

Titles

Some pointers about titles:

- You need a good, strong title to your poem as this will be the handle the audience has on the piece.
- A title is the door to your work.
- Titles are an intrinsic part of your work, not labels: they should hint at the content and create expectation but not give too much away.
- They can intrigue but should not be showy or misleading.
- They can set the tone of the poem and/or give information relevant to an understanding of it such as indications of place and period.
- In some cases a title can act as a first line.

List Poems

A list poem is what it says: a list of objects that are assembled together for a certain reason and the reason is to put across a particular message that the poet wants to convey to his/her audience/reader.

However, the objects cannot be just any old objects. They must earn their place in the poem: they will have been chosen over 10 other objects. So, say you have 12 objects in your poem, behind each of those 12 you will have a shortlist of say 5 or 6 objects that you will have discarded because they do not fit (musically or with the sense of the poem or imagistically). Your final list should be a 'best of' list.

Read this poem by Robin Robertson:

At Dusk

*Walking through the woods
I saw these things:
a cat, lying, looking at me;
a red hut I could not enter;
the white grin of the snared fox;
the spider in a milk bottle,
cradling the swaddled fly,
rocking it to sleep;
a set of car keys, hanging from a tree;
a fire, still warm, and a bone
the length of my arm, my name
carved on it, mis-spelt.
The dog left me there,
and I went on myself.*

The tone here is sinister and mysterious. Note how specific everything is: the red hut, the spider in the milk bottle, the car keys hanging from a tree, the name carved on a bone, mis-spelt and how no explanations are given for what any of them mean, or what is going on. It brings Charles Causley's comment to mind – he remarked that “poetry is more about asking questions than answers”. The reader of the poem has to, as it were, finish the writing of the poem by piecing together what is going on from the clues in the list and the way that list is written.

You'll notice that this poem is framed somewhat at the beginning and end, like most poems that employ the list strategy. The framing device here could not be more simple: “Walking... I saw these things,” then a colon, followed by the seven things he saw, each thing separated by a semi-colon.

Robin Robertson's poem is reminiscent of Louis MacNeice's great poem, *Soap Suds*:

*And these were the joys of that house: a tower with a telescope;
Two faded globes, one of the earth, one of the stars;
A stuffed black dog in the hall; a walled garden with bees;
A rabbit warren; a rockery; a vine under glass; the sea.*

Notes adapted from 'Teach Yourself Writing Poetry' by John Hartley Williams and Matthew Sweeney (2003)

Exercise

Now it's your turn to write a list poem of your own. You might simply have it as a list and find some special occasion to hang it on – maybe a very special party, or perhaps things to take with you on being banished into exile. Or you might, like Robertson, want to frame your list somehow. The nature of the list is such that it requires you to be objective; it is always a list of things to do or things to buy or things to send or things to remember etc. This will keep you from straying into the fog of abstraction.