

Course sample

Please note that due to copyright reasons, some images may be greyed out in this course sample.

Open College of the Arts

0800 731 2116

enquiries@oca-uk.com



Creative Writing 1

Art of Poetry



Level HE4 – 40 CATS

Reproductions © The Bridgeman Art Library – London, New York, Paris.

This course was written by Meg Peacock

Open College of the Arts
Redbrook Business Park
Wilthorpe Road
Barnsley S75 1JN

Telephone: 01226 730 495
Email: enquiries@oca-uk.com
www.oca-uk.com

Registered charity number: 327446
OCA is a company limited by guarantee and
registered in England under number 2125674

Document control number cw1aop211210

Copyright OCA 2010

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means – electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording or otherwise – without prior permission of the publisher.

Contents

Times are given here as a guideline: you may want to spend more

	Approximate time in hours	Page
Before you start		5
Part one Getting started	80	11
The tools of the trade		12
Seeing the world anew		15
Assignment one		19
Part two Reading and developing your ear	80	21
To read or not to read?		22
Developing your ear		27
Assignment two		32
Part three Poems: form and content	80	33
Finding the form		34
Gathering and organising material		39
Assignment three		44
Part four Language and construction	80	45
The language of poetry		46
Drafting		50
Assignment four		52
Part five Redrafting and editing	80	53
Your final submission		54
Assignment five		61

Appendices

Glossary	62
Reading and resources	69
Guidelines for submission for formal assessment	74

Before you start

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

Course aims

The chief aim of *Creative Writing 1: Art of Poetry* is to help you write better poems. At the same time, the course will increase your understanding and enjoyment of good poetry, old and new, as you discover different ways of looking at poems and develop your understanding of poetic techniques and traditions. The course will provide you with the elements of a critical vocabulary, and help you towards a flexible and informed use of language.

Note that this course is not designed to provide direct help with getting work into print. However, your tutor may encourage you to seek publication if your work reaches an appropriate level.

On successful completion of this course, you will be able to:

- demonstrate awareness of the structure, form, limitations and specific strengths/problems of writing poetry
- draft and edit your own writing, choosing appropriate forms and techniques based on the critical skills you've developed
- reflect perceptively upon your own learning experience.

Your tutor

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

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

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

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

It will be helpful for your tutor to see some of the work that you produce in between assignments. For example, you could scan pages of your learning log and email them to your tutor. Or you could post your learning log as an online blog in the OCA website so that your tutor can see how your work is developing. It's particularly important that your tutor sees regular evidence of your development if you're planning to have your work on this course formally assessed.

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

Formal assessment

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

- the three course assignments of your choice selected from assignments two to five
- your reflective commentary on the course as a whole (1,500 – 2,000 words)
- your tutor report forms.

The critical review accounts for 10% of your final mark if you decide to have your work on this course formally assessed.

Only work done during the course should be submitted to your tutor or for formal assessment.

Your learning log

Your learning log is an integral part of this and every other OCA course. If you're new to OCA courses, read your **Keeping sketchbooks and learning logs** study guide for further information.

Use your learning log to record your progress through the course. Your learning log should contain:

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

If you wish, you can post your learning log as an online blog on the OCA website so that your tutor can see how your work is developing between assignments. It's particularly important that your tutor sees regular evidence of your development if you're planning to have your work on this course formally assessed.

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

Planning ahead

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The first assignment is a diagnostic assignment that will allow your tutor to get a feel for your writing and help them to decide how best to support you. This assignment is not submitted for formal assessment.

Managing your time

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

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

Reading

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

Referencing your reading

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

Art of Poetry

Part three Poems: form and content



Finding the form

Traditional form

Some people have a great facility, even from childhood, for making verses in traditional forms, using rhyme and a set metre; and they find enjoyment in the manipulation of language that's involved in this way of writing. It's a special sort of linguistic game.

In this course, you are not required to turn out sonnets or sestinas or villanelles or even rhyming couplets, though of course you are free to do so if you wish. Even if you don't want to try them yourself, it is worth looking at some of these forms to see how they are constructed, how they can be used and, in some cases, how modern poets have adapted them. *Staying Alive* is full of interesting examples.

Along with verse forms that have been around for centuries, you'll find more recently developed forms or sound patterns. In particular, syllabic verse (as opposed to metrical writing) has come increasingly to the fore in the last 50 years or so.

Here is a selection of poems from *Staying Alive*, chosen to illustrate a few different ways of constructing a poem. As you read them, think about the ways in which subject, form and style interact.

While Fleur Adcock, in *For a Five-Year-Old*, uses a simple rhyming and metrical form suited to her subject, in *Advice to a Discarded Lover* she uses swiftly moving nine-syllable lines with assonance rather than rhyme: e.g. changes/scavengers, chosen/comparison.

Bitcherel, by Eleanor Brown, uses traditional form to satirical effect. W H Auden uses two familiar metrical song shapes in *O tell me the truth about love* while Kit Wright wittily parodies a different kind of song tradition in *The All Purpose Country and Western Self Pity Song*.

A pleasing example of a poem which is not metrical, but has its own delicate rhythm, is David Scott's *Scattering Ashes*. In *Seven Silences*, a moving poem by Katrina Porteous about the foot and mouth outbreak, the four-line verses are irregular and their structure depends on the listing of seven moments.

You will find in this anthology a range of poems in free unrhymed form; two to consider are Carl Sandburg's *Grass and Full Moon* and *Little Frieda* by Ted Hughes.

Zbigniew Herbert has a delightful prose poem, translated from the Polish, which may leave you wondering what this piece might have gained or lost by being written in a more obviously poetical form.

Problems of writing in traditional form

Why are you not expected to use particular forms at the moment? Not because they are necessarily difficult in themselves: that is very much a subjective matter; it comes easily to some people and is utterly daunting to others. What you are being asked to do in this course is actually something more radical, which is to examine the use of language and its relationship to your own thought and feeling; to become more deeply conscious of the way words work, their powers of suggestion and association as well as their overt meaning, and to control them. The trouble with writing in set forms is that they can dominate your thinking and control you.

To illustrate by taking just one aspect of the problem: suppose you like the idea of a regular rhyme scheme. Well-worked rhyme can be a delight: it can set up expectation and anticipation in a way that moves the poem along; it can spring surprises; it can be witty; it can give a feeling of security and completeness. However, rhyming in English is difficult for various reasons.

There may be dozens of rhymes for one sound – ‘end’, for example – and precious few for another. (‘Orange’ is the notorious exemplar.) Among all the possible rhymes for the word you have there at the end of a line, few may offer promising connections of meaning or feeling: for light, for instance – *bite kite sight right tight height polite ammonite invite...*

It can easily happen that in hunting for a rhyme, and not being able to find one with exactly the meaning or associations or tone that you are after, you allow yourself to approximate; or the rhyme you settle for pulls the poem off track because its tone is wrong; or it just seems to bump. Worst of all, the limited range of possible rhymes may set you off along the primrose path of cliché (think of the moon/June/tune rhymes in romantic lyrics). You need precision – ‘just-rightness’ – and every approximation will undermine your thinking and weaken what you write.



Violin player to the Moon Hans Thoma

A different way of considering form

If you avoid set forms, what other ways are there of constructing a poem? What may give it a satisfactory shape, hold it together, stop it being a sort of heap of ideas and images?

Think of making a pot. You want it to be watertight, well balanced, not too heavy, pleasing to the eye and to the hand. Your first efforts at pot-making are likely to leak, to wobble, to be clumsy. You have more work to do in order to understand the materials and to develop certain skills. That is not a bad metaphor for making a poem. To illustrate some possible ways of finding a form, and of constructing a poem so that it works as a whole, here are some poems written by students.

The first poem is presented in an early draft form, and then as the writer completed it, making changes to both structure and imagery. Students took the words, *I am a...* and went from there.

I am a

*I am a rose –
a hidden symphony
played out in velvet.
The opening prelude –
guarded petals to
a budding pianissimo.*

*Solo or in concert,
layers of scented harmonies flow,
each petal a melody.
Vibrant rhapsodies, yet unspoken,
lie in the shadowed intervals.*

*I am a rose.
Interflora's perfumed agent,
a global language for communication,
satin petticoats at the Folies Bergeres,
the naked model at the Dutch school.*

*Not the cloned imitation
on hats and handbags,
the plastic pretender
haunting railway cafes,
the silken set
dis-gracing the toilets of garden centres.
I am a rose.*

The imagery of the first half of the poem is mostly taken from music: symphony, prelude, pianissimo, solo, harmonies, melody, rhapsodies, intervals. There are some rather moody adjectives: hidden, guarded, budding, scented, vibrant, unspoken, shadowed. It's all rather luscious, but vague, and not so far from chocolate box imagery, all 'played out in velvet.'

Then the poem seems to split, beginning again with a repetition of the first line followed by a much more varied range of images, none of them this time drawn from music; and then a set of negatives – what this rose, or this writer, is determined not to be. Then the repeated line. There's a big change in this second half, not only in the imagery but in the sounds, which are crisper and more energetic than those of the first two verses.

The writer decided to abandon the romantic imagery and to strip the poem down.

Rose

*I am a rose –
Interflora's perfumed agent,
a global language for communication,
St Valentine's ardent messenger,
the naked model of the Dutch school.*

*Not the cloned imitation of hats and handbags,
the tired apology at two-star accommodation,
the plastic pretenders haunting railway cafes,
the silken set
dis-gracing the toilets at garden centres.
Hybrid or wild-bred,
I am a rose.*

The poem developed into a forthright attack on phoniness. Now the rose is sharply observed throughout, in positives and negatives; the poem has been pulled together into one whole, with the repeated line firmly attached by the line, *hybrid or wild-bred*, forming a conclusion, and the language races. All that remained was to have a bit of fun with centring.

An irregular verse form that allows a poem to wander may seem like an easier option than a more closely-constructed form, and in a way it is; but it is harder to make a 'free' form hold together. Harder also to see where you are waffling.

The next poem is a brief section of a narrative, again by a student, about children playing by the 'cundy', a big drainpipe which is a challenge to crawl through. They are testing the nerve

of an 'outsider'. It's a simple poem with variety and coherence in the two styles of language that the writer has chosen, together with short hasty lines that reflect the feeling of the moment.

A voice from the tunnel

echoes –

Comin through!

What are they planning?

Why won't they say?

Weur ganna gan through the cundy!

A black gaping hole

is all she can see

Why d'ye keep waitin?

Gan on – are ye scared?

They're testing me out

They're thinking I'll make

some excuse to go home –

No I won't! I'll go through!

Here is the latter part of another student's poem about a child losing a mother figure. The poem builds up through a sequence of days.

*Sunday, I saw her bedroom door ajar,
glimpsed the lattice of bare wire.*

*Dust was swirling in the house.
Loath to stay, afraid to go,
I loitered in the yard,
lobbing a tennis ball against the fence.*

*Like an icy wind, the inkling came.
I watched the ball, grey with dirt,
trickling down the yard.*

The verses are tiny paragraphs. There are no distractions; the child's feeling and understanding are revealed through the images which are used as symbols.

As you read more, and write more, you will discover many other ways of establishing the unity of a poem without using a regular form.

Gathering and organising material

What will you write about?

Certain themes are explored in poetry, and have always been explored, over and over again. They can be reduced, roughly, to three: the natural world; love; death. There are inexhaustible quarries for the material of your poems; but if they have been exploited for centuries, how can you say anything new?

There's no need to strive after originality. What matters is to write truthfully and accurately from your own experience. Nobody has ever had precisely the same experience as you in precisely your circumstances, and that's the source of originality. It's like the unique timbre of a voice.

It is not only that, in Blake's words, '*a fool sees not the same tree that a wise man sees.*' What happens when you get a poem 'right' is that others recognise what you have said. There's a feeling of assent, sometimes including the response, 'I've never thought of it like that.' The reader's perception of the world is enlarged. Sometimes that occurs immediately; sometimes the reader has the sense that there's something interesting there, something they want to understand, and are sufficiently engaged by sounds, rhythms and images, to puzzle over it and re-read.

Thinking about the big themes

The natural world, and love, and death, and the infinite number of ways in which those themes may overlap: the range of subject matter open to you seems infinite. Are there any limitations?

Again I would urge you to write from your own first-hand experience. Some poems that even get published are about subjects of which the writer has no direct knowledge. The writers have chosen a 'big' theme which provokes strong emotion, and is therefore imagined to lend itself to poetry; but strong emotion alone does not make a poem. Faced with appalling events like the epidemic of foot and mouth, or the death of Princess Diana, people felt overwhelmed, and wanted to express their feelings in poetry before they had had time to digest the news; but the resulting poems could say little more than 'Oh dear, this is terrible.'

There's much to be said for Wordsworth's description of poetry as '*emotion recollected in tranquillity*'. Tackling a big subject head-on is very likely to produce a kind of verbal splat, or a poem of dire flatness. That's why, notoriously, poems by poets laureate on 'public' subjects can be so deadly. It's worth keeping in mind Emily Dickinson's comment: '*Tell all the truth, but tell it slant*'.

There is another reason for avoiding the 'big' subjects which is perhaps less obvious; that is,

your understanding of these events will almost certainly be at second hand. Documentary television and other photography are often so moving and convincing that you feel you were there, but it's important to bear in mind that the images which struck you were preselected. You are seeing through someone else's eyes. Intentionally or not, your perceptions are modified and controlled by the viewpoint, circumstances and choices of the photographer when he made that shot or the journalist when she wrote. You are being influenced largely through the eye, or the eye and secondarily the ear. Touch and smell aren't involved; but in first-hand experience they very frequently are, and they are likely to have an input into what you write. These senses are the most evocative of any. That slant on truth: let it be your own.

Don't ignore the powers and processes of imagination. If you've ever been locked in a shed or stuck in a lift, you know something about imprisonment. But think of your experience as the pebble dropped into a pool: the ripples run outward. Work from the particular, and find out what it invokes; be wary of the general.

As you put together material for a poem you may be surprised by what you are feeling and thinking. It may not be quite what you believed you thought. You may find yourself laughing about things that are conventionally referred to with a solemn face, or moved to anger by something regarded as trivial. Yet however unconventional your personal response, or unusual your experience, it will resonate with other people if you convey it accurately. Its implications will flow outwards; whereas if you work from the general, and from the broad issues, your poem isn't likely to come alive.



The Imprisoned Poet Amir Valiakhmetov