

HOW TO WRITE A NARRATIVE POEM

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One of the oldest poetic forms in the world could be the perfect way to tell a very modern story – yours.

Narrative poems – which simply mean “story poems” – are among the oldest forms of literature. Before there were printed books, people would tell stories through narrative poems, using rhythm, rhyme, repetition and vivid language to make their tales easy to remember and share. Many narrative poems are long, especially older ones like *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* by the famous Greek poet Homer. But a narrative poem can also be short, capturing a brief but emotionally intense or darkly mysterious event in just a few lines.

Many older narrative poems have a set rhythm and rhyme structure, but modern narrative poems often have very free rhythms and no rhyme at all, so there is some wiggle room! However, almost all narrative poems contain at least one main character and tell a story that has a beginning, middle, and end. The stories that narrative poems tell are often dramatic and compelling, detailing events such as rocky romances, epic battles, or quests to find treasure. Once you’re ready to put together your own narrative poem, keep these guidelines in mind:

- 1. Choose a topic.** Pick a story that you really want to tell, even if you can’t explain why. It could be something that happened to you (or a friend or loved one) or it could be something that’s completely fictional. Maybe it’s a memory that haunts you, a family legend, a startling dream, or a fantasy that you’d give anything to fulfill. Remember, the narrator of the poem doesn’t have to be *you*; the narrator can be a character of your choice.
- 2. Make your voice heard.** If the narrator in your poem is experiencing a particular emotion, make sure that comes through in the words and the tone that you choose. A poem can be a snarl, a shout, a whisper or a cry, so pack it with feeling.
- 3. Skip the build-up.** Narrative poems don’t waste words introducing characters or explaining the scene—most dive right in. Try starting your poem in the middle of the action scene to bring readers immediately into the heart of your story.
- 4. Sweat the small stuff.** The best narrative poems use precise, descriptive words that bring out a story’s details and paint a rich picture. Think of the five senses and use adjectives that help describe what the world looks, sounds, smells, tastes, and feels like as the story unfolds so readers will experience it just like you do. For instance, reading about “breakfast” or “a fall day” doesn’t light the imagination, but

reading about “soggy cornflakes and last night’s cold coffee” or “dead leaves that crunch underfoot” does.

5. **Repeat yourself.** This is an especially good strategy if your narrative poem is long. Try repeating key words or phrases that are emotional or musical a few times throughout the poem. (Remember Martin Luther King’s famous speech? He says “I have a dream” eight times during that speech, which is part of what makes it so powerful.)

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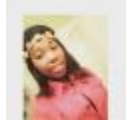
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