

## STRATEGIES FOR REVISING POEMS

### Jon Davis

#### COMPOSITION STRATEGIES:

- Try writing past the current end of the poem.
- Try cutting the current end. Often the last several lines are explanation or summary.
- Try cutting the current end AND writing past it.
- Try writing lines *before* the current beginning.
- Or try cutting the opening lines and starting the poem later—often the beginning lines are prologue. (Sometimes dates/seasons and setting can be placed in the title or just below the title in italics: “—*Window Rock, 1995*”)
- Go through the poem and find the strong lines—those that sound good and/or are built around strong, precise images.
- Keep only the strong lines, build the poem around them.
- Keep the strong lines and revise/refine the other lines until they are of equal quality.
- Triple-space the poem and expand it by writing a line between each existing line. (Keep only the lines useful to the strategy of the poem).
- Allow sound to assist the composition. If there are interesting sounds, try repeating them in current or succeeding lines.
- Try different tenses.
- Try different points of view. (Turn “I” into “you,” for example.)
- Make your imagery more specific by thinking of one particular time or moment.
- Is the poem lyric, meditative, or narrative? Might the territory be better covered by a different mode?

#### REFINING STRATEGIES:

- Sharpen existing images (don’t just add adjectives or adverbs; re-envision the images). Remember: nouns and verbs are the keys to succinct, precise, and evocative writing.
- Replace abstract statements with images.
- Supplement abstract statements with images.
- Experiment with line breaks! If you are employing long lines that are broken at the phrase, try short lines broken against the phrase (and vice versa).
- Listen to each line’s rhythm—can you tighten the rhythm or pace? (try eliminating unaccented/unstressed syllables (though don’t go too far!).
- Have you found the correct rhythm for the subject?
- Listen to the sounds each line makes—refine them according to your ear.

- Refine the relationship of sound to sense.
- Does the poem use stanza breaks effectively?
- What unifies the poem? Language? Rhythm? Image? Subject? Theme? Review the poem to make sure the unifying thread is felt, so that there is a sense of cohesion.
- Does the poem do what you set out to do? Or does it do something more interesting? Is there a possibility for it do something more interesting still—a place where it can be expanded, branch out, or take a turn?
- Have you worked TOO consciously? Or have you allowed language and accident to move the composition forward?
- Does the ending have the “feel” of an ending? Does the poem need that “feel”? That is, how important is closure to this particular experience? [The poet does not always have to provide answers or neat endings; exploration or simply experiencing a moment can be just as rewarding.]
- Can the poem be condensed further?
- Have you committed sentimentality (asking the reader to respond without providing the ground for the response)? If so, move towards concrete experience to eliminate it.
- Does the poem cover some emotional ground? If not, move the poem toward important experience. Ask: What is at stake here?
- Have you considered the imperative mode? (e.g. commands such as “Open your hand... Hold a lock of hair.... Speak softly” etc.)
- Have you damaged the poem by “working it too hard,” by thinking too consciously about its theme or subject? Loosen your hold, allow imagination and surprise to enter the lines.

#### QUESTIONS TO ASK OF THE NEARLY “FINISHED” POEM:

- Can you remove articles (*a, an, the*)? (But be careful not to turn the poem into a telegram.)
- Can you eliminate conjunctions (*and, but, or, for, nor, etc.*), using commas in their place?
- Can you find more active verbs?
- Can you cut adjectives, find more precise nouns?
- Can you cut adverbs, find more precise verbs?
- Have you used clichés?
- Have you found the best title? Make a list—a long one—of potential titles. Often the best titles are specific and concrete; think of painter’s titles: “At Naskeag Point, 1995” is (usually) much better than, “The Shoreline,” though Mark Strand’s early surrealist works featured vague, abstract titles to good effect.
- Does the poem have a strong opening line? Beginnings are tricky. How can you get into the experience of the poem without burdening it with exposition? If you are just delivering information, you’re writing prose. Work on sound, rhythm, imagery. Richard Hugo begins “The Lady in Kicking Horse

Lake” with the line “Not my hands but green across you now,” delivering exposition by implication, but also writing a highly-condensed, rhythmically-rich line.

- Have you explored different visual possibilities for the poem—spacing on the page, font, etc.
- Have you employed metaphor, simile? (Some poets need to be reminded; others do this naturally. Not all poets or poems need indulge.)
- Have you employed punctuation consistently and effectively? (Not necessarily “correctly.”)
- Have you checked for grammatical and mechanical errors?
- Have you run spell check?
- Are all grammatical exceptions deliberate, justifiable, and necessary?

AND ALSO:

Craft is really only a series of pressures put upon the poem. Different poems respond different ways to those pressures. To a certain extent, poems discover/invent their own rules and procedures. One can find great poems that arise counter to all the suggestions and injunctions included above.

