



Poems That Win - The Step-by-Step Scholastic Poetry Playbook

Step-by-step craft, real award-level analysis, and workshop assignments for grades 9 to 12.

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Each part teaches the skill, shows how winning writers make their choices, and ends with workshop assignments. Coaching notes and model responses are at the back.

02.1 What Judges Reward in Poetry

Before you polish a single line, learn what the Scholastic Art & Writing Awards actually look for in a poem and how real winners meet it. This section sets your target.

Why This Matters

The Scholastic Art & Writing Awards publish a short list of what jurors weigh: **originality**, **technical skill**, and the **emergence of a personal voice or vision**. That is the whole official statement. Scholastic does not publish a scoring rubric, a checklist, or the share of entries that reach each tier, so anyone who hands you a point-by-point formula is guessing. What you can do is study what the published winners have in common, and that is what this guide does. Where a claim is our reading of winning poems rather than a Scholastic statement, we label it as coach's inference.

Here is why strong students lose ground. They write a poem that is correct, pretty, and general. Every line is fine and no line belongs to only one person. A juror reading a very large stack of poems meets the same moon, the same falling leaf, the same lesson about growing up, again and again. The poem that stops the juror has a specific speaker, something at stake, and a shape that does some of the feeling's work. This section teaches you to aim at those three things from the first draft.

The Facts You Must Know First

Poetry is a short category with firm edges. Read these rules once now and then check the current terms on the official site before you submit, because details can change from year to year.

- ◆ **Length:** 3 to 100 lines, one poem per entry. A longer poem made of sections counts as one poem, still under the 100-line limit.
- ◆ **What counts as a poem:** free verse, formal verse, prose poetry, song lyrics and spoken word are all listed as acceptable.
- ◆ **Entering:** you type or paste the poem directly into the text box in the online portal. Judges cannot open PDFs or hyperlinks, and they see roughly what is in the box, including your line breaks and spacing. Your layout is part of the poem, so check it there.
- ◆ **Anonymity:** no identifying information, including your name, anywhere in the manuscript.
- ◆ **Originality:** the work must be your own idea and creation, and you list your influences in the Work Sources field. The rules allow some AI use for brainstorming or research, require disclosure, and make a final poem that is itself machine-generated ineligible. Your poem is only worth entering if every line is yours.

Grades 7 to 12 are eligible, and students in grades 9 to 12 compete in the senior division per a secondary source. At this level judges expect controlled line breaks, at least one real structural idea, and no reliance on stock images. You do not need a long poem: several national winners discussed below run between about 16 and 55 lines.

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The Three Official Criteria, Translated Into Poem Questions

Originality: could only you have written this poem, with this detail, this angle, this way of ending?

Technical skill: can you point to a line break, a repetition, a sentence shape or a form that you chose for a reason, and say what it does?

Personal voice or vision: does the speaker sound like a particular person with a particular way of seeing, or like a generic poetic voice?

Coach's inference, not a Scholastic statement: a fourth question winners tend to answer is, what does the reader have to figure out for themselves?

How Poetry Differs From What You Write in Class

School trains you to state the point, support it, and conclude. Poetry reverses the order: winning poems in our research file almost never announce their meaning. They put an object or a repeated phrase on the page and trust the reader to feel the weight.

Poem Moves Versus Class Habits

Class habit: state the lesson at the end. Poem move: end on something done, said or seen.

Class habit: abstract nouns such as loss or hope. Poem move: name the object that caused the feeling.

Class habit: explain the metaphor. Poem move: sustain it and let it reason for you.

Case Studies: How Winners Do It

The studies below come from poems published on school pages and on Scholastic's own blog. Our research read each poem as a structured line-by-line summary, so line counts are approximate and we paraphrase throughout. Read the originals where they are posted.

CASE STUDY 1: 'M' (NATIONAL GOLD MEDAL, POETRY, 2018; SOURCE: A HIGH SCHOOL LITERARY BLOG)

An 18-line poem in two stanzas. A grandson describes his grandfather's faded forearm tattoo, a crude letter inked when the old man was nine.

SOLUTION

Beginning. The poem opens on a body and a color: veins showing through faded ink that has settled to navy. A two-line first stanza ends on a colon. That colon is the hinge that hands the reader from looking at an old arm to being told what is written on it. Opening on a physical image instead of an idea is the first sign of control.

Development. The long second stanza releases facts in a deliberate order: the letter is not his real initial, because his name sounded too Jewish to the boys doing the tattooing; the tools were a sharpened stick and the dregs of a pen; the skin was raw; he hoped the other children would accept him. His mother wept and said he would be shut out of the family burial. The poem then steps into the speaker's own childhood confusion and jumps to the present, where the grandfather, now eighty, is overheard bargaining with God.

Syntax and structure. Three parenthetical asides carry the most painful facts. Putting the worst information in a whispered container performs how a family talks about it: privately, as an afterthought. Because the poem never labels the cruelty, the structure does the explaining. It ends on the old man's wish not to hurt his wife by missing heaven, closing parenthesis last, with no moral: a tender, nearly comic bargain after an atrocity in miniature.

Takeaway. The judgment lives in structure and in what is withheld. A merely competent poem on this subject would end on a reflection about hatred.

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CASE STUDY 2: 'COLLISION THEORY' (NATIONAL SILVER MEDAL, POETRY, 2016; SOURCE: A HIGH SCHOOL LITERARY BLOG AND ITS AWARDS LIST)

Roughly 44 lines in nine stanzas, grouped into three numbered sections, each headed by a rule of chemical collision theory. A breakup is narrated as a chemistry proof.

SOLUTION

Beginning. The first line frames the whole poem as a proof, so the reader expects logic and receives feeling. The reaction between two people is written out in the vocabulary of chemistry: hydrolysis, valence, catalysts, a constant.

Development. The three section headings, contact, orientation and energy, are used as a literal structure, and the breakup is mapped onto them one for one. Section II ends on a single-word line that places the pair as the constant in the equation, the warmest and most closed moment. Section III breaks the same vocabulary: three lines open with the same word, then equilibrium is broken and the forces become unequal.

Ending. The poem finishes on a conditional: if a collision lacks energy, the molecules bounce off unchanged. The speaker casts themselves as the exception, the one who reacts when the other does not, and ends by decomposing into undefined ions. Compare the closed last word of Section II with this dispersed ending and you can see the emotional arc.

Takeaway. The metaphor is not decoration. It reasons for a speaker who cannot be direct about pain, and it ends in a failed proof that is also a failed relationship.

CASE STUDY 3: 'SONATA OF NIGHT AND DAY' (SILVER KEY, POETRY, 2021; SOURCE: A SCHOOL NEWSLETTER)

72 lines in 18 quatrains following one day from sunrise through noon, sunset, night and back to dawn.

SOLUTION

Beginning and development. The poem opens with a sunrise like a royal procession and moves through waterfalls, noon heat, bees, fireflies and a moon over reeds. Each stanza is built the same way, mostly one sentence with enjambment inside the quatrain, and the day is personified as a queen on a throne.

What is genuinely strong. Consistent form, clear organization by time of day, steady music and a circular return to morning are real skills. The title borrows a musical form that suggests movement.

Why it stops at Silver Key (coach's inference from the published poem, not a Scholastic statement). There is no human speaker, no stake, and no turn. Every stanza has the same register: a pleasing scene in general nature vocabulary. Eighteen stanzas of similar weight produce length without development, and nothing in the poem belongs to only one writer.

Takeaway. Craft control is necessary and not enough. Compare it with 'M' and 'Collision Theory', where form and content pull against each other. If you can swap any two stanzas without a loss, you have a catalog, not a poem.

Step-by-Step: Aim Your Poem at the Target

- 1 **Pick a subject only you can claim** List five specific objects, rooms, phrases or rituals from your own life that a stranger would not think of. Circle the one that makes you slightly nervous. That nervousness is a signal of stakes.
- 2 **Name the speaker and the stake** Write one sentence: who is speaking, to whom, and what could be lost. A poem with no stake is a postcard.
- 3 **Choose a governing structure** Decide on one idea the reader can feel by the second stanza: a repeated phrase, numbered sections, an interview, a list of negations, a conceit from another field. Keep it simple.
- 4 **Draft fast with concrete nouns** Write 20 to 40 lines without stopping. Replace every abstract noun with the thing that caused it.
- 5 **Find the turn** Mark where something changes on the page, not just in thought: a one-word stanza, a tense shift, a colon, a refrain that breaks.
- 6 **Draft three endings** Write one that summarizes, one that gives an image, and one that gives an act. Choose the act or the image.

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BEFORE AND AFTER 1: FROM GENERAL TO SPECIFIC (ORIGINAL COACH SAMPLE)**WEAKER:**

My grandmother taught me about love.
 Her kitchen was full of warmth
 and her hands were gentle and kind.
 Now that she is gone, I miss her
 and I understand what she meant.

SOLUTION**STRONGER:**

She kept the rice in a coffee can
 labeled SUGAR in her own block capitals.
 Every guest was fooled once. She never explained.
 I still lift the lid expecting sweetness
 and find the small hard grains that fed us.

What changed and why. The weaker version states feelings (warmth, kind, miss) that the reader must take on trust. The stronger version offers one odd, checkable object, a mislabeled can, and a small joke that reveals her character. The lesson about love is never named. The last line turns the expected sweetness into something plain and nourishing, which is the poem's quiet claim. The weak ending explains; the strong ending shows an act (lifting the lid).

BEFORE AND AFTER 2: ADDING A STAKE AND A TURN (ORIGINAL COACH SAMPLE)**WEAKER:**

The river runs below the bridge,
 the water silver in the dawn.
 The morning is peaceful and still,
 and the world is slowly waking up.

SOLUTION**STRONGER:**

My father counts the bridges on the way to work:
 seven, and the river under every one.
 Today he says the number twice.
 The water goes on being silver.
 I do not ask him why he lost his place.

What changed and why. The weaker draft is a pleasant scene with no person in it, much like the generalized nature description in the Silver Key study. The stronger version adds a speaker, a relationship, and a small turn: the father repeats the count, which signals something is wrong. The unchanged silver water sets calm against worry. The ending is an act of withholding (the speaker does not ask), which implies far more than a sentence about fear.

Tier Check

Scholastic does not publish what separates one award from another. This table is coach's inference from published winning poems, not an official rubric. The sample is small and skewed toward successes, and the same poem can land differently with different jurors.

Gold Medal level	Silver Medal / Gold Key level	Honorable Mention / unrecognized
A specific speaker with something at stake and a risky or personal subject	A real subject and a clear conceit, though some stanzas restate	A pleasant scene or familiar idea with no speaker who risks anything
Structure that performs the content (asides, rules of chemistry, a colon hinge)	A repetition or pattern that organizes the poem; sometimes loose	Form is correct but even; stanzas could be swapped without loss
Ending complicates or acts; the poem trusts the reader	Ending pays off with a final image or word, sometimes by explaining a little	Ending restates the opening or states the lesson cleanly
Concrete, odd, bodily or domestic detail throughout	Detail present, with some stock images	Generalized imagery (golden, peaceful, sparkling)

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Common traps

1. Opening with an abstract idea (life, time, loss) instead of an object. 2. Ending with a sentence that explains what the poem meant. 3. Using only stock images such as moons, falling leaves or oceans of tears. 4. Choosing a form because it looks impressive, for example a villanelle, without a reason the form fits your subject.

Coach's Playbook

Before any draft counts, check: the speaker is a person with a stake; there is one odd concrete detail per stanza; there is one structural idea; there is a turn you can point to on the page; the ending is an image or an act; the line count sits between 3 and 100; the poem is your own work from top to bottom.

Do This Tonight

Take a poem you already wrote. In 15 minutes, underline every abstract word, replace three of them with objects, then delete the last line and read the poem aloud. If it ends better one line earlier, keep the cut.

Practice

WORKSHOP What Judges Reward in Poetry

Write by hand or on a keyboard. Aim for a full draft, then revise once.

1. List the three published Scholastic criteria in your own words, then write one question you can ask of any poem for each criterion.
2. Take a general sentence about a feeling (joy, grief, boredom). Rewrite it three times, each time replacing one abstract word with a specific object from your life.
3. Write the speaker-and-stake sentence for a poem you want to write: who speaks, to whom, and what could be lost.
4. Write a six-line poem in which every line has a clear job, then label each line's job in the margin.
5. Read two published winners listed in this section. For each, write two sentences describing the structure without quoting more than a few words.
6. Write a 12-line description of a place with no person in it. Then revise by adding one person and one small change that implies trouble.
7. Draft three different endings to the same poem: one summary, one image, one act. Pick the best and explain why in two sentences.
8. Find three stock images in a draft of yours. Replace each with a detail only you could know.
9. Write a 10-line poem that withholds its subject, as a title and objects imply a presence, and let the reader infer it.
10. Check your poem against the portal rules: lines between 3 and 100, no name on the page, line breaks preserved when pasted. Write what you changed.

02.2 Building the Poem: Image, Line, Sound, and Turn

A poem is built from four working parts: images that can be seen, lines that break for a reason, sound that carries feeling, and a turn that changes the poem. Learn each, then watch winners use them.

Why This Matters

Scholastic names technical skill as one of its three published criteria, along with originality and the emergence of a personal voice or vision. It does not define technical skill for poetry, so here is the working definition we draw from reading published winners: you can point to a choice and say what it does. A line break that makes the reader wait. A repeated word that means something new the second time. A sentence that runs on for ten lines before it lands. Students lose points when their choices are accidental, so a break falls where the line happened to run out, or a rhyme bends the meaning to fit.

At grades 9 to 12, jurors are reading a field that includes confident, experienced writers. Showing that you can build a poem on purpose, rather than pour out a feeling in line-shaped paragraphs, is what lifts your piece above the pile. Everything below is a tool you can practice.

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Core Ideas: The Four Working Parts

Image. An image is something a reader can see, hear, touch, smell or taste. The strongest winners in our research use specific, odd, bodily or domestic details: a stone-sharpened stick, a cracked box under a bed, a dust-covered bed under a flickering bulb, a tongue pressed against teeth. These details stand in for the feeling. Abstract words like sadness or freedom have no picture, so the reader cannot enter the poem through them.

Line. The line is poetry's basic unit. Where you end it controls speed, emphasis and surprise. A line that ends on a strong noun or verb lands hard. A line that ends on a small word such as the or for makes the reader hover, which can create tension, humor or hesitation. A published 5-line poem about a coffee spill on a train, written by a seventh grader and so below the senior division, uses exactly that trick: the breaks fall on tiny words, so the reader waits at small hinges before the polite apology lands. A poem can be one sentence if the breaks do the timing.

Sound. Sound is rhythm, repetition, and the music of consonants and vowels. It does not require rhyme. Repeated words, called anaphora when they start lines, create drumbeats. Short lines against long ones create acceleration and braking. Even a single repeated sound can make a theme audible. Be careful with end rhyme: when the rhyme chooses your words for you, the meaning bends. If you rhyme, make the rhyme feel inevitable and earn its place.

Turn. A turn is a change in direction that the reader can feel, ideally on the page itself. Many students believe a turn means a new thought arrives in a sentence. The winners go further and give the turn a formal marker: a one-word stanza, a colon, a shift in tense, a refrain that breaks, a sudden cut from long lines to short. A poem without a turn describes; a poem with one moves.

Four Tests Every Poem Must Pass

The picture test: circle every abstract noun. For each one, can you replace it with something a stranger could see?

The break test: for each line ending, say what the break does (slows, surprises, emphasizes, hesitates). If the answer is nothing, move it.

The echo test: find every repeated word or sound. Does it change meaning when it comes back? If not, cut the repeat or sharpen it.

The turn test: point to the exact place on the page where the poem changes direction. If you cannot, there is no turn yet.

Working With Each Tool

A note on voice that threads through all of this: your diction (word choice) and syntax (sentence shape) should belong to your speaker. A formal speaker uses full sentences and careful words. A guarded speaker might hide painful facts in asides. Choose the sentence shapes that reveal who is talking.

Vocabulary to Use When You Annotate Your Own Draft

Enjambment: a sentence runs past the line break into the next line.

End-stopped line: the line ends where the thought or the punctuation ends.

Anaphora: the same word or phrase opens several lines or sentences in a row.

Volta: the turn, the point where the poem shifts in direction, tone or time.

How Winners Do It: Case Studies

These studies come from poems published on Scholastic's blog and on school pages. Our research read each poem as a structured summary rather than copying it, so line counts are approximate and we paraphrase. Claims about sound are mostly inferred from word choices, so treat them as lower confidence than claims about structure.

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CASE STUDY 1: 'LANGUAGE BARRIER' (GOLD MEDAL PORTFOLIO, 2017; SOURCE: SCHOLASTIC'S OWN BLOG)

A poem of about 43 lines in three numbered sections. A pronunciation lesson about the 'th' sound becomes a story of language, school and family. The Gold Medal Portfolio is a senior portfolio award, so this poem is one sample from a body of work, not necessarily its own medal.

SOLUTION

Beginning. The poem opens with an instruction in second person: the tongue goes against the teeth. A mechanical lesson becomes the frame, and the second person implicates the reader as the one who sets the standard.

Development. Section I shows the speaker substituting an f-sound, so a number becomes a word about liberty. Section II moves to school scenes: a game where she cannot point to her missing teeth, a teacher asking her to say a word that comes out wrong, and a single line of dialogue that stings. Section III brings in her mother, who compliments her straight teeth without knowing the struggle behind them.

Sound and device. The poem is about a sound, so the substitutions are theme and pun at once. The sound mistakes sit inside the text, which is the poem's most elegant move. Short isolated lines give a physical pause, like the beat before a classmate laughs.

Ending. It closes on a river back home, a place where the sound was never needed. There is no resolution, only origin.

Takeaway. Build your image system from one precise, physical source, and let a pun or sound carry feeling.

CASE STUDY 2: 'WITNESS' (GOLD MEDAL PORTFOLIO, 2017; SOURCE: SCHOLASTIC'S OWN BLOG)

A 16-line poem in one block. It opens with a command to switch on a light and shows a bulb flickering over a dust-covered bed. Again this is a sample from a portfolio.

SOLUTION

Beginning. An imperative opens the poem, so the reader becomes the person at the switch. The bulb flickers on and light touches yellowed skin and clings to hair, then spreads across skin that is silent and cool.

Development. The poem never says a body is in the bed. The title and the objects imply it, and the reader supplies the corpse. That implication is the whole effect.

Takeaway. Restraint is technique. In our inference, its placement probably reflects control and a withheld subject, since it has no showy devices. Compact poems can win when every object works.

CASE STUDY 3: 'BEFORE 9/11' (REGIONAL GOLD KEY, 2019, AND AN AMERICAN VOICES MEDAL NOMINEE FOR NEW JERSEY; SOURCE: A SCHOOL LITERARY BLOG)

About 50 lines in seven stanzas of varying length. A mother's gold bars travel from South India to a Jersey City apartment, across a marriage, and out of the family. The page says the poem was a nominee, not a winner, of the American Voices Medal.

SOLUTION

Beginning. Flat declarative sentences deliver a family legend: a father vanishes from a roof, leaving photographs and gold meant for wedding jewelry. Gold is planted in the fifth line and tracked through the poem.

Development. Gold carries inheritance, marriage, endearment and finally theft, so one material does the work of four ideas. Domestic, tactile details anchor a story that spans continents.

Line and structure. Heavy enjambment gives narrative momentum, and the few full stops cluster at stanza ends, so periods feel like closed doors. Stanza length grows at the point of pressure, a long stanza of loss, then shrinks to a short coda.

The turn. A stanza made of a catalog of negations (she never tried them on, never made demands) turns silence into the poem's loudest moment. The mother's grief shows in what she does not do.

Ending. The father shaves his beard and stays inside for a week; the mother decides he is a good man. Only then does the title make sense, and the poem never states why.

Takeaway. A title can hold back a meaning until the last line. Trust images to carry judgment.

Step-by-Step: Build a Poem in Layers

- 1 Gather images before you write lines** Fill half a page with 15 concrete details from one scene: what is on the table, what is on the floor, what sounds are in the room. Star the three oddest.
- 2 Draft as plain sentences** Write the scene as short prose. Do not worry about line breaks. Get the facts in order.
- 3 Break the lines on purpose** Place each break to land on a strong word, to make the reader wait on a small word, or to keep a long sentence running. Say aloud what each break does.

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- 4 Add one structure** Pick one repetition: an opening phrase repeated, a catalog of negations, numbered sections. Use it at least three times.
- 5 Build the turn** Pick the place, usually about two thirds through, where the poem changes. Mark it with a formal event on the page, not only a new thought.
- 6 Read for sound** Read aloud. Mark any place where you stumble or where a rhyme forced a word. Fix those first.

BEFORE AND AFTER 1: LINE BREAKS AND PICTURE (ORIGINAL COACH SAMPLE)

WEAKER:

I felt nervous before the recital and my hands were shaking so badly that I could hardly hold the bow.

SOLUTION

STRONGER:

Backstage, the rosin dust
will not stay on the bow.
My hands shake it loose
as if it were snow.
Out there, a hush
like a held breath.

What changed and why. The weaker version is one long sentence of telling. The stronger one replaces the word nervous with a physical effect (shaken rosin), breaks the lines on strong nouns (dust, bow, snow), and makes the reader wait on the small phrase at the third line break. The simile is small and visual, and the last line hands the feeling to the audience instead of naming it. Note that the rhyme pair bow and snow is slant and unforced; it was not allowed to dictate meaning.

BEFORE AND AFTER 2: ADDING A FORMAL TURN (ORIGINAL COACH SAMPLE)

WEAKER:

When I was young, my brother and I built forts from couch cushions.
We stayed there all afternoon.
Now he lives far away.
I miss those days.

SOLUTION

STRONGER:

Couch cushions, four. A blanket for a roof.
We ruled it until dark, my brother and I,
and ruled it by the rule that no one else could come.
It held.
He sends a postcard of a bridge.
I put the cushions back, one at a time,
the way you tuck a child in.

What changed and why. The weaker version moves from childhood to the present in a plain summary and ends on a stated feeling. The stronger one adds a one-line stanza, 'It held.', as the formal hinge, then shifts both time and sentence energy after the stanza break. The ending is an act (putting the cushions back) and the simile in the last line quietly reveals the speaker's role. The weaker version tells us she misses him; the stronger one lets us watch it.

Tier Check

Scholastic publishes no rubric and no tier percentages. The table is coach's inference from the published winners in our research file, a small sample that skews toward successes. Judges and regions differ.

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Gold Medal level	Silver Medal / Gold Key level	Honorable Mention / unrecognized
Images are odd, specific and linked into a system (mouth, gold, chemistry)	Images are clear and concrete, with some stock choices	Images are general (golden, peaceful) or abstract
Line breaks are chosen to time the reading; one-word lines land at a hinge	Line breaks are mostly sensible; pauses are less deliberate	Lines end where they ran out
Repetition changes meaning each time it returns	A refrain organizes the poem but may restate	Repetition is decoration or accidental rhyme
A formal turn on the page (colon, tense jump, one-word stanza, catalog of negations)	A shift in thought, sometimes without a formal marker	No turn; the poem repeats its opening mood

Common traps

1. Breaking lines wherever the text hits the margin. 2. Letting a rhyme choose a word that bends the meaning. 3. Putting the 'turn' in a sentence like 'but then I realized' instead of in the poem's shape. 4. Piling up six images that point different directions instead of one image system.

Coach's Playbook

For each stanza: one concrete image, one reason for each line break, and one answer to 'what does the reader see here?' Across the poem: one repeated element that changes, one marked turn, one ending that is an act or an image. Read it aloud twice before you call it done.

Do This Tonight

Spend 15 minutes with a poem you have drafted. Highlight every line break. Beside each, write one word: slows, surprises, emphasizes or nothing. Fix every 'nothing' by moving the break or rewriting the line.

Practice

WORKSHOP Building the Poem: Image, Line, Sound, and Turn

Write by hand or on a keyboard. Aim for a full draft, then revise once.

1. List 15 concrete details from one room in your home. Circle the three oddest and write one line for each.
2. Take a feeling (jealousy, relief, dread). Write an 8-line poem that never names the feeling, using only objects and actions.
3. Write one sentence of 25 words or more. Break it into 6 lines three different ways, and note which version gives the best pace.
4. Write four lines where each ends on a small word (the, of, for, and). Describe the effect on the reader's pause.
5. Compose a 12-line poem with an opening phrase repeated at least three times; make the meaning of the phrase change by the final repeat.
6. Write a poem with a one-word stanza at its hinge. Explain in two sentences why that word needed its own stanza.
7. Rewrite a poem so its turn is a tense shift (past to present, or present to past). Mark the shift with a stanza break.
8. Choose a single physical source for all your metaphors (kitchen, ocean, machine, mouth). Write 8 lines drawing every image from it.
9. Read a poem aloud. Mark every place you stumble. Revise each to read smoothly or deliberately stumble on purpose.
10. Write a title that carries a meaning the poem only reveals at the last line, then draft the poem.

02.3 Form, Voice, and Risk

Form is the container your poem chooses, voice is who speaks, and risk is how far you are willing to go. Together they decide whether a juror remembers your poem or forgets it.

Why This Matters

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The Scholastic Art & Writing Awards name the emergence of a personal voice or vision as one of three published criteria. A secondary source adds that jurors value distinctive voice, creative risk and deliberate choice of form. That secondary summary is less authoritative than Scholastic itself, but it matches what the published winners show. Students lose ground in this area in two opposite ways. Some write a safe poem in a borrowed voice that could have been written by anyone. Others take a showy risk, such as a difficult form or a shocking subject, without a reason.

The goal is not the biggest risk. The goal is a risk that pays: a choice of form, voice or subject that makes the poem better than the safe version would have been. This section helps you decide what to risk, how to commit, and how to keep the poem readable while you do.

Core Ideas: Form, Voice, Risk

Form. Scholastic accepts free verse, formal verse, prose poetry, song lyrics and spoken word. Choosing a form is a deliberate act. Free verse gives you control of line and stanza, so every break must earn its place. A prose poem drops line breaks and builds rhythm from sentences, which suits subjects that churn, like a crowded city. A received form such as a villanelle asks you to bend repeating lines to carry a story, which can be superb or merely clever. A form is working when the reader feels the poem could not be in any other container.

Voice. Voice is the sum of diction, syntax, attitude and what the speaker notices. A strong voice can be funny, dry, understated, stubborn or hesitant. Our research found humor and dry understatement among the winners, and withheld judgment in several: the speaker reports and does not scold. Sincere general statements, in contrast, were rare among them. To find your voice, write the way you talk to a friend you trust, then revise toward precision and keep the rhythm.

Risk. A risk is a decision that could fail. It might be an unusual structure, a subject you are nervous to claim, a humor that could miss, an ending that withholds. Risk is different from shock. A shocking subject without craft reads as attention-seeking. A risky subject with a controlled form reads as courage.

Five Kinds of Risk That Pay Off in Published Winners

Structural risk: the poem borrows a frame from another field (a chemistry proof, an interview, a pronunciation lesson) and sustains it to a conclusion.

Tonal risk: humor or dry understatement carrying grief or critique, so the pain arrives through the joke.

Subject risk: a personal or uncomfortable subject treated with restraint, so the reader does the feeling.

Formal risk: a one-word stanza, a prose poem, a poem told in parenthetical asides, titled sections.

Ending risk: closing on something unresolved, an act or a refusal instead of a conclusion.

Choosing a Form That Fits

A practical note about length. The category allows 3 to 100 lines. The published winners in our research ranged from 5 or 6 lines to about 55, with one sectioned portfolio piece running far longer. Short is fine: several national-level poems run under 20 lines, and a ten-line revision that cuts restatement is often stronger than an extension.

A Voice Checklist

Does the speaker have a verbal habit (a joke, a hedge, a parenthesis) that no one else in the poem has?

Does the diction match the speaker's world (kitchen words for a cook, tech words for a coder)?

Does the speaker ever hold back? Withholding often reads as strength.

Could you remove your name from the page and still tell the poem is yours?

How Winners Do It: Case Studies

The studies below paraphrase poems published on Scholastic's blog and on school and museum pages. Our research read them as structured line-by-line summaries, so we avoid claims about exact wording. We also note when an award attaches to a portfolio rather than a single poem.

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CASE STUDY 1: 'OLIVIA MOON' (GOLD MEDAL PORTFOLIO, 2016; SOURCE: SCHOLASTIC'S OWN BLOG)

About 19 lines in one block. The name Olivia Moon is repeated in a series of comic definitions. The Gold Medal Portfolio honors a senior's body of work, so this is one poem from the portfolio, not necessarily its own medal.

SOLUTION

Beginning. The speaker creates a persona and defines her over and over. The refrain 'Olivia Moon is...' recurs at about five points and makes a character out of a name.

Development. Each definition is a small comic scene: a calming seagull from meditation tapes that flies away, a bold figure against bland color names, a hair-tosser who cannot hear unanswerable questions, a mythic origin sent by half-joking sky gods, a lipstick that looks magical in the mirror and washed out on camera.

Voice and tone. Comedy and critique of image culture coexist. The humor lets the poem say something sharp about performing a self without lecturing.

Ending. It closes on a sensory image, tasting the world through a sepia filter, rather than on a verdict.

Takeaway. Voice is the entire achievement here. A repeated frame gives the voice a place to run, and the changing definitions keep the repeat from going flat. Humor can carry real feeling.

CASE STUDY 2: 'NEW YORK, NEW YORK' (REGIONAL GOLD KEY, 2015; GRADE 12; SOURCE: A MUSEUM'S PUBLISHED GOLD KEY POEMS)

A three-part prose poem with no line breaks. Each section opens with a plural noun and the word 'here': men, women, girls.

SOLUTION

Beginning and form. Choosing a prose poem fits the subject: the city's churn does not respect line breaks. The parallel openers make a census of the city and give the paragraphs rhythm without line breaks.

Development. Section I shows men in bars and on the subway, sorry and apologetic; one man mistakes a homeless stranger for God, then sees him as himself. Section II shows women adapting while holding memories of home. Section III moves through couples, parents, memory and myth, including a mother's story about how the city's concrete was made.

Device. A recurring italic refrain about consent and confusion turns a social portrait into a personal moment.

Ending. As our research reports, the closing phrase calls the city a kind of velvet version of being alone. Our inference is that the shift from groups to a single feeling in the last line is the strongest move.

Takeaway. A prose poem still needs rhythm, repetition and a closing turn. The form is a choice about speed and breath, not a shortcut.

CASE STUDY 3: 'IDYLL, MUSINGS' (GOLD MEDAL PORTFOLIO, 2017; SOURCE: SCHOLASTIC'S OWN BLOG)

About 37 lines in an 18/1/18 structure: a long stanza, a one-word middle stanza, and another long stanza. Again, a portfolio award.

SOLUTION

Beginning. The poem opens on a strange ceremony: a woman teaching a small girl to arrange fake bones in a circle to trap the moon's whiteness. A ritual image sets an eerie tone before the poem turns to America.

Development. Sparse punctuation and heavy enjambment keep thought running over the breaks, like memory that will not stop. A repeated phrase about summers builds a list that moves from ghost stories to a brother with a handgun at a diner with a jukebox. Sweet details sit beside violence, so cruelty seems normalized. By September, a Black girl's seat is moved under a Confederate flag in a classroom, and the teacher calls it nostalgia.

The turn. The middle stanza is the single word the teacher used, set alone on the page. The accusation is made without a single scolding sentence, and the one-word stanza is the formal hinge.

Ending. The third stanza mirrors the first in length and re-uses its key words, but now the speaker is under a tree on a hill that holds a buried brother. The final line is an apology addressed to the dirt, 'I've come to apologize to the dirt', aimed at the one witness that cannot forgive.

Takeaway. This is risk with restraint: a heavy subject, an invented landscape, and the voice never asks for sympathy. The symmetry of 18/1/18 lets the form make the argument.

Step-by-Step: Take a Risk That Pays

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- 1 Write the safe version first** Draft the poem the way most students would. This gives you a baseline to beat.
- 2 List three risks** Write one structural, one tonal and one subject risk you could take. Be specific: 'tell the grief as a chemistry proof', 'make the speaker funny', 'do not name the person who died'.
- 3 Pick one and commit** Combine at most two. One bold choice, fully sustained, beats three half-chosen ones.
- 4 Find the voice** Read your draft aloud. Mark every line that sounds like a poem and not like a person. Rewrite those in the speaker's natural speech.
- 5 Test the form** Ask: could this poem live in another form? If yes, the form is not working yet; revise until the container is necessary.
- 6 Withhold something** Decide on one fact you will not say. Let the title, an object or an ending carry it.
- 7 Get a cold read** Give the poem to a reader and ask what they see, not what they think. If they miss your central idea, add one clearer image, not an explanation.

BEFORE AND AFTER 1: FINDING A VOICE (ORIGINAL COACH SAMPLE)

WEAKER:

I am a girl who is not sure who she is.
Sometimes I feel like a stranger in my own skin.
I wear a mask so no one will see.

SOLUTION

STRONGER:

On Mondays I am Sam from the bakery,
flour to the elbow, charming, quick.
On Tuesdays nobody asks, so I check.
The mirror says: still here, a little floury.
I put the mask back on the shelf next to the bread.

What changed and why. The weaker version uses mask and stranger, stock images that report a feeling without a person. The stronger one invents a speaker with a job, a joke and a rhythm. The day-of-week frame is a light structural risk; the humor carries the identity question without announcing it; and the last line makes an act of putting the mask on a shelf. The voice does the work the abstract statements tried to do.

BEFORE AND AFTER 2: MAKING A FORM NECESSARY (ORIGINAL COACH SAMPLE)

WEAKER:

My parents fight at night.
I hear it through the wall.
I put on headphones and turn the music up.
I wish it would stop.

SOLUTION

STRONGER:

Interview with the wall
Q. What do you hear?
A. Plates. A laugh that is not a laugh.
Q. Do you take sides?
A. I hold the house up. That is all.
Q. Tell us about the quiet.
A. It is the loudest room.

What changed and why. The weaker version is honest but stays at the level of statement. The stronger one finds a frame, an interview with the wall, that lets the child speak sideways through an object. The question-and-answer pattern gives the poem a skeleton, an ending that complicates (quiet as a loud room), and room for dry understatement. The frame also withholds the speaker, a risk that pays because the reader works to fill in the child.

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Tier Check

Scholastic does not publish how it separates tiers for form, voice and risk. This table is coach's inference from published winners in our research file, which is a small sample skewed toward successes, and it should be read as a pattern, not a rule.

Gold Medal level	Silver Medal / Gold Key level	Honorable Mention / unrecognized
Form is necessary: structure performs the content	Form is clear and organizing; one big idea, sometimes loose	Form is correct but interchangeable; length without development
A distinct voice with humor, dryness or withholding	A clear voice with some stock phrasing	Generic poetic voice; sincere general statements
Risk is specific and sustained to a conclusion	Risk is present but the payoff comes only at the end	Risk is absent or purely decorative
The subject is personal and unresolved	The subject is real but sometimes explained	The subject is familiar and the poem resolves it neatly

Common traps

1. Picking a fancy form that the content cannot sustain. 2. Shock without craft: the grim subject does the work the poem should do. 3. Borrowing a voice from a poet you admire so the poem could be anyone's. 4. Explaining the risk afterward, which defuses it.

Coach's Playbook

Name your form in one sentence and say why the poem needs it. Name your voice in three adjectives and find a line that proves each. Name your one risk and the sentence where it pays off. If you cannot, simplify.

Do This Tonight

In 15 minutes, take a poem and rewrite its first four lines in three different forms: a prose poem sentence, an interview, and a list of negations. Choose the one that makes you most nervous and keep going.

Practice

WORKSHOP Form, Voice, and Risk

Write by hand or on a keyboard. Aim for a full draft, then revise once.

1. Write a six-line poem in a voice that is funny. Then rewrite it in a dry voice. Which one carries the feeling better and why?
2. Draft a prose poem of 120 to 200 words with an anaphoric opener (for example, 'The students here') and no line breaks. Mark the rhythm points.
3. Invent a frame from another field (chess, cooking, accounting, weather reports) and write 12 lines about a family conflict using only that field's vocabulary.
4. Write two versions of a short poem: one safe, one risky. Explain in three sentences what the risk adds.
5. Write a poem with exactly one parenthetical aside that holds the most painful fact. Explain why it belongs in a whisper.
6. Write a poem in which the title is the last word the reader learns the meaning of.
7. Convert a 20-line draft to ten lines by cutting every restatement. Compare the two.
8. Pick a voice you admire in a published poem. Write down three features of that voice, then write a poem in your own voice that has none of those features.
9. Write a poem that withholds the name of the person it is about. Which objects make the reader infer them?
10. Describe in 3 sentences the risk you plan to take in your entry, why it fits your subject, and how you will keep it readable.

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02.4 Revision, the Ending, and the Final Polish

The first draft finds the poem; revision makes it a contender. Learn to cut, to land the ending, and to submit a clean entry in the portal before your regional deadline.

Why This Matters

A secondary source on the Scholastic Art & Writing Awards says jurors value substantial revision and deliberate choice of form. Scholastic itself publishes only three criteria: originality, technical skill and the emergence of a personal voice or vision. Revision is where all three get built. Students lose points because they stop at the first draft that feels finished, or because they revise only the surface, swapping words while leaving the shape untouched.

The ending deserves its own attention. In our research file, almost every high-tier poem ends on an action, an image or a flat statement, while the weaker poems end on a restatement or a tidy return. This is coach's inference from a small sample of published winners, not a Scholastic statement, but it is the pattern strong enough to build a habit around.

Core Ideas: Revising in Passes

Do not revise everything at once. Work in passes, each with one question, so you never fix a word in a stanza you are about to cut.

- ◆ **Pass 1, structure:** what is this poem's governing idea, and where is the turn? Move, cut or add stanzas until the shape is clear. A poem should usually have a formal event at about the halfway to two-thirds point.
- ◆ **Pass 2, cuts:** delete every line that restates an earlier line, every explanation of an image, and every adjective that does not change the picture. Our research notes that ten-line revisions that cut restatement are often better than extensions.
- ◆ **Pass 3, images:** replace stock and abstract language with specific details only you could know.
- ◆ **Pass 4, line breaks and sound:** for each break, say what it does. Read aloud and fix stumbles.
- ◆ **Pass 5, ending:** write three endings, summary, image and act, and pick the act or the image.
- ◆ **Pass 6, polish:** punctuation, spelling, title, and the portal check.

The Ending Test

Does the last line end on something done, said or seen, rather than something understood?
 Could you cut the last line without losing the poem? If yes, cut it.
 Does the ending complicate the poem, or just close the door on it?
 Does the title gain meaning at the end? Load-bearing titles are a strong move.

Endings That Resonate

Ending type	What it does	Risk	Example from our reading
Summary	States the lesson	Spends the reader's interest and sounds like a school essay	The weaker pieces in our file
Image	Hands the reader a final picture	Can be pretty and empty if not connected	A bulb recast as an ember
Act	Shows a person doing something	Needs a setup so the act has weight	An apology made to the dirt
Flat denial	A plain statement after a build	Must follow real emotion	A one-word line, then a plain refusal
Return	Echoes the opening	Closes too neatly if nothing has changed	Works when the return means something new

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Final Polish Checklist (Scholastic Rules)

Length: 3 to 100 lines, one poem per entry. A sectioned poem counts as one.

No identifying information, including your name, anywhere in the manuscript.

Type or paste directly into the portal text box. PDFs and hyperlinks cannot be reviewed. Check that line breaks and spacing survive.

List all influences in Work Sources. Final work must be your own, and any AI use must be disclosed under the rules.

You may edit until your regional deadline. Deadlines begin December 1, 2026 and vary by region, some as late as early January 2027, so check yours.

The fee is 15 dollars per individual entry, with a fee waiver available on self-certified need.

How Winners Do It: Case Studies in Endings and Revision

These studies paraphrase poems from Scholastic's blog and from school pages. Our research read each as a structured summary, not verbatim, so we describe structure with more confidence than sound. Where a poem's grade falls below the senior division we say so.

CASE STUDY 1: 'GOLD STRAW HAIR' (GOLD MEDAL PORTFOLIO, 2017; SOURCE: SCHOLASTIC'S OWN BLOG)

21 lines in six stanzas of 3, 1, 5, 5, 5 and 2 lines. A farm girl lies in grass, imagines a boy who whistles will notice her, then corrects herself. A portfolio award, so this is one sample, not necessarily its own medal.

SOLUTION

Beginning. The first stanza is lyrical, comparing the grass to a duvet and the sunlight to a great symphony. A one-line stanza asks a question, and then a repeated opener paints an idle, drowsy, brave portrait.

Revision visible on the page. The speaker corrects her own image: it was only an old folk tune, not the grand piece she named. The poem builds a flourish, then retracts it. That self-correction admits the grandeur was projection, and it is the central craft move.

Syntax and structure. The uneven stanza lengths and the lone one-line stanza make the poem feel unsettled. A rival girl with gold hair and pretty dresses enters the scene, and the poem answers with a one-word line, a plain 'No.', and then a flat final declaration that she does not have gold hair.

Ending. The flatness is the strength. The title holds both the hair she lacks and the grass she lies in.

Takeaway. Third-person distance gives dignity to someone who would be pitied in first person, and the ending is a plain statement after a build, not a summary. Revision here means cutting the flourish back to the fact.

CASE STUDY 2: 'COLORS' (REGIONAL GOLD KEY PLUS NATIONAL RECOGNITION, 2018; GRADE 8, BELOW THE SENIOR DIVISION, SO USE AS A MODEL OF COMPACTNESS; SOURCE: A TEACHER'S BLOG)

18 non-blank lines in seven stanzas, formatted as an interview. The page calls the national recognition a Silver Key, which is probably a loose label for a National Silver Medal. We cite it as the page states it.

SOLUTION

Beginning and development. Quoted questions alternate with unquoted interior reasoning. The favorite color is pink, tied to childhood and happiness. The least favorite is the color of prescription pill bottles, which signals weakness and death. The person who needs the pills is never named.

The turn. A run of three one-word lines ends the interior voice, the last one naming the pills. The collapse into single words is the emotional break.

Ending. The final line returns to the spoken voice with a hedge, 'I'm not sure.' The real answer has been given and then withdrawn. The retreat shows someone choosing silence.

Takeaway. One device (two voices), one turn (single words) and one deflecting ending can carry a medal-level poem at under 20 lines. A competent draft would explain why the color is hated; the revision trusts form.

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CASE STUDY 3: 'A FALLING LEAF' (HONORABLE MENTION, 2026; GRADE 8, BELOW THE SENIOR DIVISION; SOURCE: A SCHOOL NEWS PAGE)

16 lines, no stanza breaks, loosely rhymed. A leaf remembers its branch, falls, expects snow to replace the leaves, and chooses to tumble down and rest on the ground. Honorable Mention is the third regional tier. This is the only publicly readable Honorable Mention poem our research found, and it comes from grade 8.

SOLUTION

What it does well. The controlling idea is clear, the sound is deliberate (end rhyme and repeated 'down' at line starts that produce a descending rhythm), and the shape is coherent. It shows technical awareness at a young age.

Why it sits at the lower tier (coach's inference, not a Scholastic statement). The leaf metaphor for acceptance of change is familiar, nothing complicates it, and the ending resolves everything calmly.

How to revise it into a stronger poem. Add a speaker with a stake, break the descent with one surprising turn, and replace the calm closing with an act or an unresolved image. The sound work is worth keeping.

Takeaway. Technical control is the entry ticket. Complication is what lifts it. Revise by asking where your poem could push back on itself.

Step-by-Step: A Revision Week

- 1 Rest the draft** Leave the poem alone for at least one day. Fresh eyes find the restatements and weak spots.
- 2 Print it or paste it into the portal box** See the poem as a juror will, with your line breaks and spacing. Fix anything that collapsed.
- 3 Cut by one third** Delete the weakest third of the words. Ask what you miss. Often nothing.
- 4 Mark the turn** Underline where the poem changes. If you cannot find it, add a formal marker.
- 5 Write three endings** Draft a summary, an image and an act. Cut the summary. Pick between the other two.
- 6 Read aloud and annotate** Mark each stumble and each line break. Name what each break does.
- 7 Get one outside reader** Ask what they pictured, which line they remember, and where they got lost. Do not defend the poem. The final work must still be your own.
- 8 Final check and submit** Check the rules: line count, no name, influences listed, correct category. Submit before the deadline and keep a copy.

BEFORE AND AFTER 1: A SUMMARY ENDING BECOMES AN ACT (ORIGINAL COACH SAMPLE)

WEAKER:

The house is empty now, the boxes packed,
and everything we owned is in the truck.
I stand alone and think of all we had
and how the past will always stay with me.

SOLUTION

STRONGER:

The house is empty now, the boxes packed,
the truck idling, our whole life in the back.
I walk the rooms once more and find, behind the door,
the pencil marks that measured us.
I take the marker from my pocket
and add a line for the year we weren't here.

What changed and why. The weaker draft ends on a stated reflection (the past will stay with me), which closes the door. The stronger version replaces it with a found object, the growth marks, and an act: adding a line for the missing year. That act implies the family's loss and the speaker's refusal to let go without saying either. Only the last two lines changed in meaning, but they shift the poem from summary to image to act.

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BEFORE AND AFTER 2: CUTTING RESTATEMENT (ORIGINAL COACH SAMPLE)

WEAKER:

Grandfather's hands were rough and worn.
His hands were callused from the years of work.
They were the hands of a man who labored hard,
and I loved the way his hands felt in mine.
He held my hand and I felt safe.

SOLUTION

STRONGER:

Grandfather's hands, callused from the dock.
He held mine crossing streets long after I was tall enough.

What changed and why. The weaker draft says hands five times and states the feeling twice (loved, safe). The stronger version keeps one detail with a source (the dock), one telling action (still holding on past the age), and drops the feelings. It is shorter, and the second line makes the reader feel the love by noticing a behavior. When a revision cuts a poem by half and nothing is lost, the original was restating.

Tier Check

Scholastic publishes no rubric and no percentages for tiers. This table is coach's inference from the published poems in our research, a small sample skewed toward success stories. The same poem can land differently with different regional jurors.

Gold Medal level	Silver Medal / Gold Key level	Honorable Mention / unrecognized
Revision shows in compression: no restatement, every line has a job	Mostly tight, with some stanzas that restate	Unrevised first-draft length; loose or repeated lines
Ending is an act, image or flat statement that complicates	Ending pays off with a final word or image, sometimes explaining a little	Ending summarizes or returns neatly to the opening
Title carries meaning; the poem trusts the reader	Title is clear and functional	Title is generic or states the theme
Portal-ready: clean format, no stray name, influences listed	Mostly clean	Format or rule errors that could cost the entry

Common traps

1. Revising word choices while leaving a structural problem untouched. 2. Keeping a favorite line that does not belong. 3. Ending on the lesson, the moral or a summary of the feeling. 4. Forgetting that the portal box may flatten your spacing, or leaving your name in the title or text.

Coach's Playbook

Run six passes in order: structure, cuts, images, breaks and sound, ending, polish. After each pass, read the poem aloud once. Before you submit, check the rules list: lines, anonymity, influences, category, deadline.

Do This Tonight

In 15 minutes, cut the last line of your poem and read it aloud. Then write one new last line that is an action or an image, and compare. Keep whichever ending leaves the reader something to do.

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Practice

WORKSHOP Revision, the Ending, and the Final Polish

Write by hand or on a keyboard. Aim for a full draft, then revise once.

1. Take any draft. Cut it by one third and write two sentences on what you gained or lost.
2. Write three endings for one poem: a summary, an image and an act. State which you chose and why.
3. Mark every restatement in a draft. Delete or merge each one and count the lines saved.
4. Underline the turn in your draft. If it is only a thought change, add a formal marker (a one-word stanza, a colon, a tense shift).
5. Choose a stock image in a draft and replace it with a detail only you could know.
6. Read a draft aloud into a recording or to a friend. List three stumbles and fix each.
7. Paste a draft into a plain text box and note any spacing or line-break problems. Fix them.
8. Write a new title for a draft that gains meaning at the end. Explain the change in two sentences.
9. Write a revision plan for a poem in six steps, one per pass, with a one-sentence goal for each.
10. Run the rules checklist on a poem: line count, no name, influences, category, deadline. Write what you must still do.

02.5 Bonus Lab: Annotated Poem Clinic

Read one complete original poem in three annotated parts, then work through six revision passes on your own. The poem is a coach's sample, not a Scholastic winner.

Why This Matters

A poem is short enough that you can see every choice. This lab gives you one complete poem and a close reading of it, so you can watch development, organization, syntax, diction and devices work together. The poem is **Coach's sample (original, not a Scholastic winner)**. Scholastic publishes no poetry rubric beyond originality, technical skill and the emergence of a personal voice or vision, so the analysis is coach's inference. Remember: Poetry takes 3 to 100 lines, and your final work must be your own idea and creation.

Annotated Draft Clinic: The Sample Poem

The poem has three parts. Read each, then the analysis. Slashes are not used; line breaks are real.

PART 1: THE SPECIFIC OPENING (COACH'S SAMPLE, ORIGINAL, NOT A SCHOLASTIC WINNER)

Inventory of My Grandfather's Truck

The passenger seat still tilts toward the door

the way he leaned to roll the window down

by hand, a crank no one has made in years.

In the glove box: a tire gauge, two peppermints

fused to their wrappers, and a map

of a county that has since changed its roads.

SOLUTION

Development: the poem starts with objects, not feelings. The title promises a list, and the list quietly builds a person. Nothing is said about loss yet, which leaves the reader room to feel it.

Syntax and diction: three long, slow sentences-in-pieces, with enjambment ('a map / of a county') that makes the eye fall forward. Nouns are precise (tire gauge, peppermints, crank). Device: metonymy, where objects stand in for a man. The final detail, a map of roads that changed, plants the poem's quiet theme of a world that moved on.

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PART 2: THE TURN (COACH'S SAMPLE, ORIGINAL, NOT A SCHOLASTIC WINNER)

I am sixteen and cannot drive stick.
 He tried once, in the church lot, saying
 ease it, ease it, like talking to a horse.
 I stalled eleven times. He counted
 out loud, not to tease, but because
 he counted everything he loved.

SOLUTION

Organization: the poem pivots from inventory to memory with a flat statement of fact, and the speaker finally appears. The shift is marked by a change in syntax: shorter, more direct, with dialogue pressed into the line.

Diction and device: the simile 'like talking to a horse' is small and specific, from his world, not the speaker's. The number eleven is a concrete anchor. The last line is the turn: it reinterprets the counting from mockery to love. A turn works when it changes the meaning of an earlier detail, as this one does.

PART 3: THE LANDING (COACH'S SAMPLE, ORIGINAL, NOT A SCHOLASTIC WINNER)

Tonight I sit in the driver's seat
 with the key in my fist and the engine off.
 The seat is still set for him.
 I do not move it. I count to eleven.

SOLUTION

Development: the ending returns to the opening image but with the speaker inside the truck now. The poem ends on action rather than moral. The reader supplies the emotion.

Syntax: the final line is four short beats, the shortest in the poem, which slows the pace. Devices: repetition of the number eleven closes a loop opened in Part 2. Notice what is left out: the word 'grief' never appears, and the poem is stronger for it.

Revision Pass Plan

- 1 Pass 1: Inventory** Mark every abstract word (love, loss, hope). Replace or support each with a thing you can see, hear or touch.
- 2 Pass 2: Turn** Underline the line where the poem changes direction. If you cannot find it, write it. It should recast an earlier image.
- 3 Pass 3: Line breaks** Read the poem with each line ending as a pause. Move breaks so the strongest word lands at the end or the start of a line.
- 4 Pass 4: Sound** Read aloud. Mark repeated sounds that help and repeated sounds that clutter. Vary line length on purpose.
- 5 Pass 5: Cuts** Delete the first and last lines in turn. If the poem improves, leave them out. Cut any line that explains an image you already showed.
- 6 Pass 6: Title and format** Test two other titles. Paste the poem into a plain text box and check that spacing and breaks survive. Remove your name.

Poem Checklist

The opening is specific to one person, place or object.
 A turn changes how the reader sees an earlier detail.
 Line breaks are chosen, not defaults from a paragraph.
 The ending acts or images; it does not explain.
 Every abstract word is earned by a concrete one.
 The poem fits 3 to 100 lines and reads cleanly in plain text.

Common traps

Ending with a lesson. Using a famous poet's rhythm and imagery without finding your own. Stuffing similes into every line. Naming the emotion instead of building it.

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Do This Tonight

In 15 minutes, list ten objects from one room that belongs to someone you love. Pick the three oddest, and write six lines using only them. Do not mention how you feel.

Practice

WORKSHOP Bonus Lab: Annotated Poem Clinic

Write by hand or on a keyboard. Aim for a full draft, then revise once.

1. Rewrite the opening of the sample poem about an object from your own family, keeping the inventory structure.
2. Find the abstract words in a draft of your own and replace three with concrete images.
3. Write a four-line turn that changes the meaning of an object named earlier.
4. Take a paragraph from your journal and break it into lines. Explain each break in a phrase.
5. Rewrite the final four lines of the sample to end on a different action. Compare the effects.
6. Write a poem of 3 lines that depends entirely on one precise noun.
7. Cut a poem of your own by a third. Describe what the poem gained and what it lost.
8. Write two alternative titles for the sample poem and say how each changes the reading.

Notes Coaching Notes and Model Responses

What a strong response to each assignment looks like, and why. Compare after you draft, not before.

02.1 What Judges Reward in Poetry

WORKSHOP · WHAT JUDGES REWARD IN POETRY

1. A model answer: originality means it could only be mine; technical skill means I can defend each choice; voice means the speaker sounds like a particular person. The questions then become: what detail is only mine, what does this break do, and who is talking? Keep your questions short enough to ask while reading a draft.
2. Example: 'I was sad' becomes 'I washed his mug and set it back in its place', then 'I kept his mug turned the way he left the handle', then 'The handle still points at the door'. Each version should move closer to a thing the reader can see. Stop when the object does the feeling.
3. A strong sentence reads like: 'My brother, speaking to our mother over a locked bathroom door, risks losing her trust.' If your stake is vague, name the loss in plain terms before writing.
4. Six-line poems work when each line is a move: image, claim, contrast, refrain, shift, close. Label them honestly. If two lines share one job, merge them and you have a tighter poem.
5. Each description should name the structural device, such as parenthetical asides or three numbered rules, and its effect, such as private speech or the satisfaction of a proof. Paraphrase; do not copy lines.
6. Example addition: a woman steadies a ladder while a man cleans the gutter, and the ladder legs keep sinking. The change should be small and physical. If you explain the trouble, cut the explanation.
7. Summary ending: 'And I learned to let go.' Image ending: 'The porch light still on.' Act ending: 'I left the key under the mat.' The winners in our research mostly end on an act or an image, so pick one of those and note why.
8. Stock to specific: 'a sea of tears' becomes 'the sink of dishes I let soak until morning'. The test is whether a stranger could have written the first version. If yes, replace it.
9. Example: a poem about a mother that only shows a coat on a hook, a vacuum lines on carpet and an unopened mail stack. The reader infers an absence. Check that you never name the thing you are withholding.
10. Checklist answer: confirm the line count, remove any name from the title field or text, paste into a plain text box, and recheck stanza breaks. Many students find their carefully spaced poem collapsed; fix it before the deadline.

02.2 Building the Poem: Image, Line, Sound, and Turn

WORKSHOP · BUILDING THE POEM: IMAGE, LINE, SOUND, AND TURN

1. A good list is mundane and specific: a chipped blue bowl, a key that fits no door, a calendar still on March. The oddest three usually carry history. Write each line as a plain statement with one sensory word.
2. Example: 'I count the pans twice. / His side of the sink is dry.' Jealousy is never named but is visible in counting and comparing. If your draft slips in the word, cut it and look for the action.
3. Notice what happens when a long sentence breaks mid-clause: tension builds. Breaking at the end of each clause feels calm. Keep the version where the break interrupts a thought at its most revealing word.
4. Small-word endings make the reader lean forward. Example: 'I put the key in the / lock and did not turn it.' The reader hovers at the. Note whether the effect reads as suspense or as comedy and use it accordingly.

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5. Example refrain: 'I was fine.' Used first as a claim, then as an excuse, then as a joke, then as an admission. The refrain should shift because the surrounding lines change its meaning.
6. The hinge word should be the most loaded in the poem, such as 'Nostalgia' or 'No.' The explanation might be: it isolates a single claim so the reader cannot hurry past it.
7. Past to present is the most common choice. A good tense shift reveals that the past is still happening. Example: 'He shut the door. / He shuts the door.' The recurrence implies the memory has not ended.
8. Sticking to one source (a kitchen, say) produces a unified poem: grief as a drawer that sticks, memory as a pan left to soak. If any image feels off-system, cut it.
9. Stumbling often means a cluster of consonants or a line that is too long. Fix by trimming syllables, moving a break, or changing a word. Keep a stumble only if the line is about hesitation.
10. A model title: 'Inventory'. A poem that lists a dead parent's belongings and ends on the line 'one pair of reading glasses, still folded, to be counted last'. The title promises a list; the last line makes the list a portrait.

02.3 Form, Voice, and Risk

WORKSHOP · FORM, VOICE, AND RISK

1. Funny voices work when the joke hides a cost. A dry version often wins because understatement trusts the reader. Explain your choice by pointing to a specific line that lands harder one way.
2. A good prose poem has a repeating opener, rhythmic sentences of varying length, and a last sentence that shifts scale. Mark places where you changed the sentence length on purpose. If it reads as a plain paragraph, add a refrain.
3. Example: a family argument told as weather: 'Pressure dropping in the kitchen. Small-craft warnings for the dinner table.' The test is whether the vocabulary stays consistent and the real subject shows through. Drop any term that breaks the field.
4. The safe version usually explains; the risky version usually shows through an odd frame. The explanation: 'The risk let me say what I could not say directly.' Be concrete about which line proves it.
5. Example: 'He never said sorry (he wired the porch light instead).' The parenthesis holds the tenderness. A whisper suits a fact the family treats as private.
6. Example title: 'Inventory of a Garage'. The poem lists tools, ending on one unused cradle the speaker's father built. The reader understands the title only at the end.
7. The ten-line version is usually stronger if the cut lines were summaries. Compare by reading both aloud. Keep restatement only if it adds a new image.
8. Voices are made of habits: sentence shape, humor, word choice. Writing without them proves you can use your own. The result should sound like a person you could pick out in a crowd.
9. Objects might be: a robe on a hook, a pillbox with days of the week, a phone with one number pinned. Never name the relationship. If a reader guesses it, the withholding works.
10. A model: 'I plan to tell my grandmother's story as a recipe because she showed love in the kitchen, and I will keep it readable by giving each step one clear image and ending on the last ingredient she never wrote down.'

02.4 Revision, the Ending, and the Final Polish

WORKSHOP · REVISION, THE ENDING, AND THE FINAL POLISH

1. Cutting a third usually removes adjectives, explanations and restatements. Most writers report that the poem gets clearer and faster. If you lost an image you love, check whether it was doing work or only decorating.
2. Summary: 'I learned to hold on.' Image: 'The porch light, still on.' Act: 'I left the key under the mat.' Keep the act or the image, and say what the reader is left to do or feel.
3. Common restatements are a feeling named after an image has already shown it. A count like 21 lines to 14 is typical. Keep the instance with the strongest verb.
4. A formal marker could be a one-line stanza at the hinge, a colon before the reveal, or a switch from past to present. Place it where the poem's weight shifts. Test by reading the poem without the marker.
5. Stock: 'shattered glass'. Specific: 'the lid of the pickle jar that never fit'. The test is that a stranger could not have written your version.
6. Common stumbles come from long lines, clustered consonants and unclear breaks. Shorten, reorder or re-break. Keep a stumble only when the line depicts hesitation.
7. Plain text boxes often collapse indentation and extra blank lines. Rely on line breaks, not spacing tricks, and confirm the stanza breaks survive.
8. A better title: 'Inventory' becomes 'What Was Left on the Shelf' if the last image is an untouched jar. The title should cast a new light on the final line.
9. A model plan: 1. Structure, find the turn. 2. Cuts, remove restatements. 3. Images, replace stock details. 4. Breaks and sound, read aloud. 5. Ending, choose an act. 6. Polish, check the rules.
10. A model answer: 'Poem is 38 lines, within 3 to 100. I removed my name from the title line. I still need to list the poem I borrowed the structure from in Work Sources. My regional deadline is on the site; I will submit a week early.'

02.5 Bonus Lab: Annotated Poem Clinic

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WORKSHOP · BONUS LAB: ANNOTATED POEM CLINIC

1. A strong answer keeps the list, picks objects only that person would own, and ends the list on the oddest object. Avoid explaining why each matters.
2. For example, change 'I miss him' to a physical detail such as a mug still on the shelf. The detail should imply the missing without naming it.
3. Model: a turn like 'I find the receipt in the pocket, dated the day after' redirects earlier lines. Check that the turn reinterprets, not merely adds.
4. Look for breaks that stress a verb or image. A weak break leaves 'the' or 'and' dangling. Revise those.
5. Possible endings: starting the engine, giving the keys away, or opening the glove box. Each shifts the poem from acceptance to action to curiosity.
6. A model: three lines built around 'peppermint' or 'crank'. If the noun could be swapped for a vaguer one without loss, it is not precise enough.
7. Usually the lost lines were explanations. If the poem now feels bare, the cut hit an image, so restore it.
8. A literal title ('Inventory...') promises a list; a quiet one ('Eleven') points to the ending. Choose by what you want the reader to notice first.

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