

Poet in residence, Trevor Millum, has been generously sharing his poetic insights, creative teaching ideas and approaches with teachers and students for decades. He is also the author of over 20 books including *The Poetry Guide - A 'How To' Guide for Teachers and Librarians*, written with Bernard Young.

To celebrate National Poetry Day, this year on the theme of 'Choice', Trevor shares a simple but effective idea to help you to make your own choices when writing poetry.

Each time you write you have a choice, right? (Of course, it's also true when you speak but usually you have less time to think about it!)

As I write this, I have to choose which words to use. This act of choosing is the most important thing about writing.

What could I have written? *'While I compose this sentence, I will need to select which words to employ.'* I think the first version is better and that's the choice I made.

It's not just the choice of words, of course. You choose how long your sentence is going to be and how you might link phrases together. Whether to use a comma or an exclamation mark, perhaps. (That previous sentence didn't have a main verb - did you notice? Some people would say it therefore isn't a sentence; so what is it? I started it with a capital letter and ended with a full stop. That was my choice!)

Carefully selected language is the basis of all good writing. It is even more the case when writing poetry. Because poetry is a compressed form of writing, every word has to count. Every word must be the one most fitted to the task. This does not mean using long or complicated words - often, the opposite. Look at my two sentences again:

As I write this, I have to choose which words to use.

While I compose this sentence, I will need to select which words to employ.

The second sentence uses more words and some longer words but does it communicate any better?

Writing a poem: Write-a-lot / Cut-a-lot

Do poets sit down and write a poem from beginning to end in one attempt? That would be a very rare occurrence. Be prepared to make changes to your choices.

Here is one approach that has helped me and many students. I call it **Write-a-lot / Cut-a-lot**. Jot down everything you can think of about your subject, whatever it is - a memory, a feeling, a landscape, a person... If it's something you can see, observe it. Details are important.

Here's an example, some jottings I made while walking through some trees. (I recorded them as audio/video as I spoke and then cut out the ums and ers.)

Walking through the field at the back of their house the trees have taken over large swathes of ground. Elsewhere it's mainly brambles and tall grass. The trees are bare but interesting. It looks as if they are wearing woolly socks where the moss has crept up the trunks. Others have stockings of ivy to keep them warm in winter. The white birch trees seem to shun protection, all bare. But the pines are in leaf, quite gaudy in comparison. On the open ground there are stiff brown leaves, though some are white with frost, ever so white.

This became the starting point for a poem. I highlighted bits I liked and then removed the rest.

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This was what was left:

The trees
It looks as if they are wearing woolly socks
where the moss has crept up the trunk
stockings of ivy to keep them warm in winter
birch trees shun protection
pines gaudy
stiff brown leaves, white with frost, ever so white.

This gave me enough to work with. Some words were added, some taken away. Some phrases were moved about. **I was making choices all the time.** And the great thing is, you can change things around as often as you like. If you're using pen or pencil and paper it means you have a lovely mess of scrawls and crossings out. If typing when you write, as I am, it's easier, but you don't have the pleasure of seeing all the changes.

The beginning of the poem then went like this:

These trees seem well prepared for winter
for the trunks of some have socks of moss
and others woolly ivy stockings pulled thigh high.
Elsewhere the birches shun protection
like young men in shorts and shirt sleeves in a snow storm.
The pines, of course, are fully dressed
and almost gaudy in their greenery...

That's just one way to get into the writing of a poem. But whatever way you use, the more you read and listen, the more words you will have at your disposal. And what will that give you? More **choice**.