

A photograph of a stone church tower perched atop a grassy hill. A wide, stone staircase leads from the bottom of the frame up to the base of the tower. The hill is covered in dry, yellowish grass and green patches. The sky is blue with large, white, fluffy clouds. The text '20 TIPS TO KEEP INSPIRATION ALIVE!' is superimposed in bold black letters across the upper half of the image.

20 TIPS TO KEEP INSPIRATION ALIVE!

**Edited by
Wendy Webb**



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20 TIPS TO KEEP INSPIRATION ALIVE

Margaret Munro Gibson

Edited by Wendy Webb

This collection is dedicated to Norfolk Poets & Writers

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1. POETRY A WAY OF LIFE

When poetry is your way of life, there will rarely be a day when you do not read from one of your favourite anthologies. No day when you do not think of poetry. Few events will occur which you do not examine mentally for the possibility of the inspiration for a poem. Certainly nothing will touch your life deeply without eventually becoming a poem.

2. POETRY AS A HOBBY

You will be pleased when something strikes you as being the embryo of a poem, but if you have to bake a cake for guests, that will take priority. If poetry is your way of life, you'll buy the cake and use the time to work on the first draft of your poem. Only illness, or emergency in your immediate family circle will be more important than the tending of your new poem. However, whatever place poetry holds in your life, hobby or something more precious, you are unlikely to suffer much from boredom. Once the rough draft is on paper, there will be much pleasurable work to be done. It is important to find the best words. Not necessarily long, or difficult words, but words which best suit your theme, or which promote rhyme, or rhyme and rhythm.

3. DOES THE POEM LOOK GOOD ON THE PAGE?

Today's poetry readers, not all poets by any means, are often put off when they see large blocks of lines without any breaks. It is therefore important to decide where to make a break. This applies particularly to unrhymed verse. Quatrains, for instance, often fall into natural breaks. The same may be said of the Sonnet, the Villanelle and various other forms. The three line Haiku should not, of course, be joined, even in a Haiku sequence. The new Davidian form would of course have the break after each fifth line – or even four, if you want the fifth line to stand-alone. On average, I'd say the most a reader enjoys without a break, would be twenty, or thirty lines. So – please look carefully at your work. Do not send a poem out until it looks good on the page. Breaks also serve to add emphasis. They can be used at the conclusion to ensure the reader understands, perhaps in surprise, the main meaning of the poem.

4. WORD PROCESSING

A computer will not make you into a poet, but it can ensure that what you have composed with your pen is as good as you can make it. Seeing your poem on the screen helps you to decide whether you have used the right words. Sometimes you may find you have used the same word too frequently and must make changes. Above all, you can store the poem; perhaps make changes without full retyping. You may even want to send it out again several years later and there it is, ready on disk. Maybe you can now think of a better title. This of course applies to all forms of writing, although many writers can and do compose stories, articles, etc on the computer.

5. WITH A PEN IN YOUR HAND

Let us suppose you have an idea nagging at your mind. All day, going about your routine tasks you have been trying to think of a first line without success, wondering what form to use. For many people these problems can only be solved when you are able to sit down with an exercise book and a pen. That pen makes all the difference. Words begin to flow, even if you have to cross them out again and again. Eventually you will know – what form to use and a rough draft will appear on the page. After that you may have only a few hours of this work that you love. On the other hand it may take days or weeks, but eventually your poem will have become ready to take its place in the world. You may be able to commence other forms of writing on a word processor, but poetry never. However, even if your novel is proving difficult, try using a pen for a few pages!

6. POETRY'S FAR FLUNG CLAN

When you have been writing for a few years, or perhaps only for a matter of months, and have achieved publication in several small press magazines and perhaps in others (don't forget the country magazines), you will start to belong. You will make several friends. Indeed, you could make many friends, both in this country and abroad. Some you may meet. Some you will never see, but they could well become very important characters in your book of life. You are united in a common bond – love of words. Pen friendships blossom easily.

7. WHO WANTS TO BE A MILLIONNAIRE?

The other Saturday evening, watching that show, I was saddened to see a young man who did not know about Wordsworth's Daffodils, 'fluttering and dancing in the breeze.' The man was well informed on other subjects. I thought this gap in his knowledge reflected badly on our modern education system. Before you can start to write poetry you certainly need a basic knowledge of English Literature. Even people who do not much care for poetry should at least have a nodding acquaintance with our traditional heritage. In any case, true poetry is timeless, although there are more matters to be worked into poetry in this day and age.

You will certainly not make a living, let alone a fortune out of poetry, but from time to time you may be paid a small fee, making you feel professional. You could well win prizes, or trophies if you send the right type of poems to suitable competitions. My advice is, don't enter the big national competitions where you usually have no chance and where your fee could be supporting very difficult and possibly unpoetic work. This last point also applies to short story competitions.

8. SINCERITY IS IMPORTANT

If you do not enjoy your own poetry, nobody else will find pleasure in reading it. Never try to show off either your skill, or your knowledge. Aim at excellent construction and good clear imagery, writing only of matters you treasure, or even deplore.

9. SEASONAL POEMS MAKE IMPACT

We are often told to avoid writing about the seasons. This is a piece of advice, which should go unheeded. In fact there appear to be more seasonal poems about now than there were some twenty years ago and most people love them. However, the secret of success is to use the season more as a background than a central theme. Write about something you experienced in autumn for instance. Let Christmas be the centre of a frosty winter. Perhaps you found love in the spring; then tell your readers about it. Make seasonal poems evocative, so that the reader smells the flowers, walks on crackling lawns, responds to the tug of the wind, etc.

10. THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN SADNESS AND DEPRESSION

Surely, the best poetry uplifts the human spirit. Yet this is not to say sorrow does not have a place. If you are feeling sad, or have known much sorrow, reading a poem with which you can identify can only help.

**Remember: We look before and after
and pine for what is not;
our sincerest laughter
with some pain is fraught.
Our sweetest songs are those
that tell of saddest thought.
P B Shelley.**

However, poetry which expresses sorrow is never morbid and does not leave the reader feeling depressed and it does not use ugly language. A poem concluding on a note of hopeless bitterness could certainly depress the reader, if he troubled to read long lines of so-called realism and their negative conclusion.

11. ACCURACY IS IMPORTANT

If your poem makes reference to a well-known fact or a matter of history, which can be checked, see that you have checked. This would also apply to a Greek legend, or a Roman god, or for that matter to anything in the Bible. There will always be readers who notice your errors and are either kind, or ill-natured enough, to write in and mention them. This applies even more urgently if you are writing a novel, short story, or an article of course.

12. A PLACE IN WHICH TO WRITE

Your WP or computer is obviously fixed in your own den, but pen and paper writing usually has to be done wherever and whenever you can find the time. That has been my experience, anyhow. In any case, the ardent writer has exercise books and pen, or at least notepad and pen at hand all the time! Favourite places in which to enjoy writing, especially poetry, might be a garden chair on a beautiful day, a seat in the park, or by an open window. In winter you might prefer your own fireside chair, but in a busy life, things seldom work out this way. You must compose where you can.

13. COFFEE BREAKS

Good for flagging energy, of course, if you can tear yourself away from your loved task! You should, of course, never continue writing until you feel ready to drop, but of course when time is scarce, you tend to do this. If you like milky coffee however, do force yourself to run and make a cup, or even less milky. You'll feel much better for it. A couple of chocolate wafer biscuits will push you on for a while too.

Poetry is certainly a way of life for many poets, but even as a hobby you've got to give time to the working out of each piece of inspiration. This applies to all forms of writing. I know, because for me, other forms of writing are a hobby. Poetry is my way of life. It is as much a vocation as that of being a nurse, or a religious teacher should be.

14. HUMOUR IN POETRY, LOVE OF READING

In my opinion this is very difficult to introduce and unless it comes naturally is best left alone. On the other hand, a certain jauntiness is delightful. How splendidly the late John Betjeman introduced this note into many of his poems. 'A Subalteen's Love-Song' moves with such swift and jaunty grace that it cannot fail to charm. We are happy to be introduced to the world of Miss Joan Hunter Dunn. Naturally you will continue to read your best-loved choices in the well-known poetry anthologies as well as those that appear in the modern small press magazines. I would suggest you read John Betjeman frequently. His poems always have something to say, with a touch of light humour.

However, don't let me deter you from writing humorous poems. I am unable to offer much advice, except be careful that your intended humorous work does not appear to others as rather trite. I am perhaps inclined to hold poetry in a too sacred place in my line of thought, but it does seem to me that there are some subjects that do not lend themselves. The very word poetry suggests beauty of thought, language and description and with Keats I say:

'Beauty is truth, truth beauty – that is all

Ye know on Earth, and all ye need to know.'

Not that a funny poem need lack a little beauty, just that it is very hard to achieve.

15. SLEEP WELL – refreshed for writing

Sleeping well should keep you writing. You wake refreshed. The ideas you thought up in a daze of fatigue are now a distinct possibility. Even a long stint on your computer seems undaunting. But life isn't like that, is it? Before you can settle down to writing, precious energy must be used in other ways. Even if you don't work away from home, or it is a Sunday, what about breakfast for the family? The family pets. The demands of children. Conversations with your partner. However, when poetry is your way of life you will fit it in somehow. Even late at night it is possible to write. Some may be able to use the computer when feeling 'all in'. I never could. Poetry however, in itself, refreshes the faded spirit.

Whatever you are writing, however, if you are lucky enough to sleep well, to wake refreshed and have the time, don't waste your energy on tasks in or around the house. Gardening, window cleaning, painting, cleaning the car can all wait.

16. SOUNDS LIKE POETRY

‘All that glistens is not gold’ – and everything that sounds like poetry is not poetry. You will know the difference between free verse and blank verse. However, with free verse, there is a danger of producing chopped up prose. Good descriptions and beautiful words are not enough. You need to introduce simile, alliteration, or some of the other features of poetry.

17. RECRAFTING A POEM TO SHINE

The above remarks also apply to this section. Sometimes reading one of your old poems, you will find the subject interesting, but lacking in polish, e.g.: -

**Mr Clegg was an Undertaker,
so he always wore a black suit.
His manner was swift,
yet dignified, but even off duty
he strutted about in dark clothes,
making it easy to guess his calling.**

Same stanza reworked: -

**Mr Clegg was an Undertaker.
With deft dignity he directed.
Mourners gratefully accepted him.
But when on holiday, ill at ease,
he strutted about like a crow, a crow
hungry and deprived of flight.**

Surely an improvement – if not exactly shining! However, shine is only another word for polish. The first version of the stanza was unpolished. Use of the word crow twice, emphasises the fact that Mr Clegg still wore black even on holiday. Yes. I made it up just to illustrate the point.

(*Note: The choice of name is fictional, and bears no relationship to any living individual.)

18. COMPETITIVE EDGE

Again the advice in the last two headings applies, with a little more added. I am not competitive by nature, but entering competitions in poetry, or any other form of writing, is one way to publication. Publication means sharing one's ideas and that is my goal. If you are dedicated it will be one of your goals. Your competition entries should shine with all the polish you can muster. They should also be as original in theme as you can make them. On the other hand, if using a well-worn theme, you must try to find something new to say about it. If you happen to be familiar with the work of the adjudicator you might have some idea of the type of piece likely to stand a chance. Never be daunted by lack of success. Your entry was one of many and may yet get a mention, or publication elsewhere.

19. IVORY TOWERS, HOLIDAYS, BREAKS, COURSES

Ivory Towers are not always attainable. Why bother? Just enjoy your poetry, other writing and your holiday, absorbing every facet of life around you. Making notes of matters of special interest is a must. I wrote several poems when on holiday in Paris. I have several about Coventry Cathedral. Brecon, South Wales, was a place in which I loved to stay, many years ago. One of the poems inspired while in Brecon was published recently.

Writing holidays, or courses, could be both enjoyable and helpful, especially if you are a beginner. A good way to meet like-minded people. They are not, however, essential.

20. WHEN WRITING INSPIRATION FAILS

This sad heading can only inspire me to say that when you are experienced, especially in poetry writing, you will not suffer this problem very often and it will not last long. Your life force, or spirit, provides themes for you to work on, especially if you are an observer of life, making notes regularly. Even so, there are days when you long for the joy of inspiration, only to find you cannot think of a subject. Beginner, or experienced poet (or story writer, or whatever) you can only be patient. You can only look about you, think and imagine. Perhaps that very day you saw a fussy looking man with white whiskers hurrying along the road, reminiscent of the white rabbit in Alice in Wonderland.

Did you have a vivid dream last night? Do you remember a romantic episode in your own life that you have not, if you are a poet, put into poetry? Have you any passionate likes, or dislikes? You can make a start by picking up a pen and trying to compose a few lines. Try to write

a haiku (5-7-5-) even if it is only about your own garden, or the clouds overhead. Writing a small coherent poem will at least restore your confidence and may just help your thoughts to flow, forming the inspiration needed for a longer work. Above all, try not to worry. Inspiration will return.

THE END

Tips for Writers is also a print magazine in the UK. There is also a free monthly eTIPS on request.

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