE** and
5. A capacity for **MAKING DISCRIMINATIONS**: **sifting, rank-ordering in terms of importance** (They are able to distinguish parts that make up a whole, discriminate between the important and the trivial, order priorities, see cause/effect relationships, understand sequential processes, make judgments, discern inter-relationships, draw comparisons, find meanings. This entails both analysis and synthesis.)

6. A capacity for **EFFECTIVE USE OF LANGUAGE** (They know and understand the resources that language provides for communication and expression; they are aware of its potentials and its limitations— what it can and cannot do; they are sensitive to nuances of word connotations, command a vocabulary and range of styles and sentence structures suitable for their purposes, and know the effects

that different styles and idioms have within the culture; they have a sense of knowing *what* to do *when* for desired effect.)

7. Powers of **KEEN LISTENING** (Two dimensions here: (1) they have an ear for Speech—its rhythms, cadences, styles, dialects: they hear *how people talk*; and (2) they attend to what people *say*, striving to understand the meanings that lie *behind* the words.)

8. A good **ORAL INTERPRETIVE STYLE** (They are able to *read aloud* effectively for meaning, cadence, phrasing, and dramatic tension.)

9. An ability to **READ OTHER AUTHORS WITH UNDERSTANDING** (They tend to have an interest in other writers' work and read widely to see how others "do it": appreciating what others write about, how they accomplish their aims and achieve their effects. They read not to imitate, but to LEARN.)

GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS: SPECIFIC RHETORICAL SKILLS and HABITS OF MIND

Good writers are characterized by the following. They have

10. A **SENSE OF AUDIENCE** (They "aim" their writing at potential readers—an audience real or hypothetical, particular or general; they know what they've got to do to reach and hold that audience, with regard to syntax, word choice, tone, control of vocabulary, etc. This is a matter of rhetorical strategy; it does NOT imply a "selling out" to the whims or prejudices of the audience, or telling them only what they'd like to hear. See #18.)

11. A **SENSE OF TACT** (They know when they've said enough; know when to quit and not say too much; they know when to leave it up to the readers to "fill in the blanks" and draw their *own* conclusions, allowing the readers to participate in the act of creation.)

12. Powers of **SELF-CRITICISM** (They know how to read their own work "from the outside" and make honest evaluations and judgments about it; they don't fall prey to thinking something is good just because they wrote it.)

13. A **SENSE OF DISCIPLINE** (At least three dimensions here: (1) they have the strength to prune away what should be removed, to leave out what doesn't belong or that which detracts from the total desired effect, no matter how good it may be in itself; they do not become so ego-involved or self-indulgent about their own words and ideas that they lose the power to see them objectively; (2) they develop the patience and concern with craft necessary to revise, re-think, and re-write as much as may be required (generally speaking, one's writing improves with careful rewriting); they overcome impatience and tendencies to laziness or carelessness, taking pains to "get it right"; (3) they sustain (and maintain) some form of continuous output or production, knowing that it is necessary to keep producing; they develop some type of regular work habits (which of course vary with the individual writer)—*for it's only by writing that one learns to write and improves as a writer.*)

<u>**REQUIREMENTS FOR THE BEST WRITING YOU CAN DO — PERSONAL ORIENTATION**</u>

General advice for improving effectiveness in writing:

14. Write about (from) **WHAT YOU KNOW** (The more you know, the more you experience, and the more you reflect upon your experiences, the more you will have to write about and the more effective your writing will be. (This does not mean that you shouldn't use imaginative projection; it means that there should be some sort of knowledge or experience on your part to serve as a base, or foundation, for your projections; if there is not such a foundation, you may appear a fool to those who *do* know; you will find yourself out of your depth and will probably become bored with what you're writing.) By writing from (or about) what you know, you will gain self-confidence, establish credibility with your readers, and avoid certain types of frustration and failure.)

15. Write about **WHAT INTERESTS YOU** (This will make writing pleasurable, honest, convincing to the reader *and* to you—exciting, even. It will build your self-confidence and skill. If you try to write about things that don't interest you, you will become bored, impatient, frustrated—and the writing will reflect this.)

16. **BE YOURSELF** (That's what it's all about; it's your uniqueness that's interesting and worth knowing about. Don't imitate other writers except as a learning-exercise, or to pay homage.)

17. **BE HONEST** (Avoid phoniness, pretentiousness, pimping; be true to yourself: *that* will come across. Say it as you see it.)

18. Write to **PLEASE YOURSELF** (Don't write with an eye to slavishly pleasing others, or let them call the shots—whether editors, publishers, critics, reviewers, teachers, friends, or some hypothetical audience—UNLESS your prime concern IS to satisfy a specific readership, provide how-to-do-it information to a mass market, achieve commercial success by following formulas, or make lots of money (difficult at best). If following your own bent as well as you can is your chief concern, remember that # **10**, above, does *not* require that you "sell out" your integrity. Please yourself first, and that will probably please at least some others. But, equally important, at the same time DON'T BE SELF-INDULGENT AT THE EXPENSE OF YOUR ART! Don't become so defensive or ego-involved in your creation that you refuse to listen to concerned and judicious criticism or fail to see where your work might be strengthened. If you can't take friendly, informed, and well-reasoned criticism and can't criticize yourself, you close off an avenue to learning and improvement. Keep yourself open: listen to judicious criticisms from reliable and trustworthy sources; reflect upon it; and be able to modify your practices if the suggestions are good.)

<u>**IMPORTANT RHETORICAL STRATEGIES AND TECHNICAL SKILLS**</u>

Your writing will improve in effectiveness if you pay attention to the following:

19. **PRECISION** (Develop the ability to choose the right word (implies awareness of nuances of connotation); in phrases, to say just what you want to say.

Avoid unfortunate accidents, as of *ambiguity* or *vagueness*. Hit the nail squarely on the head; near-misses are misses, and make for bad writing. If you wish to use conscious ambiguity for special effect, *know what you're doing!* If you are writing in an ironic mode, make sure your readers know that you are being ironic.)

20. **ECONOMY** (Be as succinct and spare as possible, consistent with your matter and with the effect you're trying to achieve; avoid wheelspinning, wordiness, repetition that is excessive or non-functional. Trim away the fat; jettison the garbage. Turn everything to account; avoid waste. Test everything to see if it makes a contribution toward your desired end or effect; if it doesn't, take it out. BUT: be careful not to throw the baby out with the bath water.)

21. **SELECTION** (Exercise careful choice in selecting things to be said; see above, **# 20** and **## 4--5**. Your total effect and effectiveness will depend on what you choose to select from the random and chaotic mix of experience available to you.)

22. **ORDERING, ARRANGEMENT** (In surveying your selected materials, find the best inter-relations, internal ordering, and sequence of the items for the purposes and effect you wish to achieve; develop a capacity to see and mentally explore alternative routes and their consequences, and make reasoned judgments as to which would be best for your specific purposes.)

23. **IMMEDIACY, DIRECTNESS, "GRAB"** (Strive for vigor, clarity, simplicity, pith; think "action"; avoid indirection unless it is functional to the effect you wish to achieve (there *is* a place for it);—clearly **## 19--22** have relevance here. Watch your *verbs* in particular: take the time to hunt for those which provide vividness and pungency (don't go overboard, of course!). And watch out for flaccid adjectives that don't really say much: as a general rule, don't try to make adjectives do *your* work. They can be false friends. In verb constructions, remember that active voice is usually more direct and vivid than passive voice.)

24. **EDITING and RE-WRITING** (Develop a "feel" for what's needed, and a capacity for sensing whether it's present or not. Develop a capacity to see what is NOT needed and should be omitted. Become adept at devising alternative ways of saying something, and develop your competence to choose the best alternative for your purpose and desired effect. If something does not add to or further your purpose and effect, it probably should come out. Learn how to proof-read with accuracy, from a vantage point "outside" the text. Be able to assess your precision, economy, principles of selection and ordering, and your "grab" quotient.)

25. **READING ALOUD** (If you have developed a good ear for spoken language (see **# 7**), and a good interpretive oral style (see **# 8**), one of the BEST WAYS to discover how effective and graceful your writing is (and to spot "bad" passages) is to *read it aloud*, or listen while someone else (who has a good oral style) reads it to you. *Good writing tends to feel good in the mouth and sound good to the ear.* This principle is a help both in writing and in editing. (Try the oral/aural test and see for yourself.)

This list of characteristics, traits, habits of mind, and technical skills does not seek to give the impression that creative writing is to be regarded as essentially a self-conscious, mechanical process; nor does it seek to deny the importance of **inspiration**, **intuition**, and **the desire to express powerful emotional responses**. Without these three, the 25 points discussed above would not produce good writers. But: except in rare instances, the three are not alone sufficient to produce effective writing. The 25 help to actualize the three.

PROSE FICTION: SOME THOUGHTS ON THE WRITING OF FICTIONAL NARRATIVES

Narrative, in a generic, historic-traditional sense (having had its origins in oral story-telling in preliterate cultures), is discourse *which tells a story* by recounting a sequence of events in a logical, cohesive, and coherent manner; it typically takes one or more characters through a sequence of events or situations to some sort of conclusion, or resolution. Stories take many forms: fables, Biblical parables, brief narrative anecdotes, some kinds of jokes, epic marathons (such as *Beowulf, The Iliad, Gilgamesh, The Mahabharata, The Kalevala, The Aeneid, The Divine Comedy, Paradise Lost,* and *Njalssaga*); stories may be long or short, simple or complex; the time spans they encompass may range from a few seconds to many years (Odysseus' long journey home; several generations enduring through war and peace, as in a family saga). Narratives may be recounted in verse or prose. A narrative presented in prose (which, stylistically, *may be* "poetic") that creates an imaginative construct not factually "true" (though it may contain factual material) constitutes that type of discourse called "prose fiction." Although prose fictions may take a variety of forms (not all of them designed to tell stories in the conventional sense ['Once upon a time, these things happened: 1, 2, 3 ...']), writers who wish to be competent should understand how prose fictions that do express the art of conventional story-telling are paced and structured, how information is revealed and withheld, how suspense is generated. (This knowledge is a requisite for the writing of effective fictions no matter how unconventional, surrealistic, structurally loose, or convoluted they may be. It is a necessary grounding, analogous to what competent graphic artists must know—whatever medium they work in and regardless of how unconventional, experimental, or freeform their creations may be—*a sense of the Line, and how to draw it.*).

Stories usually employ a narrative development of some sort (which may be straightforward, sequential, and chronological (forward or in reverse); or indirect, fragmented, perhaps a mosaic to be "made sense of", or layered (like an onion); perhaps unfolded through diverse voices, viewpoints, or characters' presentations; or implicit only, with no trail of breadcrumbs to be easily followed, providing a challenge to readers, demanding that they participate in the act of creation). Narrative is a laboratory, a realm of serious play, in which writers like to experiment. Fictional narratives are not required to be true-to-fact as they would be if they were reports, biographies, or historical accounts. In writing fiction, the storyteller creates his or her own world and presents it believably. This fictional, or created, world may be very similar to the world of experience, may incorporate actual events or situations (e.g., the War of 1812, the San Francisco earthquake of 1906, the sinking of the *Titanic*, the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, etc.), may—in other words—be "realistic" and encompass true facts:—but it doesn't *have* to. It may be quite dissimilar to the world of experience; may take place in future time, or distant galaxies, Tolkien's Middle Earth, the Land of Oz, inside a seashell or the chambers of the heart. Whether or not the story has points of contact with existential reality, the work as a whole should be seen as an imaginative fabrication, an invented "universe" in its own right, peopled with characters of the author's creation and capable of being developed in whatever ways are consistent with its own logical premises.

Even if a story is based on a happening in your own life, or if a character is modeled on your Aunt Agnes, there is no requirement *in writing fictions* that you must present things "truthfully": you may add or subtract, reshuffle and modify, to suit your story-telling purposes. You are calling the shots. Your Aunt Agnes *in the story* is not your Aunt Agnes down the block. In a broad sense, a story tells a tale. It may have points to make, axes to grind, philosophical or moral implications; it may illustrate a particular theme, tell us something about the human condition, raise disturbing questions about our motives or the future of the planet, or delight us and make us laugh. But all of these possibilities grow out of, or perhaps are ancillary to, the act of telling the tale (which is narratively to take one or more characters through a sequence of events or situations to some sort of conclusion or resolution). There are many ways of telling a tale, and new ways are being discovered all the time. More of this in a moment.

THE FOLLOWING ARE ELEMENTS OF MOST PROSE FICTION:

CHARACTER(S) — "actors", those whose story is being told, and supporting cast

PLOT(S) — sequence(s) of events, situations, actions (the "story line"; there may be a main plot and any number of sub-plots (within limits!—you don't want to overburden your readers' memories with too many threads to keep untangled)

THEME(S) — in an abstract sense, what the story "is about" or "reveals" or "demonstrates" or "shows"

SETTING(S) — location(s) in which action unfolds, events happen, situations occur

TONE(S) — "flavor" or "mood" which engenders emotional responses in the reader (tones may be humorous, tragic, somber, "light", suspenseful, calm, ironic, thoughtful, frightening, etc., or various blends of these)

All of these are important to an effective story. Some stories may emphasize one or more of these elements over others: thus, a story might be a "character study" or psychological-crisis narrative, in which SETTING might be extremely important, or only minimally so. A horror story, or "Gothic thriller", might focus on TONE and PLOT, with CHARACTERS only minimally developed. A mystery story might focus on PLOT; a love story or comedy of manners might focus on CHARACTER and SETTING; a social-protest story might focus on THEME. A story that attempts ultimately to show some truth about the human condition, or about the effects of obsessive guilt or holding a long-term grudge, might be focused on THEMES, and use CHARACTER and PLOT only as vehicles to embody and illustrate these themes. And so on. Or, *all* of these might be equally important in a given story. Let's look at them in more detail.

CHARACTER — Since most stories are about people, characters are an essential component of narrative prose fictions. It is characters' actions, interactions, and reactions to events and situations, the choices they make with attendant consequences, and the changes they undergo, that determine plot, express theme, give rise to anticipation and generate suspense, engage readers' attention, and elicit readers' empathy and concern. In a given story, characters may be few or many; if many, some will be central or major, some will be subordinate or minor; character development may be slight (or superficial, producing stereotypes or "cardboard cutouts"), moderately rendered (somewhat "fleshed-out"), or elaborately detailed and finely textured. If the latter, CHARACTER is in all likelihood a major focus of the story. It is important for major

characters (those whom the story is "about") to be sufficiently "fleshed" and textured to be believable; at some level, the reader must be able to "identify" with them and share in their "lives" (it is not necessary for the reader to "like" them). As author, you must know your characters well—who they are, where they've come from, what their values are, their personality traits, and how they would react to specific stimuli. It is important, in my opinion, that you make the reader *care* about the major characters—engage with them, identify with them, contend with them, be concerned with what happens to them. (Some current experimental narrative fictions do not accept this premise; but in traditional storytelling it has been seen as crucial.)

PLOT — Every story has some sort of plot, or story-line: a sequence of events leading to some sort of outcome, crisis/resolution, logical conclusion. Depending on the narrative style, it may be an obvious progression, bare-boned and single-directioned like an arrow's flight; it may be roundabout, oblique, and indirect, with dramatized flashbacks to action in past time; it may be obscure, implicit (rather than overt), designedly ambiguous, indeterminate—forcing the reader to thread a maze or assemble "the pieces" to create a coherent pattern or picture, or simply make a calculated guess as to motives or outcomes. The only major exception I can think of would be the open-ended pure "slice of life", where from an ongoing sequence an almost random cut is taken. Such a "slice of life" might reveal something about the typical quality of characters' lives—but would basically be descriptive rather than developmental or dramatic. Some stories exist basically for the working out of PLOT: those sensational thrillers where a group of people is gathered in a falling airplane, sinking ship, or burning skyscraper, and the only questions we have are *Which of them will die? which survive?* fit this category. Mystery stories tend to be plot-centered, and, frequently, adventure stories:—the quest, against overwhelming odds, for the Inca treasure, etc. Not that characters might not be important too, of course (see Sherlock Holmes or Miss Marple, for example). But sometimes plot *serves* character development—and in those cases, it's ultimately CHARACTER or THEME that's central to the story. Plots must be able to be discerned by the reader (which does NOT mean that they shouldn't challenge the reader; plots certainly may be indirect, complex, and implicit rather than explicit). I think it's important that the reader have some means of knowing what is going on, what's at stake. Completely baffling the reader is generally not a good idea: while many people like puzzles, almost no one likes riddles that have *no "answers" at all*. (Of course, writers don't have to put answers into readers' hands: that frequently tends to produce bad writing also.) When sub-plots accompany the main story-line, they may be organically connected to the main plot, or run parallel to it, be completely unrelated, or echo, mirror, run variations on, the dominant plot. In some very elegant fictions, the various sub-plots all converge at the point of "crisis" and determine what the form the resolution of the main plot will take.

THEME — Themes are usually not stated outright. Theme tends to embody an abstract concept, a general principle or summary conclusion which is implied by, and can be inferred from, the action of the story. Example: "It is dangerous to tell lies, because one lie frequently leads to another by way of cover-up, and a liar can ultimately lose all credibility and be destroyed." Or, "There is in every person a capacity for doing evil, which, under proper circumstances—as in the absence of normal societal restraints—can surface and cause the person to be the agent of atrocity." Some stories are written specifically to exemplify or illustrate a theme; in others, the story comes first, and the theme that can be legitimately inferred from it may not even have been consciously recognized by the author. Most stories have thematic elements, whether the author consciously intended them or not.

SETTING — Settings are locations, physical surroundings, a particular culture or society, a specific house or room or Turkish bath, etc. where character is developed and actions/events/situations occur: rural Kansas, Imperial China in 1875, Middle Earth, Dr. Frankenstein's laboratory, the frozen tundra of the Yukon, Paris in 1930, the back room at Milly's Tavern, etc. Setting is frequently crucial to particular stories: as, for example, April 14, 1912, aboard the *Titanic*, on her maiden voyage approaching Newfoundland; the halls of the U.S. Capitol Building, Washington, D.C. in the final showdown punch-out between Senator Puffer and Senator Belch; an isolated, snowy wasteland in Jack London's "To Build a Fire"; a lonely deserted motel for the accomplishment of a bathtub knife murder, etc. Or, SETTING can be relatively unimportant: as in an elderly man's internal recounting of the events of his life as he approaches death (it might not matter if he is in a nursing home, a hospital room, his own front porch or bed, in Florida or Gibraltar, in 1990, 1225, or 2100). Or a husband and wife deciding whether to get a divorce (it might not matter whether they live in Toledo, Ohio, or Toledo, Spain, or New Orleans, or Nairobi); or a conflict between a professor and a student at Anypublicuniversity, U.S.A. On the other hand, setting *can* determine plot and character development: i.e., a lonely homesteader on the Kansas prairie in 1856 *had* to be self-reliant. The plotline can also change setting, since people are forced to go from place to place by the pressure of events. Even at its palest, setting provides a sense of CONTEXT for the action which is occurring, provides the reader with an anchor, or ballast; most plots don't unfold in a gray Never-Never limbo (some *have*, of course! But most don't.). One advantage, then, of there usually being a SETTING is that you can turn it to account and *have it work for you.*

TONE — Tone is imparted by your attitude toward your material, by the language you choose, by your selection and rank-ordering of priorities of what you depict. Tone of some sort will inevitably be present, whether you have consciously fashioned it or not. Language choice alone will determine that there will *be* a tone. (Even a flat, featureless, dull tone is a tone.) Tone helps to orient readers to the material presented so that you can achieve with them the reaction or effect you as author desire. Even unconsciously, or subliminally, readers do respond to tone. The wrong tone for your purpose may make your intention misfire: you have to understand what you're trying to do, keep your audience and their needs in mind, and then stay consistent with what you feel is required to achieve your aims. (It requires that you monitor your work as you go, and then again in proof-reading when it's finished to determine that no inconsistencies have crept in.) Tone engenders reader-responses: in a horror story, your tone should reinforce the horrors enacted or described so that suspense and terror are increased for the reader. If you desire a "light" tone, one to relax the reader and evoke a smile, a chuckle, or a belly-laugh, a different sort of language and choice of items is required. Tone works in a subtle way to reinforce everything you're doing with CHARACTER, PLOT, and THEME. If you are writing ironically, make sure that your tone serves the irony and lets the reader know that irony is intended. Trust your intuitions as a start: say it as *you* "feel" it.

MODES OF NARRATION

Point of view: A story is told from one or more vantage points of observation; this principle has traditionally been called "point of view". Sometimes one (or more) of the characters tells the story—in which case the Narrator of the moment tends to be named "I" (though of course s/he may have a given name as well). This mode of telling is called *'first-person narrative'*.

Rarely, a rather disembodied, nameless narrator addresses the reader as "you"; this is called

'second-person narrative'. In prose fiction it is rarely encountered, and it tends to work best in short passages, for it's difficult to maintain in long works.

Sometimes the story is told by a nameless Narrator who sees all, knows all; who can range over time and space, and get into any character's head: this is the "omniscient point of view"; it usually employs *'third-person narrative',* in which characters are referred to by name, or by 'he' and 'she'. In a sense, an Omniscient Narrator is *outside* the story, looking "in", seeing it all—not a character in any conventional sense of the term. But: a sub-class of this type of narration is "third-person omniscient / limited", in which **a single character** (called by name, or 'he' or 'she,' by the Omniscient Narrator) **is followed through the story as a central observer, and everything is seen through his or her eyes;** the reader is thus limited to seeing and knowing only what this central character sees and knows. A variation of this mode allows the Omniscient Narrator to choose *different* characters to serve as the central observer as the story progresses; in this type of narration, the point of view, with attendant limitations, is restricted to only one character at a time.

EXAMPLES:

First-person narrative. "I climbed the stairs and saw Sheila standing near the window. She seemed to be crying. Before she saw me, I turned and went down again so as not to embarrass her."

Second-person narrative. "You climb the stairs and see Sheila standing near the window. She seems to be crying. Before she sees you, you turn and go down again so as not to embarrass her." (NOTE that verbs are in the present tense.)

Or, it can be couched as a directive (with 'you' understood): "Climb the stairs. See Sheila standing near the window. She seems to be crying. Turn and go down again so as not to embarrass her."

Third-person narrative (omniscient). "He climbed the stairs and saw Sheila standing near the window. She seemed to him to be crying, though in fact she wasn't. So as not to embarrass her, he turned and went down again before she saw him. He needn't have worried; Sheila was preoccupied with watching Charles and Henrietta playing croquet on the lawn. 'Bloody bitch,' she thought."

Third-person narrative (omniscient/ limited). "He climbed the stairs and saw Sheila standing near the window. She seemed to him to be crying. So as not to embarrass her, he turned and went down again before she saw him."

Note that *second-person narrative* tends to be told in the present tense of the verb, or else in the imperative mood. *First-* and *third-person narratives* may be told in either the present or past tense. The past tense has been used in the examples above. Compare those with these present-tense versions: "I climb the stairs and see Sheila standing near the window. She seems to be crying. Before she sees me, I turn and go down again..." and "He climbs the stairs and sees Sheila standing near the window. She seems to him to be crying, though in fact she isn't...."

Present tense confers a kind of immediacy to the narration, pulling the reader in; it can be

overdone—and if that occurs, the mode becomes heavy-handed and rather tedious. The past tense slightly distances the narration, tending to put the reader more into the role of a spectator than a participant); but if the narrative is sufficiently compelling and well told, the reader is drawn in nonetheless. Past tense is the traditional, usual, and "natural" way that we recount stories: "The last man on the earth sat alone in a room. There was a knock on the door...".

Which mode of narration you adopt for telling your story, which point(s) of view you choose to tell it from, which tense you choose to put your verbs into—all of these are crucial strategic decisions which you must face if you hope to accomplish the aims and intentions you wish your story to realize. For particular aims, and for particular narratives, there might be a *best* way to do it. If so, your job is to find that best way.

Each of these modes of narration has advantages and limitations:

First-person:

ADVANTAGES — immediacy; draws the reader in; causes reader to identify with the "I" character. Enables author easily to withhold information from the reader; since everything is seen from "I's" perspective, what "I" doesn't know, the reader doesn't know. Enables the author to create a persona to tell the story: "I" has a personality too, perhaps blind spots or biases (opening up the possibility of ironic exploitation by the author: "I" may be untrustworthy, dense, insane, a liar). "I" may be someone "outside" the story—someone in a frame narrative, perhaps, who is telling a story within the story, or a fictional editor who's editing the text of the story proper as if it were a manuscript, etc.)

LIMITATIONS — author is not free to range through time and space as will, get into other people's heads; author is committed to "I's" point of view. Only what "I" sees, hears, is present at, or hears *about* can be known to "I" and to the reader.

Second-person:

ADVANTAGES — immediacy; draws readers in by (in effect) addressing them and making them undergo the actions and events; reader becomes a character in the story.

LIMITATIONS — author is not free to range through time and space without taking "you" (the reader) along as baggage. Since "you" must always be talked at, the name *you* is constantly repeated (unless the directive imperative mood is adopted). This point of view can quickly become tedious unless very skillfully handled. For long works it is generally not the best.

Third-person (Omniscient Narrator):

ADVANTAGES — author has great flexibility; sees all, knows all from the disembodied omniscient narrator's point of view. Time and space present no boundaries. Simultaneous actions in different locations can be depicted. Author chooses how "external" or how "internal" the narrative is to be at any particular time. Author can get into any character's head at any time. (Author still selects and chooses what the reader is to know, and what information is to be withheld.) Reader gets to share in this all encompassing view. Reader goes along for the ride — but certainly can become a vicarious participant through various identifications.

LIMITATIONS — some dangers for the author to watch out for; if not well handled, omniscient point of view can lack immediacy, can fail to engage readers and draw them in, can hold them off at arm's length, so to speak. There might also be a tendency to ramble, or get wordy, drift into long discursive passages — in other words, to forfeit ECONOMY and TACT. Such a wealth of available information to choose from can cause the author to lose sight of priorities and bury the important in the trivial. There is also a danger of *telling* too much, and not *showing* enough through dramatization; explaining too much, drawing conclusions for readers rather than letting them draw their own.

Third-person (Omniscient Narrator/ Limited):

ADVANTAGES — author can get into the "he/she" character's head, can describe or otherwise delineate the character's feelings and opinions. Information can easily withheld from the "he/she" character *and* from the reader (as in *first-person narrative*). Though the reader can still be made to identify with the "he/she" character, there *is* a distancing (the reader is more a spectator than in the first-person mode of narration, where identification with the "I" character makes the reader a character, or participant, in the story).

LIMITATIONS — author is committed to the "he/she" character's point of view; thus no information can be provided beyond what that character knows through direct experience or hearsay. This cuts out the possibility of ranging through time and space and of depicting simultaneous theaters of action or other characters' thoughts. (These limitations apply only when *a single character* is taken as the central observer and rigorously followed throughout the story.) In practice, many stories have been written using a combination of **Omniscient Narrator** and **Omniscient Narrator / Limited**. A typical technique is to use **Omniscient** for general overviews or summaries and for bridges between scenes, and then to use **Omniscient / Limited** (choosing a particular character as central observer) for *specific scenes*. It might be the *same* character for each scene, or *different* characters for different scenes. This combination technique provides more flexibility, a chance to avoid the limitations of the pure form of **Omniscient / Limited**, and, when different characters take turns at being the central observer, expanded opportunities for developing characterization.

Some stories are more effectively told with first-person point of view, some with third-person omniscient, some with third-person omniscient/limited, and conceivably even some with second-person. The author has to determine which "point of view" would be the most effective for the purpose at hand. It is a major strategic decision. It is even possible—in longer works, especially—to mix these narrative modes, and considerable experimentation is currently taking place. In my opinion, authors will experiment more effectively if they have mastered the requirements and "feel" of the standard modes first, learning to walk before trying to run.

STORIES TOLD WITHIN STORIES: FRAME NARRATIVES

Stories may be told as stories-within-stories, the frame narrative containing one or more inset narratives. Examples would be Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, Boccaccio's *Decameron, The Arabian Nights*, and Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. (Theoretically, there's no limit to the number of enfoldings you might attempt—creating Russian doll structure, with stories nesting one within another. In practical terms, however, such a structure could become burdensome to both author and reader, the device ultimately calling attention to itself to the detriment of the piece as a whole.). To reach conclusion in this mode (and logical coherence), you must come out again

through the various frames in sequence to the starting place of the original frame.

STORIES TOLD THROUGH LETTERS OR JOURNAL ENTRIES

Stories have been told through sequences of diary or journal entries, through a series of personal letters sent and received, through extended monologues, through filmic cuts and dissolves from scene to scene, or impressionistic montages of clustered and juxtaposed images, etc., etc. See where your imagination leads you.

DIALOGUE AS A MEANS OF "TELLING THE STORY"

In prose fiction and some types of narrative poetry, one of the most *efficient* ways of "telling the story" is through recounting what characters *say* to one another. Dialogue—the sequence of speech utterances of two or more people talking together—is inherently dramatic, because utterances (questions, statements, commands), by their very nature, elicit responses—and these responses quite frequently are unpredictable. The drama and the suspense of not knowing what's coming next engage the reader's interest, and the information (of various sorts) that emerges as the dialogue unfolds both arouses and satisfies the reader's curiosity. In other words, well-crafted dialogue is immediately appealing to most readers; and for certain purposes, it can move the story along much faster than description, explanation, or exposition. How does it do this?

Dialogue establishes characterization. The personality, values, motivations, perceptions, aims and purposes, and emotional states of a person shape and color what that person says in specific contexts; and they are reflected, and revealed by, what is said and the manner of saying it. Depictions of speech utterances are an indirect way of characterizing the speaker. Likewise, characterization is achieved through the things that speakers say about *other* characters, who are not present.

Through dialogue, narrative coherence can be strengthened by characters' alluding to past events in the story-line. This both refreshes the reader's memory of what's already happened in the story and reveals what the characters think and feel about those events.

Through dialogue, anticipation and suspense can be generated by characters' talking of what is yet to come, making plans, "fearing the worst", etc. An analogy would be the theatre: plays are stories that are acted out, dramatized; the narratives they embody are presented through dialogue—actors in character-roles talking to each other (and about each other)—and the performance of physical business. Radio drama consists primarily of dialogue (augmented by narrative bridges and summaries, sound effects, and mood music). (Although the dialogue component of motion pictures would share the traits of written or theatrical dialogue highlighted above, motion pictures (as an edited visual medium) have an additional broad repertoire of narrative devices (cutting, montage, panoramic and tracking shots, distance views versus close-ups, fadein and -out, visual flashbacks, voiceover summaries, musical soundtracks, lighting values (and, conversely, shadow effects),color versus black-and-white, subtitles, etc.).

In sum, dialogue characterizes (which furthers the story), allows characters to express feelings and opinions (commenting on events, themselves, and other people); it can point backward to what's already happened, or point forward to that which may be coming. And all of this can be accomplished in just a few lines, as A, B, and C enjoy morning coffee or jostle to work on the subway. Dialogue is one of the most efficient ways to advance a narrative; and it possesses the

inbuilt advantage of having inherent drama and the capacity to command the reader's attention and interest.

POETIC FORMS AND STRUCTURES:

VERSIFICATION

RHYTHM

A *syllable* may be defined as a vowel nucleus with or without accompanying consonant(s).

EXAMPLES: a   the   okay (o-kay)   happiness (hap-i-ness)   elevator (el-e-va-tor)
disestablishmentarian (dis-es-tab-lish-ment-ar-i-an)

Stress may be defined as the relative force of volume (loudness) with which a syllable is uttered. English linguistics recognizes four levels of stress:

$/$ (primary) $\wedge$ (secondary) $\backslash$ (tertiary)   ∪ (weak)

In speech, every syllable has one of these four levels of stress. Every multi-syllable word has its standard and predictable *stress pattern* (the pattern or sequence of stresses enables us to recognize the word in question when we hear it).

```
              /        \   /              /  ∪  ∪             ∪   /
EXAMPLES:  no    okay (o-kay)   happiness (hap-i-ness)    bizarre (bi-zar)
           /   \                    ∪    /
conduct (con-duct = NOUN) conduct (con-duct = VERB)
        /   ∪            /  ∪  ∪              \  ∪  /
lemon (lem-on)    terrible (ter-i-ble)    cigarette (cig-a-ret)
        \    /   ∪             \   ∪   /
insurance (in-sur-ance)    guarantee (guar-an-tee)
              /   \    ^   ∪
lighthouse keeper (light-house-keep-er) "one who keeps a lighthouse"
              ^    /    \   ∪
light housekeeper (light-house-keep-er) "one who does light housekeeping"
```

Phrasal units (groups of two or more words) also have *their* typical stress patterns or sequences (though this can vary with meaning—such as giving a word in a familiar phrase an atypical (or unusual) emphasis):

```
                 ∪   /     ∪   /
USUAL EMPHASIS: a dog     the dog
                         /  \           /   \
UNUSUAL EMPHASIS: I didn't say a dog; I said the dog!
                        /    \
EXAMPLES: White House (white-house) "the President's home"
             \        /
white house (white-house) "a house that is white"
```

```
             / ∪ \ ∪ ^ ∪ \ ∪        ^∪ \ ∪ / ∪ \ ∪
```
elevator operator (EITHER el-e-va-tor-op-e-ra-tor OR el-e-va-tor-op-e-ra-tor)

More complex phrases maintain sequences of stress-levels, which—in speech—produce rhythms. A long utterance may be comprised of several phrasal groupings or clusters; each phrasal grouping in a sequence of phrases tends to have one syllable, which has dominant stress (sometimes more than one, however). And sometimes the complex phrase as a whole has a single primary stress on a certain word (syllable); when this occurs, the dominant stresses in the constituent phrases may be bumped downward on the stress-scale: i.e., a primary may become a secondary; a secondary may become a tertiary.

EXAMPLES:
```
              ^  ∪ ∪ \   ∪ /  \   ∪
```
He is a man for all seasons. (he-is-a-man-for-all-sea-sons)
```
              \   ∪ ∪ ^   ∪  / / ∪
```
He is a man for all seasons. (he-is-a-man-for-all-sea-sons)

Whenever I go to town, I see Sally and Denise riding the bus
```
  ∪   ^ ∪ ∪ \ ∪ /   \ \  / ∪ ∪   ∪ /  / ∪ ∪   /
```
(when-ev-er-I-go-to-town // I-see-Sal-y-and-Den-ise // rid-ing-the-bus)
          (phrase)   (phase)   (phrase)
      (phase)   (phrase)
  (ADVERBIAL PHRASE) (SUBJ+VERB+DIR OBJECT) (ADJECTIVAL PHRASE)

All speech (normal prose conversation) is rhythmic. VERSE embodies a relatively regularized pattern of repetitious "beats" or primary stresses, alternating with weaker stresses.

METER

The pattern of regularized "beats" is called the verse's METER (a "measured quantity"). We call the system of beats the METRICAL PATTERN, and the type of patterning (of several possible types) the verse's METRICS.

In English, the unit of metrical measurement is called the FOOT, which usually consists of two or three syllables. The following are the most common "feet" in English versification:

1) **IAMB** (iambic meter): Each foot contains two syllables—a weak stress followed
      by a primary stress: ∪ /

      EXAMPLES: above   deny   suppose (each of these words constitutes an iambic foot)

2) **TROCHEE** (trochaic meter): Each foot contains two syllables—a primary stress followed by
      a weak stress: / ∪

      EXAMPLES: ugly   double   notice (each of these constitutes a trochaic foot)

3) **SPONDEE** (spondaic meter): Each foot contains two syllables—both with primary stress: / /
      EXAMPLES: (He's) dead meat.   (It's a) timed lock.   (each item is a spondaic foot)

4) **ANAPEST** (anapestic meter): Each foot contains three syllables—two weak stresses followed
      by a primary stress: ᴜ ᴜ /
      EX.: introduce   undertake   disenchant   (each item is an anapestic foot)

5) **DACTYL** (dactylic meter): Each foot contains three syllables—one primary stress followed
by   two weak stresses: / ᴜ ᴜ
      EX.: happily   syllable   poverty   (each word is a dactylic foot)

A metrical LINE is a sequence of words (literally on one line of text) whch is characterized by the number of poetic FEET it contains—as follows:

      MONOMETER (one foot)   DIMETER (two feet)   TRIMETER (three feet)
      TETRAMETER (four feet)   PENTAMETER (five feet)   HEXAMETER (six feet)

Note: English versification very rarely goes beyond six feet per line; and six is fairly rare. The line tends to "break" after six. A five-foot line is the most popular for much of English metrical poetry ("free verse" is subject to other rules), though the history of English verse amply attests shorter lines as well.

SOME EXAMPLES OF LINES:

      IAMBIC TRIMETER: he bought / his wife / a coat   (NOTE: six syllables)
                  FOOT 1 / FOOT 2 / FOOT 3

      IAMBIC PENTAMETER: Yond Cas / sius has / a lean / and hun / gry look
                      FOOT 1 / FOOT 2 / FOOT 3 / FOOT 4 / FOOT 5

                    He thinks / too much. / Such men / are dang / erous
                      FOOT 1 / FOOT 2 / FOOT 3 / FOOT 4 / FOOT 5
                      (NOTE: ten syllables per line)

      TROCHAIC DIMETER: Happy / fellow!   (NOTE: four syllables)
                  FOOT 1 / FOOT 2

      TROCHAIC HEXAMETER: Silas / never / guessed that / Ginger / planted / tulips
                    1 / 2 /   3   / 4 / 5   / 6
                    (NOTE: twelve syllables per line)

      ANAPESTIC TETRAMETER: When a dog / and a cat / get togeth /er to feed
                       1   /   2 /   3   /   4
                    (NOTE: twelve syllables per line)

      DACTYLIC TETRAMETER: Anyone / knows what a / horror can / do to them
                     1 /   2   /   3   /   4
                    (NOTE: twelve syllables per line)

Two common variations are the omitting of a weak-stress syllable (or two) at the end of a "falling foot" (strong/weak), or the adding of a weak-stress syllable at the end of a line of "rising meter" (weak/strong+weak):

<div align="center">

Anyone / knows what a / horror can / do XX
1 / 2 / 3 / 4

</div>

Here is an IAMBIC PENTAMETER line with an added weak syllable:

<div align="center">

I come / to bur / y Cae / sar not / to praise / him
1 / 2 / 3 / 4 / 5 / (+)

</div>

> (NOTE: the last added syllable does not constitute
> a foot, because it doesn't have primary stress [which
> *defines* a foot].)

PLEASE NOTE: In a series of lines, if the meter becomes *too* regularized, a predictable "sing-song" tick-tock hobby-horse rhythm can result, which is boring, tedious, lulling, or irritating to the reader. Skillful poets working in metrical forms frequently VARY their meter in subtle ways to avoid this—by SUBSTITUTING a different type of metrical foot into a regular line: a conscious choice to deviate from the established pattern (it counters the reader's expectation and even can be used for emphasis or inducing surprise). In *Julius Caesar*, Mark Antony's funeral speech is in a regular IAMBIC PENTAMETER pattern: ᴜ / | ᴜ / | ᴜ / | ᴜ / | ᴜ / (ten syllables); but note Shakespeare's substitutions which lend variety:

```
              /       /  ᴜ      /  ᴜ   ᴜ    /  ᴜ    ᴜ   /
        Friends, / Ro-mans, / coun-try-men, / lend me / your ears
syllables    1      2   3      4   5   6      7   8    9  10
feet      FOOT 1 /  FOOT 2 /     FOOT 3    / FOOT 4 / FOOT 5
meter      short /  trochee  /    dactyl    / trochee /  iamb
           spondee                                         /    /
                                            / or spondee, if [ lend me ]
        I come / to bur / y Cae / sar, not / to praise / him
syllables  1 2     3 4 5    6 7 8    9 10      11
feet     FOOT 1 / FOOT 2 / FOOT 3 / FOOT 4 / FOOT 5  /  (+)
meter     iamb  /  iamb  /  iamb  /  iamb  /  iamb   / (weak-stress added)
```

> The ev / il that / men do / lives af / ter them (regular iambic pentameter)

AVOID THE TICK-TOCK REGULARITY SYNDROME. It's deadly. SUBSTITUTE!

RHYME

Rhyme can be defined as the repetition of vowel and consonantal sounds. The beginning (or initial) sound(s) of the rhyming syllables MUST BE DIFFERENT; but the nuclear vowel and the ending (terminal) sound(s) MUST BE THE SAME.

> EXAMPLES (true rhymes): old, cold | box, clocks | lock, clock | scream, dream |
> follow, hollow | billow, pillow | dumb, chum | style, smile, pile, guile, while |
> mop, stop, chop crop | fun, son, sun, gun, done | love, above, shove, glove |
> sin, begin, grin, shin, twin, skin | bottle, throttle | higgledy, piggledy | down, crown,
> clown, drown | whippet, snippet, whip it, grip it, trip it | erase, my face, disgrace |
> underneath, dirty teeth | everywhere, rocking chair, wash and wear, rumpled hair |

"Imperfect" or "near" rhymes *aren't* rhymes.

<div align="center">

[ʌ]   [o]   [u]

</div>

     EXAMPLES: love, grove, move (vowels are all different)

<div align="center">

lost, most (ditto)   heaven, given (ditto)

</div>

In popular song lyrics, the illusion or "effect" of rhyme is sometimes attempted by similarity of vowel sounds, while the ending sound(s) are different: e.g., smile, child | kiss, lips | sent, friends | knows, show | eyes, nice

<div align="center">

/z/   /s/

</div>

THESE ARE NOT RHYMES. The pairings are exploiting similarity of vowels (assonance), but do not fit the definition of 'rhyme' given above. Words of course rhyme with themselves; but *repetition* of a word as a way of creating rhyme should be done only rarely, and for special effect or rhetorical point.

Basic definitions established, let's turn to a discussion of the

AFFECTIVE RESOURCES OF THE ENGLISH SOUND SYSTEM

Skillful use (manipulation? exploitation?) of RHYTHM, METRICS, and RHYME in poetic discourse enables the sound (or phonic) resources of the English language to engender emotional responses in readers.

As in music, where such sound-based phenomena as TEMPO, RHYTHM, HARMONY (or DISHARMONY = dissonance), PACING, KEY SIGNATURE (and MAJOR and MINOR modes), CHANGE OF TEMPO (fast to slow, etc.), DYNAMICS (relative levels of "loud" and "soft"), CHANGE OF DYNAMICS (loud to soft, etc.), and VARIATIONS OF INSTRU-MENTATION (drums, oboe, trumpet, harp, saxophone, the singing voice, castanets, flute, tambourine, violins, cello, etc. and various combinations) are used by composers to add variety and emotionally affect the listener, so in poetry the various components of the English sound system (inherently *part of*, or intrinsic to, the sound system) can be "managed" to evoke emotional responses in readers.

Specifically:

RHYTHM, established over a series of lines, can—as in music—develop a mood (calmness, smoothness, roughness, jollity, excitement, disquiet, rough-and-tumble, etc.); or establish a "symbolic" correspondence with what is being presented by way of "content" in the words (i.e., sound can echo sense); or, through internal changes of rhythm, draw contrasts and *alter* the reader's mood which has previously been established.

METRICS, in a closely related way, establishes a general tone; builds reader's expectations in subtle (and perhaps unconscious) ways; once a regular metrical pattern has been established, authors can insert deviations from it to reverse the reader's expectations and elicit surprise. A metrical scheme *does* impose certain restraints of freedom on the poet: you've got to conform to the rules you've set up, stay within the boundaries. This can be excessively limiting if what you're trying to express doesn't go well in such constraints; yet, the requirements of metrical form confer a kind of freedom, too: you know what you have to do, and then can make subtle variations on it as occasion demands. Thus you have your cake and eat it too, building

reader's expectations of the predictable, then surprising the reader to accomplish your ends by reversing expectations to good purpose.

RHYME (when well-handled) shares with metrics the advantages of expectation building and possible reversals. Well-turned rhymes are very satisfying to the reader; they confer a sense of "harmony" and allow for nail-on-the-head definitiveness of "clinching" statement. You can drive home a point in a memorable way (the rhyme helps the reader remember what you've said). Also, for many readers, there is something esthetically pleasing in watching a poet maneuver within the confines of a rhyme-scheme—if the poet does it well. Internal rhymes (*within* lines) add emotional impact if well-handled, and can in subtle ways "build" or "reinforce" the poem's argument.

Now let's turn to:

THE INTERACTION OF VOWELS AND CONSONANTS:

Affective dimensions of vowels and consonants are not easy to describe. We seem to respond to them in fairly predictable ways; and there is a suggestive correlation sometimes apparent between the *sounds* of words and their cognitive meanings. High, tense vowels seem frequently to "symbolize" things that are small, tiny, tight (teensy-weensy, itsy, bitsy); back, open vowels frequently seem to "symbolize" emotional states of pain or anguish, or produce a sense of grandeur. Some words are echoic (onomatopoeic), in that they closely resemble in *sound* what they signify: hiss, buzz, bang, groan, tinkle, sigh, crash, etc. Complex consonant clusters can slow the reader down, produce dissonance (disharmony) through their clashing: task-master, ecstatic, sclerosis, wasps. Vowels and consonants in their normal sequences can build striking effects.

Read these aloud:

       The buzzing of innumerable bees.   Leilani loved to live in Honolulu.

From Robert Louis Stevenson, "Windy Nights":
       By at the gallop he goes, and then
       By he comes back at the gallop again. *(repeat the last four words rapidly four times)*

From Gerard Manley Hopkins, "No worse, there is none":
       Pitched past pitch of grief, / more pangs will, schooled at fore-pangs, wilder wring.

Read aloud the following lines from Alexander Pope's *Essay on Criticism* which cleverly illustrate some of these principles:
       True ease in writing comes from art, not chance,
       As those move easiest who have learn'd to dance.
       'Tis not enough no harshness gives offense,
       The sound must seem an echo to the sense:
       Soft is the strain when Zephyr gently blows,
       And the smooth stream in smoother numbers flows;
       But when loud surges lash the sounding shore,
       The hoarse, rough verse should like the torrent roar:
       When Ajax strives some rock's vast weight to throw,
       The line too labours, and the words move slow:

Not so, when swift Camilla scours the plain,
Flies o'er th'unbending corn, and skims along the main.

 (NOTE. This passage is in heroic couplets: IAMBIC PENTAMETER lines (end-stopped), rhyming aa bb cc dd, etc.) The last line, with twelve syllables (six feet instead of five), is a deviation with the specialized name, "Alexandrine".

OTHER AFFECTIVE DEVICES:

REPETITION OF WORDS, PHRASES, LINES:

On the sound level alone, these repeated patterns can have a cumulative "building" effect, or aid "symbolically" in the incremental construction of an argument, or create sets of expectations in the reader (as in using the same word or phrase to begin each stanza, or to serve as a refrain or chorus at intervals throughout a long poem). Sometimes an effect is achieved like the repetitious tolling of a bell, or a continuous "ground" underlying a melodic musical line). (Note the number of times the word 'words' is used in the second stanza of the Elinor Wylie poem quoted below, and the effect which the repetition engenders; also, note the threefold repetition of 'I love' in the whole poem.

In the Hopkins sonnet "God's Grandeur", below, note the threefold repetition of 'have trod' in line 5. Of course the *meaning* of these words and phrases is important in a lexical sense, and the repetitions have a rhetorical significance in the development of the poem's argument. But by virtue of their sound alone, the repeated sequences of vowels and consonants in these words and phrases are able to affect the reader emotionally in their own right.

ALLITERATION is the repetition of consonants, particularly on stressed syllables and at the beginnings of words. These consonantal repetitions have a cumulative effect. See Hopkins' "God's Grandeur" below (line 1: **g**randeur/**G**od; 2, **sh**ining, **sh**ook; **f**lame, **f**oil; 3, **g**athers, **g**reatness; 4, **r**eck, **r**od; 7, **sm**udge, **sm**ell) and Wylie's "Pretty Words" (line 1, **p**'s; 3, **s**'s: **c**ircle, **s**lowly, **s**ilken, **s**wish; 5, **d**'s; 7, **s**'s; 8, / **k** /'s: **c**ream, **c**urds).

	rhyme
And Algernon Swinburne, an extreme case:	
Before the **b**eginning of years	a
There came to the **m**aking of **m**an	b
Time, with a **g**ift of **t**ears;	a
Grief, with a **g**lass that ran; . . .	b

ASSONANCE is the repetition or sequential grouping together of identical or clearly similar vowel sounds. This also imparts a cumulative effect, and may also have "symbolic" significance. Note the different patterns of assonance in the following sonnet by John Milton's "On the late Massacre in Piedmont" (you'll have to read it aloud to get the full effect):
(end-rhyme)

a	Avenge, **O** **L**ord, thy *s*laughter'd *S*aints, whose b**o**nes
b	Lie *s*catter'd on the Alpine mountains c**o**ld,
b	Ev'n them who kept thy truth s**o** pure of **o**ld
a	When all our Fathers worship't *St*ocks and *St***o**nes,
a	Forget not: in thy book record their gr**oa**ns
b	Who were thy Sheep and in their antient F**o**ld
b	*S*lain by the bloody Piemontese that *r***o**ll'd

a	Mother with Infant down the *R*ocks. Their m**oa**ns
c	The Vales redoubled to the Hills, and they
d	to Heav'n. Their martyr'd blood and ashes *s*ow
c	O're all th' Italian fields where **s**till doth *s*way
d	The **t*riple *T*yrant: that from these may gr**ow** * the Pope
c	A *h*under'd-f**ol**d, who *h*aving learnt thy *w*ay
d	Early may fly **the Babyl**o**nian *w***oe**. ** the Church of Rome

Reading the [o] words at the ends of lines sequentially downward is a mournful trip.

Gerard Manley Hopkins "God's Grandeur" *(Read aloud)*

a	The world is charged with the *g*randeur of *G*od.
b	It will *f*lame out, like *sh*ining from *sh*ook *f*oil;
b	It *g*athers to a *g*reatness, like the ooze of oil
a	Crushed. Why do m**e**n th**e**n *n*ow *n*ot **r*eck his *r*od? *take heed of
a	*G*enerations have *tr*od, have *tr*od, have *tr*od; [trod / trade]
b	And all is seared with *tr*ade; bleared, smeared with *t*oil; *internal rhyme*
b	And wears man's *sm*udge and *sh*ares man's *sm*ell: the *s*oil *internal rhyme*
a	Is bare *n*ow, *n*or can *f*oot *f*eel, being *sh*od.
c	And for all th**i**s, *n*ature is *n*ever sp**e**nt; *alliteration; assonance*
d	There l**i**ves the *d*earest fr**e**shn**e**ss *d*eep *d*own th**ing**s;
c	And though the *l***a**st *l*ights off the bl**a**ck *W*est w**e**nt *alliteration, assonance*
d	Oh, morning, at the *b*r**o**wn *br***in**k eastward, spr**ing**s—
c	Because the **H**oly Gh**o**st over the *b*ent
d	*W*orld *br*oods *w*ith warm *br***ea**st and with ah! *br*ight *w***ing**s.

In this sonnet from Elinor Wylie, note the sound symbolism, assonance, alliteration, and brilliant use of rhyme. You'll have to read it aloud, with vocal inflection following the phrasal sense, to get the full effect. It will then be clear that the words themselves, by virtue of their rhythmic structure and articulatory properties speed up and slow down expression and "symbolically" reflect sense. (There's no way to say 'Warm lazy words' fast and be consistent with her intention of imaging some words as "white cattle under trees".) Note the play of vowels and consonants.

"Pretty Words" *(READ ALOUD)*

rhyme

a	*P*oets make *p*ets of *p*retty, docile *w*ords:
b	I love smooth *w*ords, like gold-enamelled *f*ish
b	Which *c*ircle *s*lowly w**i**th a *s***i**lken *s*w**i**sh,
a	And t**e**nder ones, like *d*owny-f**ea**thered birds;
a	*W*ords sh**y** and *d*appled, *d*eep-**eye**d *d*eer in *h*erds,
b	Come to my *h***a**nd, and *p*layful **i**f I w**i**sh,
b	Or *p*urring *s*oftly at a *s***i**lver *d***i**sh,
a	Blue *P*ersian *k*ittens, fed on *c*ream and *c*urds ./k/ /k/ /k/
c	I *l*ove bright *w*ords, *w*ords up and singing early;
d	*W*ords that are *l*uminous in the dark, and sing;
e	*W*arm *l*azy *w*ords, white *c*attle under trees;
c	I *l*ove *w*ords opalescent, *c*ool, and pearly,
e	Like *m*idsummer *m*oths, and honied *w*ords like bees,
d	**G**ilded and *st*icky, w**i**th a li**tt**le *st***i**ng. *assonance*

The poem is about words. The word 'words' occurs ten times, if you include its use in the title. The phrase 'I love' occurs three times. Alliteration, like rhyme, coming on important words, can be an emphasizer, a reinforcer of meaning. And see how all of this comes together in Wilfred Owen's "Dulce et Decorum Est", one of the finest anti-war poems ever written (he was killed in 1918, just before the Armistice):

"Dulce Et Decorum Est" *(read aloud, dramatically)*
["Sweet and fitting it is to die for one's country."]

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,
Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs
And towards our distant rest began to trudge.
Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots
But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind;
Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots
Of tired, outstripped *Five-Nines that dropped behind.   *gas shells

Gas! GAS! Quick, boys!—An ecstasy of fumbling,
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time;
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling
And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime . . .
Dim, through the misty panes and thick green light,
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

In all my dreams, before my helpless sight,
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

If in some smothering dreams you too could pace
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,—
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old lie: Dulce et decorum est
Pro patria mori.

VARYING THE LONG METRICAL POETIC LINE
Two poetic modes which have served effectively to create extended poetic discourse in English are *the heroic couplet* and *blank verse*.

THE HEROIC COUPLET:
The heroic couplet may be defined as IAMBIC PENTAMETER lines rhyming in pairs. In their great flowering in the late 17th Century and throughout the 18th Century, the lines were usually end-stopped—though of course there is always the possibility of carrying the thought over to

subsequent lines (and the syntax of the sentence also—a structuring called 'enjambment'). When the thought is contained within two end-stopped lines, it's almost as though the pair of lines constitute a mini-stanza unto themselves. The form lends itself to epigrammatic statement (EPIGRAM: a short, terse, pithy, sometimes humorous or barbed statement, comment, observation, etc.). Within the two lines of each couplet, there frequently is parallelism of structure, a use of antithesis (reversal or opposition of ideas), balance, and symmetry. The form was used in the late 17th Century for verse drama (the speeches being cast into it); and in the 18th Century, while drama was still in vogue, the form proved itself well-suited for extended philosophical discourse, narrative (storytelling), essays-in-verse, social commentary, and satire. The poet John Dryden (d.1700) was a famous and popular user of the form: but it was probably used most brilliantly by Alexander Pope (1688-1744), whose skill in manipulating the *caesura* (the "pause" within the line) gave the form enormous flexibility. Pope's influence dominated poetic practice for half a century; and although the heroic couplet is not currently a popular mode ("free verse" being the dominant practice), it's nonetheless a formal scheme which has much to reveal about what makes effective writing.

Alexander Pope: from the "Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot" (I've excerpted the attack on Lord Hervey. Effeminate in manner (which Pope did not like), Hervey was a political smoothie, a sycophantic self-server and confidant to Queen Anne (who is called Eve in the poem). Rhyme-scheme reads vertically downward at the beginnings of the lines. Observe the floating placement of the CAESURA (or inline pause), which I've symbolized as #):

a	Yet let / me flap / this bug / with gild / ed wings,	
a	This paint / ed child / of dirt, / # that stinks / and stings;	(*note alliteration*)
b	Whose buzz / # the wit / ty and / the fair / annoys:	
b	Yet wit / ne'er tastes, / # and beaut / y ne'er / enjoys:	
c	So well / bred span / iels # civ / illy / delight	*(adjacent /**s**/ 's force a caesura)*
c	In mum / bling of / the game / they dare / not bite.	
d	Eternal smiles # his emptiness betray,	
d	As shallow streams run dimpling all the way.	
e	Whether in florid impotence he speaks,	
e	And, # as the prompter breathes, # the puppet squeaks;	
f	Or at the ear of Eve, # familiar Toad,	
f	Half froth, # half venom, # spits himself abroad,	
g	In puns, or politics, or tales, or lies,	
g	Or spite, or smut, or rhymes, or blasphemies.	
h	His wit all see-saw, # between *that* and *this*,	*(note how the structure reinforces*
h	Now high, # now low, # now master up, # now miss,	*his argument; note also the*
h	And he himself # one vile Antithesis.	*third rhyming line: = a triplet)*
i	Amphibious thing! # that acting either part,	
i	The trifling head # or the corrupted heart,	(*alliteration of* 'head' *and* 'heart')
j	Fop at the toilet, # flatt'rer at the *board	* table
j	Now trips a Lady, # and now struts a Lord.	*(note contrast of verbs)*

A different type of poem: Pope, from "An Essay on Man":

> Know then / thyself / # presume / not God / to scan;
> The prop / er stud/ y of / Mankind / # is Man.

Placed on this isthmus of a middle state,
A Being darkly wise, # and rudely great;
With too much knowledge for the Sceptic side,
With too much weakness for the Stoic's pride,
He hangs between; # in doubt to act, or rest;
In doubt to deem himself a God, # or Beast;
In doubt his Mind or Body to prefer;   *(note threefold repetition of* 'in doubt'*)*
Born but to die, # and reas'ning but to err;
Alike in ignorance, # his reason such,
Whether he thinks too little, # or too much:
Chaos of Thought and Passion, # all confused;
*Still by himself abused, # or disabused;   *always
Created half to rise, # and half to fall;   *(parallel structure: antithesis)*
Great lord of all things, # yet a prey to all;   *(the passage shows how heroic couplets*
Sole judge of Truth, # in endless Error hurled: *may be used to develop an argument:*
The glory, # jest, # and riddle of the world!   *in this case, a trait-definition of the*
                                                                                        human condition)

The form lends itself to epigram and to the "quotable quote": see Pope's "Lines Graved on the Collar of a Dog":

I am His Highness' Dog at *Kew;   * a royal palace
Pray tell me, Sir, whose Dog are you?

Or, from "The Rape of the Lock":

The hungry Judges # soon the sentence sign,   *(perfect iambic pentameter!)*
And wretches hang # that jury-men may dine.

One of the finest examples I know of the varied and effective use of end-rhymed couplets and triplets to describe, characterize, and tell a story is in Book Four of one of America's great longpoems, Stephen Vincent Benét's *John Brown's Body* (1928). In this poem, Benét tells the story of the American Civil War, using rhyme in the depictions of the Confederacy dealing with the plantation aristocracy, and blank verse (sometimes ragged and irregular) in his recountings of the Union Army and Lincoln's Presidency. In Book Four he has a brilliant description of smugglers who took their ships through the Union coastal blockade to bring supplies to the Confederacy, and a moving description of Mary Lou Wingate, matriarch of a doomed plantation. *Read it aloud*; note the wonderful rhythmic effects, the way that vowels and consonants work together:

For the coasts are staked with a Union net
But the dark fish slip through the meshes yet,
Shadows sliding without a light,
Through the dark of the moon, in the dead of night,
Carrying powder, carrying cloth,
Hoops for the belle and guns for the fighter,
Guncotton, opium, bombs and tea.
Fashionplates, quinine and history.
For Charleston's corked with a Northern fleet
And the Bayou City lies at the feet
Of a damn-the-torpedoes commodore;   (Farragut)

The net draws tighter and ever tighter,
But the fish dart past till the end of the war,
From Wilmington to the Rio Grande,
And the sandy Bahamas are Dixie Land
Where the crammed, black shadows start for the trip
That, once clean-run, will pay for the ship.
They are caught, they are sunk with all aboard.
They scrape through safely and praise the Lord,
Ready to start with the next jammed hold
To pull Death's whiskers out in the cold,
The unrecorded skippers and mates
Whom even their legend expurgates,
The tough daredevils from twenty ports
Who thumbed their noses at floating forts
And gnawed through the bars of a giant's cage
For a cause or a laugh or a living-wage,
Who five years long on a sea of night,
Pumped new blood to the vein bled white
—And, incidentally, made the money
For the strangely rich of the after years—
For the flies will come to the open honey,
And, should war and hell have the same dimensions,
Both have been paved with the best intentions
And both are as full of profiteers.
. . .
Mary Lou Wingate, as slightly made
And as hard to break as a rapier-blade,
Bristol's daughter and Wingate's bride,
Never well since the last child died
But staring at pain with courteous eyes.
When the pain outwits it, the body dies,
Meanwhile the body bears the pain.
She loved her hands and they made her vain,
The tiny hands of her generation
That gathered the reins of the whole plantation;
The velvet sheathing the steel demurely
In the trained, light grip that holds so surely.
She was at work by candlelight,
She was at work in the dead of night,
Smoothing out troubles and healing schisms
And doctoring phthisics and rheumatisms,
Guiding the cooking and watching the baking,
The sewing, the soap-and-candle-making,
The brewing, the darning, the lady-daughters,
The births and deaths in the negro-quarters,
Seeing that Suke had some new, strong shoes
And Joe got a week in the calaboose,
While Dicey's Jacob escaped a whipping
And the jellybag dripped with its proper dripping,

And the shirts and estrangements were neatly mended,
And all of the tasks that never ended.
Her manner was gracious but hardly fervent
And she seldom raised her voice to a servant.
She was often mistaken, not often blind,
And she knew the whole duty of womankind,
To take the burden and have the power
And seem like the well-protected flower,
To manage a dozen industries
With a casual gesture in scraps of ease,
To hate the sin and to love the sinner
And to see that the gentlemen got their dinner
Ready and plenty and piping-hot
Whether you wanted to eat or not.
And always, always, to have the charm
That makes the gentlemen take your arm
But never the bright, unseemly spell
That makes strange gentlemen love too well,
Once you were married and settled down
With a suitable gentleman of your own.
And when that happened, and you had bred
The requisite children, living and dead,
To pity the fool and comfort the weak
And always let the gentlemen speak,
To succor your love from deep-struck roots
When gentlemen went to bed in their boots,
And manage a gentleman's whole plantation
In the manner befitting your female station.
This was the creed that her mother taught her
And the creed that she taught to every daughter.
She knew her Bible—and how to flirt
With a swansdown fan and a brocade skirt.
For she trusted in God but she liked formalities
And the world and Heaven were both realities.
—In Heaven, of course, we should all be equal,
But, until we came to that golden sequel,
Gentility must keep to gentility
Where God and breeding had made things stable,
While the rest of the cosmos deserved civility
But dined in its boots at the second-table.
This view may be reckoned a trifle narrow,
But it had the driving force of an arrow,
And it helped Mary Lou to stand up straight,
For she was gentle, but she could hate
And she hated the North with the hate of Jael   (Old Testament, *Judges*, 4: 21)
When the dry hot hands went seeking the nail,
The terrible hate of women's ire,
The smoky, the long-consuming fire.
The Yankees were devils, and she could pray,

For devils, no doubt, upon Judgment Day,
But now in the world, she would hate them still
And send the gentlemen out to kill.
The gentlemen killed and the gentlemen died,
But she was the South's incarnate pride
That mended the broken gentlemen
And sent them out to the war again,
That kept the house with the men away
And baked the bricks where there was no clay,
Made courage from terror and bread from bran
And propped the South on a swansdown fan
Through four long years of ruin and stress,
The pride—and the deadly bitterness.
Let us look at her now, let us see her plain,
She will never be quite like this again.
Her house is rocking under the blast
And she hears it tremble, and still stands fast,
But this is the last, this is the last.
The last of the wine and the white corn meal,
The last high fiddle singing the reel,
The last of the silk with the Paris label,
The last blood-thoroughbred safe in the stable
—Yellow corn meal and a jackass colt,
A door that swings on a broken bolt,
Brittle old letters spotted with tears
And a wound that rankles for fifty years—
This is the last of Wingate Hall,
The last bright August before the Fall,
Death has been near, and Death has passed,
But this is the last, this is the last.
There will be hope, and a scratching pen.
There will be cooking for tired men.
The waiting for news with shut, hard fists,
And the blurred, strange names in the battle-lists,
The April sun and the April rain,
But never this day come back again.
But she is lucky, she does not see
The axe-blade sinking into the tree
Day after day, with a slow, sure stroke
Till it chops the mettle from Wingate oak.
The house is busy, the cups are filling,
To welcome the gentlemen back from killing,
The hams are boiled and the chickens basting,
Fat Aunt Bess is smiling and tasting,
Cudjo's napkin is superfine,
He knows how the gentlemen like their wine,
Amanda is ready, Louisa near her,
Glistering girls from a silver mirror,
Everyone talking, everyone scurrying,

Upstairs and downstairs, laughing and hurrying,
Everyone giving and none denying,
There is only living, there is no dying.
War is a place but it is not here,
The peace and the victory are too near.
One more battle, and Washington taken,
The Yankees mastered, the South unshaken,
Fiddlers again, and the pairing season,
The old-time rhyme and the old-time reason,
The grandchildren, and the growing older
Till at last you need a gentleman's shoulder,
And the pain can stop, for the frayed threads sever,
But the house and the courtesy last forever.
. . .

BLANK VERSE:

Blank verse may be defined as unrhymed lines of ten syllables each, measured in IAMBIC PENTAMETER. Lines are usually not end-stopped: i.e., the thought being expressed may extend over several lines, and sentences may end in the body of the line itself, another sentence immediately beginning ("enjambment"). Blank verse is a favorite form of poetic writing in English, used with great distinction by such writers as Shakespeare in his plays, Milton in the long epic *Paradise Lost*, Wordsworth, Robert Browning, and Robert Frost. The form provides great flexibility, allows for extended discourse (speeches, description, narrative, essay-writing, summary, character-development, etc.). It is admirably suited to long works. To quote Thrall, Hibbard, and Holman in their *Handbook to Literature:* "Because of its freedom it appears easy to write, but good blank verse probably demands more artistry and genius than any other verse form. The freedom gained through lack of RIME is offset by the demands for richness to be secured through its privileges. This richness may be obtained by the skillful poet through a variety of means: the shifting of the CAESURA, or pause, from place to place within the line; the shifting of STRESS among syllables; the use of the run-on line, which permits of thought-grouping in large or small blocks...; variation in tonal qualities by changing DICTION from passage to passage; and, finally, the adaptation of the form to reproduction of differences in the speech of characters in dramatic and narrative verse and to differences of emotional expression." (pp. 59-60). Some examples: *Please read them all ALOUD.*

Shakespeare (dramatic speech)—from *Hamlet*:

O that / this too / too sol / id flesh / would melt,
Thaw, # and / resolve / itself / into / a dew!
Or that / the Ev / erlast / ing had / not fix'd
His can / on 'gainst / self-slaught /er # O / God! # God!
How wear / y, # stale, # / flat, # and / unprof / itab / le   (+)
Seem to / me # all / the us / es of / this world!
Fie on't! # ah, fie! # 'Tis an unweeded garden   (+)
That grows to seed; # things rank and gross in nature   (+)
Possess it merely. # That it should come to this!
But two months dead! # Nay, not so much, # not two.

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From John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (epic narrative):

<div style="margin-left:2em">

So spake our Mother *Eve*, and *Adam* heard
Well pleas'd, # but answer'd not; # for now too nigh
Th' Archangel stood, # and from the other Hill
To their fixt Station, # all in bright array
The Cherubim descended; # on the ground
Gliding meteorous, as Ev'ning Mist
Ris'n from a River o're the marish glides,
And gathers ground # fast at the Labourers heel
Homeward returning. High in front ***advanc't**   (*****an adjective, not a verb)
The brandisht Sword of God before them blaz'd
Fierce as a Comet; which with torrid heat,
And vapour as the Libyan Air adust,
Began to parch that temperate Clime; whereat   ("temp'rate")
In either hand the hastning Angel caught
Our lingering Parents, and to th'Eastern Gate
Led them direct, and down the Cliff as fast
To the subjected Plain; then disappear'd.   (rather abruptly!)
. . .
Some natural tears they drop'd, but wip'd them soon;
The World was all before them, where to choose
Their place of rest, and Providence their guide;
They hand in hand with wandring steps and slow,
Through Eden took their solitary way.

</div>

In Robert Browning's poem, "The Bishop Orders his Tomb at Saint Praxed's Church," the worldly Renaissance prelate is telling his out-of-wedlock son how and where he wants his tomb erected in the cathedral. He is angry because his rival Gandolf, dying first, grabbed one of the best locations for *his* tomb; but the Bishop will make do with what's left. He envisions the beautiful marble, etc. that will grace his sepulcher; and then in a paranoid turn of his enfeebling and wandering mind, he "sees" that his son is going to cheat him, pay him back, with inferior materials. Note Browning's psychological twists, the dense, congested turns of thought, his skillful use of caesura, rhythmic variation, and emphasis to characterize the psychology of the Bishop. (Speech, again, like Hamlet's soliloquy above, and called *dramatic monologue*.)

<div style="margin-left:2em">

And so, about this tomb of mine. I fought
With tooth and nail to save my niche, ye know:
—Old Gandolf cozened me, despite my care;
Shrewd was that snatch from out the corner South
He graced his carrion with, God curse the same!
Yet still my niche is not so cramped but thence
One sees the pulpit o'the epistle-side,
And somewhat of the choir, those silent seats,
And up into the aery dome where live
The angels, and a sunbeam's sure to lurk:
And I shall fill my slab of basalt there,
And 'neath my tabernacle take my rest. . . .
Peach-blossom marble all, the rare, the ripe

</div>

> As fresh-poured red wine of a mighty pulse.
> . . .
> For ye have stabbed me with ingratitude
> To death—ye wish it—God, ye wish it! Stone—   (Iambic Pentameter)
> Gritstone, a-crumble! Clammy squares which sweat   (Trochaic Foot 1)
> As if the corpse they keep were oozing through—
> . . .   *(flexible, yes?)*

Having discussed poetry of regular metrical scansion and poems employing rhyme, we should examine one further type of poetry which has proved very popular in the 20th Century and is continuing as a dominant mode in the 21st: Free Verse.

FREE VERSE (French *vers libre*) is poetry which has no consistently regularized meter, prescribed line-length, or fixed pattern of rhymes (usually it has no rhymes at all). The rhythmical patterns are based on natural speech rhythms, the boundaries of the individual phrase, and the span of the breath sequence. Stress patterns fall as they would in speech, "following the thought." The "freedom" poets gain by not being bound by metrical and line-length constraints allows them great flexibility of expression—in word-choice, structuring, pacing, patterning of lines. This freedom, though, confers other kinds of constraints and responsibilities. (It's *not* the case that "anything goes"!) The absence of formal boundaries (and the discipline which they impose) requires poets to be doubly vigilant to guard against wordiness, wheel-spinning, lexical and structural ambiguity, vagueness, pointless repetition, etc. To write good free verse requires focus, concentration, keen awareness of what is being said, acute sensitivity to phrase-structure, and editorial skills of a high order.

THE CONCEPT OF THE LINE (and PRINCIPLES OF LINE-BREAKING)

While in free verse the line *length* is extremely flexible (there is no prescription as to how long or short lines must be), the free-verse poet must be concerned with what the individual line does or accomplishes. What role, or function, does a particular line perform in the poem as a whole? Does it constitute a thought-unit in its own right? present an image? carry some freight of meaning? In free verse, the line may be a whole sentence unto itself; it may be a series of items forming a list or catalog; it may be a prepositional phrase, or even a single word. The point is: does each line have a purpose for being there isolated unto itself? does it have its own integrity within the poem? (A line should not be an arbitrary assemblage or grouping of words: it should be doing something to justify itself as having been granted line status.) Related to this concept of the integrity of the line is the crucially important matter of where a line should be broken (or where it should end). I would suggest that, as a starter, it would be useful to see the line in terms of phrasal units: those normal groupings of words which in English constitute the building-blocks of sentences.

EXAMPLE:

Bob and Sarah,   my friends   of many years,   have come   back   in time   for tea.

(I have sequentially, at different levels of analysis, underlined the phrase groupings: note how they nest one inside the other.)

        Bob and Sarah : compound subject of sentence
        my friends : noun phrase
        many years : noun phrase
        of many years : prepositional phrase, adjectivally modifying 'my friends'
        my friends of many years : noun phrase, appositive to subject 'Bob and Sarah'
        have come : verb phrase
        back : single-word adverbial phrase, modifying 'have come'
        in time : prepositional phrase, adverbially modifying 'have come'
        for tea : prepositional phrase, adverbially modifying 'have come' but possibly 'in time'
        have come back : verbal phrase, with one-word adverbial complement
        in time for tea : prepositional phrase, adverbially modifying 'have come'
        have come back in time for tea : verb phrase, full predicate

How could this sentence be broken into "poetic lines"? (NOTE. It is *not* a "poetic" sentence: I am using it only for illustrative purposes.)

1) Bob and Sarah
   my friends of many years
   have come back in time
   for tea.
*(Note the omission of the commas
in the appositive; a possibility as
long as structural ambiguity doesn't
result.)(I don't like this example much.)*

2) Bob and Sarah, my friends   *(Note presence of commas*
   of many years,   *framing the appositive.)*
   have come back
   in time for tea.
   (I don't like this version very well, but it's possible.)

3) Bob
      and Sarah
  my friends   of many years
  have come back   in time for tea.

(I don't like this one either.)

4) Bob and Sarah, my friends of many years,
     have come back in time for tea.

    *(Commas required again, since unlike (1) the appositive
    does not have individual line-status to separate it from
    the main-sentence elements.) (This read like prose.)*

Given the limited possibilities of this unpromising sentence, I would personally prefer the following:

      5) Bob and Sarah
        my friends of many years
        have come back
        in time for tea.   *(A combination of (1) land (2). My next best*
                      choice would be (4).)

Any of the five versions above would be possible. BUT I THINK IT WOULD BE AN ERROR TO BREAK THE SENTENCE INTO LINES SUCH AS THE FOLLOWING:

6) *NO!* Bob and
       Sarah
       my friends of
       many
       years
       have come back in
       time for tea.

7) Bob and Sarah, my
   friends of many
   years, have come
   back in time for
   tea.

8) Bob and Sarah my
   friends of
   many years
   have come
   back in time
   for tea.

To my mind, these three examples (6, 7, 8) represent arbitrary and capricious line breaks. The integrity of the individual phrase is violated; the reader is jolted by unfamiliar cleavages in accustomed phrase-structure to no purpose (which needlessly complicates the reader's process of understanding what the poet is saying). In (6), two ambiguities are introduced in the last two lines. In (8), a structural ambiguity is created which potentially changes the meaning of the original to suggest time-travel.

I question whether it's generally a good policy to end a line with a conjunction ('and') or a preposition ('of', 'for', 'in'), or a possessive ('my'). Adjectival and adverbial modifiers may be separated from the noun phrases and verb phrases they modify—but only with care, *and for good reason,* as:— for emphasis, or because the poet wishes to invest them with their own peculiar freight of meaning. In general, the normal phrasal clusters of accustomed idiom should be preserved *unless there is a good reason to break the pattern*. (And it's important to remember that moving a modifier too far from what it modifies invites the possibility of ambiguity.)

As a rule of thumb, line-breaks should probably occur at the end of thought-units. This will usually conform to the structure of those word-clusters we call phrases. Ideally, each *line* should give the reader something particular to process, visualize, or "think about."

Although free verse has been used now and again throughout much of the history of English poetry, the mode has been extremely popular in the 20th Century. It is used by a great many contemporary poets, possibly because it has a more "natural" flow (approximating speech, and frequently with a "conversational" tone) and less artificiality (or appearance of self-conscious contrivance) than metrical verse, consistent rhyme-schemes, and fixed forms such as the sonnet, villanelle, rondeau, haiku, or sestina. These other modes are still widely used, of course, and are always available to the poet. But the free verse form is widely practiced. (Unfortunately, it is not always practiced effectively; I have a suspicion that many novice poets and untalented ones gravitate to free verse because (a) they see a lot of it done around them and, ignorant of other traditions, think that's what poetry "is"; (b) they like the "freedom" they think it confers by liberating them from the necessity of observing formal constraints; (c) they are fearful of attempting more structured verse, are too lazy to learn how to work with meter, rhyme, etc., or are unwilling to subject themselves to the discipline of formal requirements (not realizing that free verse requires equally demanding, though different, discipline); (d) they equate free verse with "free expression"; or (e) since they think (from reading too much *bad* free verse) that "anything goes", they use it in an attempt to mask their poetic incompetence. The results of (a) through (e) too frequently are slipshod, ineffective expression; incompetence masquerading as experimenta-tion; "licentious self-indulgence" instead of "freedom"; arbitrary and capricious line-breaks which obscure meaning and irritate the sensitive reader; and the intrusion of stupid structural ambiguities which disrupt the poem's intention. Good free verse is NOT "easy" to write.)

Free verse does give great flexibility to style and mode of expression, but it
requires the poet to exercise great care in controlling the poem's materials. You have
to continuously keep your eye on the ball, and spend much energy on focus,
concentration, editing. A practitioner of free verse should know that *each word
counts*: everything hinges on ECONOMY, PRECISION, CLARITY, VIVIDNESS, and
TACT (see ## 11, 19, 20, 23, pp. 2, 4, 5).

SOME EXAMPLES:

In the mid-nineteenth century, Walt Whitman inaugurated the modern phase of free verse writing in America. Note his "long line":

> When I heard the learn'd astronomer,
> When the proofs, the figures, were ranged in columns before me,
> When I was shown the charts and diagrams, to add, divide, and measure them,
> When I sitting heard the astronomer where he lectured with much applause
>   in the lecture-room,
> How soon unaccountable I became tired and sick,
> Till rising and gliding out I wander'd off by myself,
> In the mystical moist night-air, and from time to time,
> Look'd up in perfect silence at the stars.

In the mid-twentieth century, the mode was amplified by Allen Ginsberg, in "Howl" and in this passage from "America":

> . . .
> I sit in my house for days on end and stare at the roses in the closet.
> When I go to Chinatown I get drunk and never get laid.
> My mind is made up there's going to be trouble.
> You should have seen me reading Marx.
> My psychoanalyst thinks I'm perfectly right.
> I won't say the Lord's Prayer.
> I have mystical visions and cosmic vibrations.
> America I still haven't told you what you did to Uncle Max after he came over
> from Russia.
> I'm addressing you.
> Are you going to let your emotional life be run by Time Magazine? . . .

W. H. Auden, "In Memory of W. B. Yeats":

> He disappeared in the dead of winter:
> The brooks were frozen, the airports almost deserted,
> And snow disfigured the public statues;
> The mercury sank in the mouth of the dying day.
> What instruments we have agree
> The day of his death was a dark cold day. . . . *(it goes on)*

Denise Levertov, from "Matins":

> . . .
> The new day rises
> as heat rises,
> knocking in the pipes
> with rhythms it seizes for its own
> to speak of its invention—
> the real, the new-laid
> egg whose speckled shell
> the poet fondles and must break
> if he will be nourished. . . .

James Wright, "Two Hangovers":
>   I slouch in bed.
>   Beyond the streaked trees of my window,
>   All groves are bare.
>   Locusts and poplars changed to unmarried women
>   Sorting slate from anthracite
>   Between railroad ties:
>   The yellow-bearded winter of the depression
>   Is still alive somewhere, an old man
>   Counting his collection of bottle caps
>   In a tarpaper shack under the cold trees
>   Of my grave. . . . *(it goes on)*

And finally, contradicting what I've said earlier about observing phrasal integrity in making line-breaks, by E. E. Cummings, who (in my opinion) is one of America's most interesting poets:

in Just-
spring   when the world is mud-
luscious the little
lame balloonman

whistles far and wee

and eddieandbill come
running from marbles and
piracies and it's
spring

when the world is puddle-wonderful

the queer
old balloonman whistles
far   and   wee
and bettyandisbel come dancing

from hop-scotch and jump-rope and

it's
spring
and
        the

            goat-footed

balloonMan   whistles

far
and
wee