

The History Festival Poetry Takeover judging criteria

“a good poem is a symptom of the author’s effort to make sense of the world”

We are all sitting in a time of change. Change is everywhere. Throughout the month of May, compose a poem that reflects your feelings during this time.

Using museums digital collection of objects and images as your source of inspiration, we invite you to help make sense of, and connect us to you and your thoughts and feelings about change. We want you to make us respond with our hearts and our heads to the words you write / speak and the imagery you use.

What are we looking for? What makes a good poem? How will we judge it?

1. Your poem tackles a big idea – find a compelling, exciting, disturbing, meaningful, intriguing, important, far-reaching, or unexpected poem about human experience. Remember simple ideas can have a deep impact. Small objects can tell big stories. Big ideas can be captured in a metaphor or a moment.

2. Form – the type of poem you write / speak – the form it takes, should suit what you are trying to say. Rhyme, don’t rhyme. Repeat a rhythm, don’t repeat a rhythm, tackle a sonnet, a limerick, a haiku, slam us with your ideas. Double space, single space, visually shape your poem or play it straight – our judges don’t mind, just make sure it is the best form to convey your ideas.

3. Craft your poem with perfect word choices – carefully select the right words to say what you mean, to build your picture for the reader. Your words should be precise, they should express with clarity and imagination your big idea. We should think “wow that was the perfect word for that idea/object/moment” or “not a word was wasted or out of place”. Your spelling should be correct.

4. Use powerful imagery to create mood & understanding. Poetry often does with imagery what prose can’t – make your point with strong, memorable concrete images about places, concepts, events, thoughts. Be bold and brave in your choices, but there is usually no need to tell us the sky is blue –we know that! Save it for powerful connection and be cautious about over-description.

5. Kill your darlings (edit!) get rid of all the unnecessary commas, exclamation points, words, adjectives (even if you really really love them), overblown language etc. – trim it down, give it a haircut! Make it sing with clarity.

6. Less is more – you don’t have to TELL the reader everything or spell it out in detail – you can be elusive, make us guess a little bit, be ambiguous. Maybe you are writing about a frog, but you are really talking about a person. A poem isn’t always a direct statement, sometimes it is full of hints and ideas, or it makes us think of, say, the tragedy of war, when it is talking about something else, like gardening.

7. Make us feel, make us think. Your audience should have a strong emotional and / or intellectual response. Perhaps they instantly feel an emotional connection to the poem, or perhaps they are still thinking about it a few days later. Either way, the poem should impact on the reader: “wow this poem made me feel...” or “now I understand” or “I felt - and now I understand -” or even “I want to know more”.

We will use these 7 criteria across the poem to judge the competition, finally asking the question – “does the poem successfully achieve what it set out to?”

Good luck! We can’t wait to read your poems.

Years 4-6 – we are more concerned with the way an idea is captured and the response and relationship to the object. Senior students (7-8, 9-11) we will look at poetic devices such as rhyme, half-rhyme, alliteration, assonance, imagery, personification, that shift it from prose to poetry in more detail.