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# It's time to grow your own poem

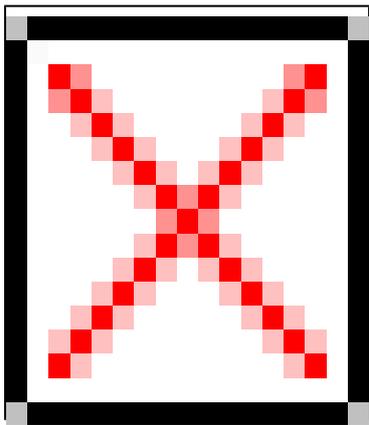
Article Author:

[Kate Clanchy](#) [1]

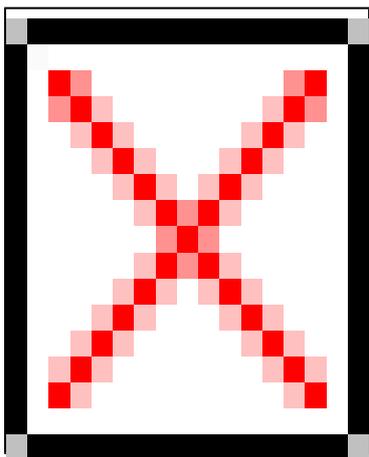
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Byline:

**Kate Clanchy** tells you why



Kate Clanchy has been teaching people to write poetry for more than twenty years, with extraordinary and inspiring results ? take a look at the poetry she shares on Twitter or published in her book, [England: Poems from a School](#) [3] which features the work of young poets from a single the Oxford Spires Academy, a state comprehensive on the outskirts of Oxford. None of those she works with were confident to start with, but every one finished up with a poem they were proud of, a poem that only they could have written ? their own poem.



Kate's big secret as explained in her new book **How to Grow Your own Poem** is a simple one: is to share other poems. She believes poetry is like singing or dancing and the best way to learn is to follow someone else. In her book, Kate shares the poems she has found provoke the richest responses, the exercises that help to shape those responses into new poems, and the advice that most often helps new writers build their own writing practice. In this extract, she explains why it is time to give yourself permission to write, and why now is the time to join the poetry conversation.

*?Of all the art forms, poetry is the most economical. It is the one which is the most secret, which requires the least physical labour, the least material, and the one which can be done between shifts, in the hospital pantry, on the subway, and on scraps of surplus paper.?*

So said the great American poet and essayist Audre Lorde, contrasting poetry with novel writing. She should be right ? yet most beginning writers still start on novels. Despite being so accessible, poetry has a difficult reputation. It is seen as more elevated than prose, and harder. Poets are often thought of as special people, eccentric, super talented, and marked from birth. It's all very intimidating.

If you feel stymied by these ideas, or by the anxiety that your thoughts are not original enough or your experiences not spiritual enough to belong in a poem, here is a thought. For most people over most of time, poetry hasn't consisted of single poems by named (male, white, dead) poets in books. Mostly, poetry has consisted of stories and chants handed down and exchanged among working people going about their daily lives. Mostly, poetry hasn't had a single author, or been written down, but has been recited, sung, shared, adapted and passed on as seemed useful. And, though all societies have a special place for talented poets, most people over most time would at some point in their lives have made up a few lines of poetry, in the same way that they would have added a note to a work song, or danced a new step at a wedding. Those lines would probably have been in answer to someone else's lines ? the way rap artists still riff off one another. Poetry, in short, until very recently, was a varied, noisy, general conversation, not a silent solo art form.

It's easier to join in a conversation than it is to make a speech, just as it is easier to open your mouth to sing if you are in a choir, or to dance in a group. Most art forms support beginners by sharing. No one expects a prima ballerina or opera diva to train entirely alone and walk fully formed on the stage ? but we do have those expectations of poetry. If you can put those expectations aside, you may well feel more free to write.

Rather than setting out to be 'a poet?', try allowing yourself to join in the poetry conversation. We all retain that ancient capacity to answer a poem with another one: it's much easier and more natural than writing an essay about a poem. All you have to do is let yourself read a poem and allow answering thoughts to form in your mind. The news is: a writer is a person who writes, and a poet is someone writing a poem ? you.

As Audre Lorde says, poetry can happen anywhere but, Kate says, it helps to have:

**A Place:** Set aside a writing place. A particular chair with your laptop or corner of your desk will do, so long as you feel secure there.

**A Time:** Make a writing date and mark it in your diary, whether it's a half-hour first thing in the morning, or a Saturday afternoon.

**A Folder:** Value your poems in a tangible way: have a special folder or notebook for your work, or at the very least a special file on your computer.

If you keep waiting for inspiration, the time for writing won't arrive. If you give yourself a time to join in the poetry conversation, a place to do so, permission and a prompt to answer, your poem will come too.

**How to Grow Your own Poem** by Kate Clanchy is out now, published by Picador, 978-1529024692, £14.99 pbk.

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