



# NATIONAL FEDERATION OF STATE POETRY SOCIETIES, INC.

An educational and literary organization dedicated to the writing  
and appreciation of poetry in America.

## *Strophes*

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*Julie Cummings*  
34th NFSPS  
President

### Dear Poetry Family,

As I write this today, I have been awake for most of the night. I worry if I am doing “it” right. I am not even sure sometimes what “it” is. I am teaching middle school to my students in online classes and trying to encourage them to “hang in there” just as I am trying to encourage you. It may seem that there are few things to celebrate in this ever-changing world, but I do have a couple items.

I first want to welcome the Nebraska Poetry Society to our family! I am so happy they have joined us and look forward to getting to know their members and especially their poetry. Welcome Nebraska!

In addition, our NFSPS Annual Convention will be held June 11-13, 2021 via Zoom. We are actively working on our schedule of events and will be continuing the tradition of amazing workshops, speakers, and reading the prize-winning poems during this online event. The good news is you will be able to enjoy the event without the expense of travel. We will have opportunities to collaborate and meet and will also have time before the event to practice with Zoom. I know many state meetings have been held using this and other online formats and I am more than happy to help you with them. A full description will be published in the April issue of *Strophes*.

Speaking of prize-winning poems and the annual contests, the submissions are open! Use NFSPS.Submittable.com or use the U.S. Postal Service. Just be sure to enter on Submittable or have your envelopes postmarked before March 15, 2021 and enter the earlier the better! Good luck!

I believe we write poetry to leave as a legacy. We are each recording a moment in our lives with every word we write. In one of my favorite poems, “Let Evening Come”, Jane Kenyon writes:

Let the light of late afternoon  
shine through chinks in the barn, moving  
up the bales as the sun moves down.

Let the cricket take up chafing  
as a woman takes up her needles  
and her yarn. Let evening come.

The poem comes to me when it is needed, and it has been needed often in the past few months, playing over and over in my head. As you may or may not know, each year at the annual convention’s first plenary session, we have a moment of silence for those members who have passed away in the last year and we will still do so this year. Since July, I have received quite a few notices of members who have passed away and I am sure that I have not gotten all the notices. Please let me know of members who are no longer with us. I would be remiss in my duties if I didn’t honor the members that have taken ill and those who have passed away.

I know that many believe that “Let Evening Come” is a poem about depression. To me, it is a poem of hope. There is so much hope! Ms. Kenyon does not have to travel far to find inspiration—here she has given us so much of the farm around her house, even a bottle in a ditch—and she lives in the moment. I want to remind you to live in the moment and know that this moment is worth remembering. Find inspiration in the things and events around you. I know you will. Even if we cannot travel far, there is poetry around each of us. I look forward to reading the poems you write.

Let it come, as it will, and don’t  
be afraid. God does not leave us  
comfortless, so let evening come.

*Your sister in words,*  
Julie Cummings, 34th NFSPS President

### NFSPS 2021

### BLACKBERRYPEACH PRIZES FOR POETRY: SPOKEN & HEARD

Awards: 1st Prize \$1,000, 2nd Prize \$500, and 3rd Prize \$250. This competition blends “stage” and “page” poetry, equal weight will be given to performance and poetics. A submission consists of four poems, each with a separate audio file, and a transcript of the four poems in a single electronic document. Submissions will be accepted between January 1st and March 15th, 2021, using Submittable.com. For the complete set of guidelines on how to submit, see:

[nfmps.com/BBP3Guidelines.html](http://nfmps.com/BBP3Guidelines.html)

Join the fun—become famous and rich. Pick your four best poems, record them and submit! Remember you have to enter to win. Good luck.  
~ Joe Cavanaugh, *BlackBerryPeach Prizes for Poetry Chair*

### NFSPS 2021 COLLEGE UNDERGRADUATE POETRY COMPETITION

Two winners will be chosen for the College Undergraduate Poetry (CUP) Competition, one receiving the Edna Meudt Memorial Award (\$500), the other receiving the Florence Kahn Memorial Award (\$500). Undergraduates working toward a degree in an accredited U.S. college or university during the contest submission period are eligible to enter. The manuscript submission consists of 10 poems in a single Word or .pdf file. Submission via submittable.com is from December 1, 2020, to January 31, 2021. There is a \$10 fee, and manuscripts must be submitted through [nfmps.submittable.com](http://nfmps.submittable.com) or with permission of the CUP Chair entries may be permitted through the US Postal Service; see contest rules for details. Complete guidelines for the 2021 College Undergraduate Poetry competition are available online at [nfmps.com/CUP.html](http://nfmps.com/CUP.html).

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### STROPHES

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\* Submission Deadlines

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**NFSPS MEMBER SOCIETY NEWS**

**POETS ROUNDTABLE OF ARKANSAS** celebrated Poetry Day in Arkansas virtually with videos on Saturday, October 31. President Frieda Patton kicked off the day in video-form thanking everyone for their flexibility and presenting the agenda. Laura Bridges, Poetry Day Chair, told about Rosa Zagnoni Marinoni, for whom the event is named, eulogized the three PRA members who died in 2020, and introduced the speaker, Sandy Longhorn. Sandy Longhorn is Associate Chair and Associate Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Central Arkansas. She talked about trends in modern writing and old methods to avoid. Frieda then announced the winner of the 2020 Merit Award: Stacy Pendergrast. Stacy won for her efforts organizing Youth Poetry Day in Arkansas and for extensive work with students. Charlie Southerland won the top prize: 1st place in the Sybil Nash Abrams award contest. Many thanks go to Marie Allison for being contest chair for the third year in a row. All videos and announcements can be found on [poetsroundtableofarkansas.org](http://poetsroundtableofarkansas.org). ~ *Laura Bridges, Reporter*

**ILLINOIS STATE POETRY SOCIETY:** Covid-19 prohibited ISPS members from meeting at the Brewed Awakening coffee house that would have included some poetry challenges and celebration of the holidays as well as featured readers. Various chosen poets have continued to present, however, on monthly Zoom sessions that include an open mic. The fifth edition of *Distilled Lives* biennial anthology of members' poetry was published and distributed to members in December. It continues to be a popular feature of ISPS membership. Our yearly poetry contest was a success and thanks to all who participated. Some of our chapters continue to meet every two months on Zoom and remain well attended and a convenient method of critiquing members' poetry. The Gala planned for November had to be cancelled, but there may be a possibility that in 2021 we can gather for a full-day program of poetry presentations, continental breakfast and hot lunch. The ISPS Board continues to discuss various ways to offer members reading opportunities using technology. Illinois State Poetry Society sends greetings and wishes for a healthy and creative new year. ~ *Susan T. Moss, President*

**POETRY SOCIETY OF INDIANA** in adapting to our current situation with social distancing, protective face masks, and canceled face-to-face gatherings, we are quickly shifting gears to stay connected.

First, a training video was created to teach members and others how to participate in Zoom Meetings. These have become our 'standard' to continue to meet for our Annual Events. It is available on our PSI website and on YouTube. Secondly, a new Executive Committee position has been created to help us move into the cyber world. The brainstorming has begun: plans for open mics to continue sharing our poetry; designs for podcasts on the topic of poetry with some of our very own wordsmiths; investigating ways to assist local societies in identifying and tapping in to their local resources and art groups; re-visiting our social media venues to ensure a friendlier usability; Collaborative Poems activities for publication; accumulating first-line writing prompts from members to keep the creative sparks burning; and, throwing the net wider to include word artists from local universities and other state societies. We are still offering assistance to our PSI members to help them publish their chapbooks. And all this is just the beginning! Happy writing to all. ~ *Deborah Petersen, President*

**MASSACHUSETTS STATE POETRY SOCIETY** has two of our chapters keeping active during the COVID-19 epidemic. The Louise Bogan Chapter of Lunenburg has met via Zoom. Waterfront CREW Poets of the Winthrop area critique poems via email. Members and friends of MSPS continue to be uplifting with their generosity. Sponsorships for our 2021 National Poetry Day Contest exceeded the goal of 25 categories. We continue to have one round robin for critiquing each other's poems by mail. MSPS would like to start an online Anthology and would appreciate suggestions from societies who have successfully done so. Please send suggestions to: President Jeanette Maes, 64 Harrison Ave., Lynn, MA 01905. ~ *Beverly Barnes, Reporting*

**MAINE POETS SOCIETY** is holding its meetings and workshops on Zoom these days. We had a members-only contest on Saturday, September 19, for poems of "What America Means Now", judged by Adrian Blevins, a published poet and professor of English at Colby College. The following Saturday there was a workshop on "The Secret Lives of Words: Etymology in Poetry" led by Linda Aldrich, Poet Laureate of Portland, Maine. Winter Gatherings are in the planning stage. MPS President Jenny Doughty will offer a 3-hour workshop in January on "What We Can Learn from the Romantics." Any handouts will be digital. Vice President James Breslin will offer a workshop in February, and Sally Joy will host what is expected to be a members-only

"Reading in the Round" in March. Details are posted on [mainepoetsociety.com](http://mainepoetsociety.com). ~ *Sally Joy, Reporter*

**POETRY SOCIETY OF OKLAHOMA** wishes everyone a "HAPPY NEW YEAR!". It has been a very challenging year for everyone, to say the least! With COVID-19 everywhere, PSO was pretty much put on hold for 2020. Then our PSO Poetry Day meeting in October at Twin Hills Country Club was cancelled due to a fire. We proceeded with the contests for National Poetry Day and poems were judged and winners announced. The theme for National Poetry Day in 2020 was Vision. We are looking forward to another year of growth as we continue to get the word out about poetry and the Poetry Society of Oklahoma. Oklahoma Native Joy Harjo, the United States Poet Laureate, was one of ten women picked as the "10 influential women in Oklahoma history." PSO will hold its annual Spring Banquet at Twin Hills Country Club in March 2021. Winners from the Spring Contest will be announced, prizes awarded, and poems read. Please remember to check [angelfire.com/poetry/psol/](http://angelfire.com/poetry/psol/) for information and our PSO Facebook page. Until next time—keep writing those poems! And "Come and Grow at PSO! ~ *Patti Koch, President*

**PENNSYLVANIA POETRY SOCIETY'S** Ann Gasser recently passed away. She was a longtime member of PPS, a poet and well known by some presidents of NFSPS. For many, many years she was the force behind our poetry society, a PPS secretary, and up until November, was also the Editor of our monthly poetry issue, *Pennessence*. This is an irreplaceable loss for our society. May she rest in peace. ~ *Emiliano Martín, President*

**POETRY SOCIETY OF TENNESSEE** successfully held its 64th Annual Poetry Festival virtually on October 24th via Google Meet. We were happy to come together in this time of COVID-19 and celebrate poetry. Our workshop leader, John C. Mannone, spoke on the Intersection of Science and Poetry. He challenged us to find inspiration in "unusual" places: science news, technical fields, medical journals, and to look for both human connection and divine transcendence in everything we write about. We announced the winners of and read the 1st/2nd/3rd place poems for our Festival's Poetry Contest; 45 poets submitted over 500 poems to our 20 contests. Congratulations to all winners and many thanks to our sponsors, particularly Marilyn Denington, who sponsored our Best of the Fest award in memory of her husband

Mick Denington. All three chapters (Knoxville, Northeast, and West Tennessee) remain very active with online meetings and readings. We are recruiting new members and have received interest from the Nashville and Tullahoma areas recently. Once those areas attain a “critical mass” of members, we hope they will form new chapters. See [poetrytennessee.org](http://poetrytennessee.org) for additional information about membership, contest winners, and other PST activities.  
~ Lori Goetz, *President*

**POETRY SOCIETY OF TEXAS’** Annual Awards Banquet was cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In its place, a Virtual Awards Ceremony was held via ZOOM on November 14, 2020. At the start of the event, PST President Irene C. Robertson welcomed everyone and made opening remarks. NFSPS President Julie Cummings brought greetings from NFSPS. Budd Powell Mahan, Chairman of the Hilton Ross Greer Outstanding Service Award, announced the 2020 recipient was Michaud L. Lamrouex. Nancy DeHonores, Chairman of the PST Student Contests, announced the names of the winners, and students who were taking part in the event read their winning poems. Nancy Baass, Chairman of the PST Annual Contests, was unable to participate, so her Annual Contests Report was given by President Robertson, who along with Vice President Richard Weatherly, announced the names of those awarded 3rd, 2nd and 1st Place in the PST Annual Contests. First Place winners who were taking part in the event read their winning poems. Susan Maxwell Campbell, Chairman of the Catherine Case Lubbe Manuscript Prize, announced that the winner was Michael Minassian. Others receiving recognition were Budd Powell Mahan for 2nd Place and George Fredric Campbell for 3rd Place. ~ Nancy Baass reporting

## POETRY ARTICLES & NEWS

### REMEMBERING SAMUEL DEES WOOD, NEVADA POETRY SOCIETY

By Phyllis Peacock, Nevada Poetry Society President

Sam’s Okie roots kept him grounded on his long creative path, including a forty-year academic librarian career which closed with the honor, Librarian Emeritus of the University of Nevada, Reno. Sam liked to call himself a Renaissance man, indeed, he was well versed in the Arts with a special love for opera and all shades of the written word. Self-disciplined, he liked to share tips from his own well-balanced life and was generous with advice on how to fool Father Time, which included the nurturing of Soul, Body and Mind. As a lifetime member and

lead singer in church, he held God close at all times and found great joy and comfort as he did with his cage birds and Pekingese dogs. In younger years, exercise was enjoyed in the form of square dancing and later by regular visits to the gym. Diet was equally important, but breakfast got top billing, a feast including bacon, eggs, cereal and blueberries which he liked to say were the elixir of life. When it came to stimulating the mind, poetry was king and if he ever felt a little down, reading a couple of saucy limericks would always lift his mood so it was his perfect tool to keep the mind sharp. Sam, though small in stature was huge in *raison d’etre*. He liked to experiment, took on new challenges and gently encouraged us all to find our own individual voice through poetry. Young at heart, he loved to laugh, sing and be happy. I learned the value of moving through life with grace, as well as crafting words and even found myself eating those awed blueberries. The Nevada Poetry Society was blessed to have Sam Wood as President and friend for so many years. His bright spirit lifted us all and he will remain a dear, constant inspiration.

### APPROACH TO WRITING A POEM

By Emiliano Martín, Pennsylvania Poetry Society President

People write poetry for many reasons. Those induced by moody behavior provide the highlights and low points of the day: preoccupations, ambition, hate and love’s exaltation, disappointments, or celebrations. Any meaningful thought of importance must be penned down, shared among our peers.

We are privileged to have the gift of writing, as much as our mood and inspiration allow us—for fun, money, or simply to pass the time. We even write to show off or just to encounter the delightful experience of discovering a universe waiting for the proper ink over a blank piece of paper. And there are ways to go about it easily, without signals of indifference. While writing we must be ready and willing to create a good impression, look for intimacy, show self-assurance and respect for the subject, find the way to be convincing, sincerely mean and convey all that we need to say. Grooming and style can be helpful. Instead of a worn-down pencil, use a gorgeous fountain pen, grasp the moment, make it yours, and write on a clean piece of paper. The result could be surprising—with knowledge, practice and good luck.

### EMERSON’S POET

By Ron Weber, Poetry Society of Michigan

In Ralph Waldo Emerson’s second volume of essays, published in 1844, there

is, among other pieces, his long and all-encompassing tribute to and praise of “The Poet.” It is the energy, openness and expressive skill of the poet that speaks to all of us.

Emerson’s poet sees and chronicles the many facets and foibles of mankind as he struggles with not only his strengths but his desires, imperfections and weaknesses, as well as physical, social and spiritual needs and the many relationships called forth with nature. Emerson’s poet is a composite just as life itself is a composite and yet he is a glowing beam of light.

Emerson writes, “And this hidden truth, that the fountains whence all of this river of time and its creatures floweth, which are intrinsically ideal and beautiful, draws us to the consideration of the nature and function of the poet, or the man of beauty, to the means and materials he uses, and to the general aspect of the art in the present time.”

Emerson saw what might be called the people in general as being “too feeble” for describing or conveying in an enlightened and evocative sense the impressions of nature, the thrill of every touch. He lamented that every man could not be an artist to report in conversation and in writing that which has befallen him and given him the experiences that are life and living. He states that “The poet is the person to whom these powers are in balance, the man without impediment, who sees and handles that which others dream of, traverses the whole scale of experiences, and is representative of man, in virtue of being the largest power to receive and to impart.”

To Emerson, the poet is “the sayer, the namer and represents beauty. He is a sovereign and stands on the center.” I can only surmise, but perhaps Emerson here is implying that it is from the center that the poet can strive to serve everyone. Following is Emerson’s tribute in verse:

### The Poet

A moody child and wildly wise  
Pursued the game with joyful eyes,  
Which chose, like meteors, their way,  
And rived the dark with private ray:  
They overleapt the horizon’s edge,  
Searched with Apollo’s privilege;  
Through man, and woman, and sea, and star,  
Saw the dance of nature forward far;  
Through worlds, and races, and terms, and times,  
Saw musical order and pairing rhymes.  
Olympian bards who sung  
Devine ideas below,  
Which always find us young,  
And always keep us so.

## HOW TO ENGAGE A WHOLE CLASSROOM: CREATING YOUTH PROGRAMMING

By Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer,  
NFSPS Youth Chair

About twenty years ago, a classroom teacher gave me advice for how to begin a poetry workshop: write a group poem.

At first the task seemed difficult, until I discovered how amazingly easy it is to write a list poem with a large group.

What I love about it: this gives everyone a chance to contribute to writing a poem in a very low risk way. Also, it provides lots of room for teaching, too—like about how to vary a line, how to break a pattern, how specificity and generality can tug against each other.

Of course, it helps to have a great example poem. I love William Stafford's "Yes" and Paul Zimmer's "Zimmer Imagines Heaven".

Of course, you can also just give them a line and have them fill in the blank. After suggesting the prompt, I give students a minute or two to write a few lines down on their own pages. Then I write them all on the board to create an impromptu poem.

Here are some of my favorite list poem prompts:

- *Things I Don't Know*
- *Apologies I Don't Want to Make*
- *Things I Wish Would Never End*
- *In a Backwards Universe ...*
- *Foods I Will Miss When I Am Dead*
- *Things You Can't Take With You to the Moon*

If you have ideas of programs you have sponsored or ways to engage youth with poetry, please send them to me at: [wordwoman@rosemerry.com](mailto:wordwoman@rosemerry.com). I will feature member ideas in future columns.

## THE ART OF POETRY

By Emiliano Martín, Pennsylvania Poetry Society President

Poems come in many forms, lengths and subjects, yet they hold issues in common, with side effects to be concerned about. They share verbal artifice, harmonious sounds with significant rhyming thoughts and a meaningful narrative, if possible, away from prose. Surely, prose can be poetic, there is no argument there. All we must do is read some verses by Walt Whitman. Unfortunately, most of us are not like him.

Yet masquerading in verse, any sudden prosaic thoughts, it is not fair to the poet who is trying to figure out the reason why... he or she is in love with the poetic muse, or at least making an attempt to be precise in the art of writing in verse. Long live the poet!

## POETRY, LITERATURE ARE PORTALS TO WISDOM

By Ron Weber, Poetry Society of Michigan

Maybe it's because 2020 has been filled with pandemic and political madness and mayhem, but I find myself at the end of this year seeming to spend more time reflecting on the dynamics of literature and poetry in terms of how they contribute to defining, if not creating, human wisdom. This used to be a given and was reinforced through education, but in this age of ubiquitous gadgets, devices and social media that we seem unable to turn off, this is no longer the case.

It is extremely unfortunate, if not heartbreaking, that way too many people today fail to realize that literature is not exchanging tweets on why television still has not brought back "Here Comes Honey Boo-boo." Nor is it carrying on ad nauseam through email over which of the Barbie Doll contestants will be picked by "The Bachelor." And it isn't inane postings on Facebook urging the offing of the judges and the boycotting of sponsors because your favorite couple was eliminated from "Dancing with the Stars." These may be reading and writing but it's no more literature than a lobotomy is brain surgery.

Can the intellectual gene pool in this culture get any shallower? Add this year's presidential election to the mix and you shake your head in dumbfounded exhaustion. Biden or Trump... Really?! Trump or Biden... Seriously?!

Mankind has something far above any other species in the animal kingdom, and that's empathy. The ability to care and feel through the experiences and tales of others. It is through labeling those experiences, it is through defining people, places and things, it is through the telling of stories and the singing of songs that we know ourselves and one another.

Be it riddles or nursery rhymes as the first things we remember hearing, be it stories our mothers told us or books our brothers and sisters read to us, be it holy books or textbooks and what we memorized as children and students, we learned to live our lives through narrative, thereby broadening the scope of meaningful perspective. By these means we have the opportunity to develop a moral nature. We discover both who we are and who we are not. We need stories and songs to live fully.

Literature and poetry are two of the critical ways the human family has always turned knowledge into wisdom. It is a historical fact and self-evident truth. I have yet to read of a past culture that did not develop them. Knowledge alone can get mankind into significant dilemmas, or

outright trouble. For example, gun powder, dynamite and splitting the atom. You know, things like mushroom clouds.

So what's the difference, you ask, between knowledge and wisdom? The simplest analogy I can give would be the tomato. Technically, the tomato is classified as a fruit, although we all consider it a vegetable. Knowledge is knowing the tomato is a fruit. Wisdom is knowing you don't put a tomato in a fruit basket.

Unlike passively watching television or surfing the net, reading is actually a pretty active enterprise. It requires sustained, focused attention along with the use of memory and imagination. Literary reading enhances and expands our humility through helping us imagine and understand lives much different from our own. In both content and process, we learn to read so we can read to learn.

We owe a historical debt of gratitude to poetry. It served us long before the first marks were put on papyrus or the first symbols were placed on parchment and the dawn of written communication began. Through memory and word of mouth, the poet, the minstrel and the storyteller preserved in verse man's history, culture and heroes.

Poetry matters the way lovemaking matters beyond procreation. Poetry matters the way tears and deep human empathy matter beyond the sympathy card. Poetry matters the way cuisine matters beyond nutrition and the way wisdom matters beyond knowledge. Literature and poetry are part of man's intelligent endeavor to live life and not merely survive.

Prose tells us how to bake a pie, how to wash long underwear so it doesn't shrink, how to reseat the limburger cheese so it stays fresh, and how to use odor eaters in our shoes, so we don't alienate our fellow man. Poetry, however, helps us appreciate, helps us express, and helps us grieve. Prose may be knowledge, but it is the creative art of literature and poetry that is wisdom.

We must not lose touch with that which helps define our humanity. We must all make time in our lives to read as if culture, values, caring, personal freedoms, tolerance and human wisdom depend on it, because they do. How do we know? Books!

If you only read one story in your life, make it "Yertle the Turtle" by Dr. Seuss, and then read it again. I'm as serious as a heart attack here. It tells you all you need to know about human power, arrogance, selfishness, cruelty and suffering.

As we wrap up 2020, I extend my deepest heartfelt wish to each of you that the New Year brings everything this past year did not. Hold the hearts of those you love close

to your own and give long hugs. So, here's to poetry. Here's to literature. Here's to wisdom. Cheers!

~ *This article was previously published by the Poetry Society of Michigan*

## POETRY ARTICLES ON CONTESTING

Editor's note: the following articles were previously published in *Strophes* but reprinted again for those interested in submitting poems to upcoming contests.

### GENERALLY AGREED-UPON QUALITIES OF GOOD POEMS

By Rick Kempa (as published in a quarterly newsletter of WyoPoets)

Originally published: *Strophes* January 2016.

- \* Voice (Develop your own. Don't hold back!)
- \* Precision (Aim for the right word in the right place.)
- \* Economy (Make everything contribute: no slack.)
- \* Vividness (Find the words for the world. Use fresh images that appeal to the senses.)
- \* Clarity (Challenge us, stretch our limits with language, but aim to be understood.)
- \* Development (Be willing to push the poem forward, to keep exploring.)
- \* Music (Make the poem's music somehow suitable to the subject.)
- \* Fittingness of form (Make the poem's shape — stanzas and line-breaks — mirror the meaning or the tone of the poem.)
- \* Surprise (Break the patterns. Delight us. Give us a twist.)
- \* Subtlety (Employ the light touch: a little bit goes a long way.)

### JUDGING POETRY FORMS

By Steven Concert, NFSPS 4th VP

Originally published: *Strophes* October 2017.

As a judge of poetry contests, I have had to disqualify entries because I did not feel that they met the basic requirement of the type of poem that contestants were being asked to submit. Consider for example lyric poems, these should not be narrative or descriptive, but should express emotion or ideas and use poetic devices to help convey the emotion or idea. Generally, forms such as sonnets, odes, elegies and hymns are used for lyric poems, but there is no requirement for anything specific. Imagine the frustration of a contest judge to receive the packet of entries only to find a substantial number are narrative or descriptive. What should one do, judge them anyway? That does not honor the intent of the contest sponsor who asked that entries be for a specific form.

I think state societies are in a strong position to try to help members, as well as non-members, who enter contests to better understand the different forms. Perhaps when a contest category requires the use of a particular form, the specifics can be listed on the society's website as a tutorial, maybe even a .pdf or .doc file to download. And maybe even a well-known example of the form could be cited as reference. This might help to reduce, if not eliminate, the number of entries that do not fit the category requirements. Additionally, when contest sponsors name a specific form to use, they could be asked to provide the specifics of the form to the contest chair. It does not feel fair that a judge should be left to second guess what the contest sponsor intended.

### APPLY A JUDGE'S RATING SYSTEM TO YOUR POEM

By Kathy Cotton, Illinois State Poetry Society and *Encore* Editor

Originally published: *Strophes* October 2017.

Russell H. Strauss of Memphis, TN, is not only a frequent poetry contest judge, he is also a frequent poetry contest winner. That combination makes this former NFSPS president's judging methodology a useful tool for all of us as we prepare submissions for poetry contests. Especially for contests like NFSPS, where the judge must choose between a large number of good poems, Strauss finds that his rating system makes judging "a little less subjective." He assigns a numerical rating from 1 to 10 for each of eight categories and totals the number, "like I might if I were judging a skating competition or gymnastic competition," Strauss explains. Before you submit your next contest or publication poems, test their strength in his eight categories. Perhaps it will help you win, too.

1. Originality
2. Cohesiveness
3. Figurative language.
4. Appropriateness to form or topic.
5. Clarity
6. Meaning and purpose.  
(The purpose does not have to be a serious one. Humor can be a purpose.)
7. Correctness: grammar, punctuation, spelling, accurate word usage, accurate background information, etc.
8. Beginnings and endings: title, first line, last line.

[The above was adapted from an article published in Illinois State Poetry Society's Sept/Oct 2017 newsletter, *Illinois Poets*.]

### SUBMISSIONS FOR POETRY CONTESTS

By Jim Lambert, *Strophes* Associate Editor  
Originally published: *Strophes* January 2018.

One of the best things about belonging to

NFSPS is the poetry contests that it and its member states conduct. It seems that contests get the poetic juices moving in our versified brains. Themes help to broaden the scope of the poems we write. I recommend that poets participate in contests for many reasons, but the main one is *it will help you write better poems*.

As with any activity, there are certain requirements that must be followed. One of the best ways to better one's chances of placing in a contest is to *follow the rules*. As a male, it is difficult for me to follow instructions or get directions or ask for help. That is a sign of weakness it seems in our maleness. So men, please pay attention. No one will know that you are getting help. This article is not specifically for men because some ladies appear to ignore them after they have read the instructions. Maybe it's short-term memory loss, disagreement with the instructions, or misalignment and/or planetary imbalance.

I find that the majority of poets who enter our contests are female, although it seems men are gaining ground. Speaking of whom, another interesting and informative thing about us is we don't like to lose (probably in our DNA), so how can a guy lose if he doesn't enter the contest? My excuse is that my entry got lost in the mail, turned into vapor in cyber space, and/or my dog/cat/hamster/guinea pig ate it.

### HOW TO MAKE A JUDGE HAPPY

By Susan Maxwell Campbell, past NFSPS Contest Chair, and Barbara Blanks,

Poetry Society of Texas

Originally published: *Strophes* January 2019.

#### *First and Foremost*

1. Read the competition rules.
2. Check the sponsor's website for additional rules.
3. Follow the rules.
4. Email, phone, or write the contest chairperson about your questions.

#### *Getting Your Poems Ready*

- Keep to the suggested font and size. Please—reading a stack of poems can strain the judge's eyes. Words only! Don't add anything, no matter how cute. By the way, some judges like a left margin of 1.5 inches since thumbs have to go somewhere, preferably not over your words. Just a suggestion.

- Single-space your poems. Most rules require this. If you 1-1/2-space or double-space, your poem won't even be considered—all that work for nothing. And you will never know why you didn't win.

- Staple multiple pages together if the rules require it, and if they don't, don't. (See how easy this is?)

• When counting lines, count all the lines with print: the second (and third) lines of titles; dedications; epigraphs; titles or numbers of sections; and notes. If the contest requires you to identify the form (like the type of sonnet), that notation is excluded from the line count.

• Lines that are too long may circle around to hang you. NFSPS rules say every single line must keep to 50 characters (letters, spaces, and punctuation). Longer lines may be divided at the discretion of the *Encore* editor, and if a poem is already close to the limit, your poem might burst its seams—and that creates problems when the public reads them. Neither poet nor judge likes stones thrown at them.

• Seriously: Divide the poems into two stacks: those without ID (which go to the judge) and those with ID (which get processed for winners later). Dividing huge batches of papers is *not* entertaining to contest chairs. Really. Don't irritate them!

#### *Putting Your Packet Together*

• Please don't send oddball sizes of index cards. NFSPS rules say use a lined 3 by 5 index card. And you know that top red line on an index card, don't—please—don't write on it or above it. That's for our records. Legible contact information is a good thing. If you can't manage that, try a return-address label.

• More tape on the envelope is not better; wrapping in a simple manner is practical at our end, too. Plain envelopes 8 ½ x 11 or 9 x 12 are excellent. You do want us to be able to open it and process your entries, right? Rest easy—we've seldom seen a mangled envelope.

• And one more thing, please try not to wait until deadline to mail your entries. Tons of last-minute mail produces nightmares about being buried alive. Chairing a contest is more work than you can imagine, and we appreciate your cooperation. Really!

#### *Post Script*

This "How to Make a Judge Happy" article grew out of a conversation we co-authors had regarding our experiences with judging numerous contests and chairing contests. And rather than quietly grumble, we felt the need to let writers know potential problems and to steer them away from pitfalls. We are keenly aware that these observations on counting lines and counting characters in a line are not set in stone either by NFSPS (at the moment anyway) and do not necessarily apply to all contests available to the poetry community. Our bottom line is this: always, always check rules and do all you can to follow them. Rules level the playing field, and not even brilliant content prevents disqualification for not following them. Trust us, all contest

chairs really are happier to deal with your questions beforehand than to have to make decisions that keep winning poems from getting to the prizes.

#### POETRY CONTEST TIPS

By Jim Lambert, *Strophes* Associate Editor  
Originally published: *Strophes* January 2020.

I have chaired the Illinois State Poetry Society's annual contest for four years now and several things are now obvious to me, both from the standpoint of entering contests and from producing them. It seems that people think that chairing contests is somehow difficult and challenging. There is a bit of a challenge but chairing one is essentially paper shuffling, sorting and, most importantly, getting judges. When entries arrive, I log them in on an Excel spreadsheet. At that point, the poet becomes a number. I file the "information" copies by number. On the anonymous copies, I write the poet's number and file them by contest. I check each poem for obvious errors—inadvertently putting the poet's name on them happens more often than you would think. It's because each poem they copy has the "by poet's name" line. Any violation of basic rules is dealt with by me but the judges also catch many that I miss. If a poem has typos, some may be sent on to the judges (if it happens to be an excellent poem). The judges can decide what to do. As a judge, I feel that any typo represents lack of attention and is disqualified. Most judges that I've dealt with will disqualify for typos. The next thing I hear most often from judges is finding bad grammar, forced rhyme, or using a word that has the wrong meaning. One can find almost anything in a large number of poems. We specify the subject to write about in several of our categories—this is frequently ignored, or the poet doesn't know what the subject means. We have made mistakes on the subject matter which we hope to avoid in the future and those miscues are caused by the subject being too specific. A perfect example is in our current contest, one of the them had as its subject, Shawnee National Forest. This forest is large and covers a significant part of Southern Illinois—so it's a good topic for those of us in that area, but not for a national contest. We should have made the subject "National Parks". This category got only 23 entries from 105 poets.

Here is what Jon Sebbra had to say about the poems he judged in one of our contests.

"I offer the following remarks in the hope that they will help all contestants to rank higher next time. Because I am human, I appreciate poems which: move me, show originality and care in selection and thoughtful use of words. Other judges may

have more objective criteria. I am sorry, but I am not an algorithm. If I select a poem as a winner, I feel I bear responsibility for the choice. Thus (in my opinion) good poems, which have typos or unintentional grammatical mistakes, reflect on me. That's why I cannot judge poems with typos or errors to be winners. I urge all poets to re-re-read their work carefully to eliminate all flaws. Find a trusted friend who knows grammar, spelling, capitalization, etc. to review your poems before you submit them. Together with yours, the judge will be reading five dozen or more entries in a category. If the subject is given, there are bound to be several similar in topic or approach to yours. So how will you ensure yours stands out? Strive to be original. Avoid clichés, unintentional repetition of words (if acceptable synonyms are available). Omit any final summarizing line or stanza, which explains or repeats the story, message, or theme. Someone said: 'More's conveyed that's left unsaid.' Do use strong nouns and verbs, poetic devices (metaphors, similes, allegories, alliteration, etc.), and employ evocative or emotive situations and language. Remember: brevity. Some of these stories and situations would have been winners had they been pared down to their densest essence. ~ Jon Sebbra"

*Jon Sebbra, Salt Lake City, Utah, was awarded Utah State Poet of the Year in 2013 for Yossi, Yasser, & Other Soldiers, a collection of his poems about war from the perspective of a soldier in combat. Jon works with ex-soldiers affected by PTSD. He uses his poems to demonstrate how one veteran learned to mitigate his demons by writing.*

#### TIPS FROM ONE EDITOR TO YOUTH CONTEST ENTRANTS

By Lucille Morgan Wilson, Editor

Originally published: *Strophes* April 2014.

**Give your poem a good title.** Just as an interesting book title may invite us to open and read the book, so the title of a poem gets the attention of a reader. "The Dead Crab," "The Image of Delight," "The Day I Broke My Leg," or "Meeting a Stranger" are more likely to pull us in than "Springtime," "My Garden," or "Mother," all titles that have been used many times. The title should be appropriate, not misleading, and it is an opportunity to add something extra to the poem without "wasting" precious poem lines/words.

**Consider punctuation your friend.** Commas, periods, semicolons, and dashes give the reader clues that help him read the poem in the way you intended. Line breaks also may indicate a breath pause or give added emphasis. Lines should, therefore, end on significant words, not "and," "the," or "so."

**Search for the “just right” words.** Whether you are rhyming or writing free verse, be sure you know the meaning of a less familiar word. A dictionary—either a physical book or on-line—is a necessary tool for a writer and may save you from looking foolish if a word sounds good but your usage is wrong. Be on guard with to/too, bear/bare, there/their, are/our, peddle/pedal, shown/shone and lots of other tricky pairs. One of the most common errors is to confuse *lightening* (to make a burden lighter) with *lightning* (that accompanies a storm).

**Be specific.** It’s better to use particular terms than general ones: *wren* or *hawk* or *eagle* will each convey a different tone in your poem than bird. The image is much stronger if instead of *tree*, the more exact *willow* or *pine* or *oak* is used.

**Avoid over-used phrases.** *Azure sky, hard as a rock, good as gold.* Often the first thing that comes to mind is a metaphor that has been used so frequently it no longer has a fresh message. Make every word count. Words like *so, very, that* used as fillers to pad out the meter, especially in a rhymed poem, usually do not earn their space.

**Listen to your poem.** Read it aloud. Check for awkward places that may be improved by rearrangement or substitution of a few words. Make good use of such poetic devices as alliteration – *In a summer season, when soft was the sun* – (hear the soothing sound of the repeated “s”) –or consonance – *The moon, a pale balloon, loosed from moorings beyond the trees . . .* Consider how this repetition of sound can add to the mood of the poem. When does *stone* work better than *rock* or *pebble*? *halt* rather than *stop* or *quit* or *cease*?

**Read, read, read** to expand your word power. Observing how poets and prose writers use the “tools of the trade” will help you become a more appreciative reader and a better writer.

**Test your work in contests.** Be sure these are legitimate competitions, not those operating for profit that will issue “Honorable Mention” certificates to all entrants, with the aim of selling you their costly publications, your poem on mugs or plaques. When you do enter, be sure to read and follow rules carefully.

### WANT TO WIN A POETRY CONTEST?

By Jim Lambert, *Strophes* Associate Editor

Originally published: *Strophes* Jan 2020.

I do too! Here are some things that will help us do so. **1.** Neatness counts. I receive entries with contact info ball-pointed across the page and words scratched out. **2.** Know/learn the rules (Big Exclamation Point!) and follow them. **3.** Don’t wrap your entry as though it will be attacked by hatchet-wielding merciless contest judges. It took me much effort to cut through all the tape on some packs of poems. **4.** Pray.

### POETRY CONTESTS—NEATNESS ACHIEVED WITH TEXT BOXES

By Jim Lambert, *Strophes* Associate Editor  
Originally published: *Strophes* January 2018.

As contest chair/coordinator/manager for the Illinois State Poetry Society, whatever you want to call me, I have realized that many poets have yet to discover the most helpful tool a poet can have for entering contests: **Text Boxes.** By creating a text box with the required information in it (name, address, etc.) for the information copy, the poet is only about three mouse clicks away from having a poem ready to send to the contest chairperson. I have received many poems with all this info handwritten so small and sloppily that it’s barely legible. We are going to require that all info be printed next year. The classic this year was the anonymous copy that a poet had used the information copy and then scratched out all the information with a ball-point pen to create the anonymous copy. It would have been easier just to print out another copy, but this was actually about a fourth generation copy of the poem—copied enough times that the print was gray. One would think that, if one is going to enter a contest, then one should do so in a sane, responsible, and legible manner. If you don’t know how to use a text box, get someone to teach you. You can even email me (jim@jimlambert.net) and I’ll set one up for you. Write on. Write on.

*Strophes* Editor: if you search for “word text box”, you will likely find a Microsoft Word help page entitled: [Add, copy, or remove a text box in Word.](#) For example, below is a text box added from the Insert menu’s Text Box icon in the Text section. The “Simple Text Box” option with default formatting was chosen, then Author contact details typed in:

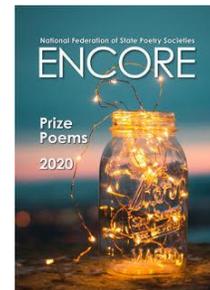
Author’s Name: Pam Poet  
Author’s Address: 123 Elm St, Somewhere, FL  
Author’s Email: pampoet12345@mymail.me

### POETRY CONTESTS

#### MONTHLY POETRY CONTEST

Wilda Morris, former president of the Illinois State Poetry Society, posts a contest for other poets each month on her blog. New contests are posted on the first of the month; deadline is the 15th of the month. No charge to enter. Previously published poems are okay, but not simultaneous submissions. Winning poems are published. View the guidelines at: [wildamorris.blogspot.com](http://wildamorris.blogspot.com).

#### ENCORE 2020



The anthology of our top 159 prize-winning poems from NFSPS 2020 contests is on Amazon for \$13. The 2019 edition that would have been distributed at the June 2020 convention is also available. All royalties support NFSPS. ~ *Kathy Cotton, Encore Editor*