

## Choosing a Title for your Poem

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A title can be as telling about a poem as a handshake and exchanged pleasantries can be about a person. The title is the handshake (firm? limp? damp?), the polite smile (crooked? genuine?) and the first words (casual? deep-voiced? British?). Leaving a poem untitled, or fixing it with a random title, may short-change an otherwise engaging piece of work, and even discourage potential readers. With so many poetry books out there begging to be read, this is something no true poet can afford.

Below are some ideas and suggestions for choosing a winning title.

### **Descriptive Title**

A good title catches the eye of the reader. It attracts notice, creates interest, and draws the attention from itself down to the words on the page. Descriptive titles should present a striking image, something grand or memorable or hauntingly beautiful. It should make the reader pause and say *'Hmm.'* It should make the reader want to follow the description, to read its embellishment within the poem.

Examples of descriptive title include:

"Speaks the Whispering Grass" by Jesse Stuart

"Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" by Robert Frost

"Lines Inscribed Upon a Cup Formed From a Skull" by Lord Byron

### **Theme Title**

Every poem centers around at least one strong theme. Placing the theme in the title lets the reader know right away what the poem is about, and what can be expected when reading it. Some may think that poetry should be 'mysterious' and painstakingly analyzed before attaining understanding, but this will only confuse and alienate readers. The point of poetry isn't to confound but to present, share, give. By placing the theme in your title, you attract readers with interest in that theme. Instead of feeling confused and irritated, they will most likely move on to read your other poems as well. Stating the theme in the title strengthens its presence in the poem below.

Examples of theme title include:

"Oppression" by Langston Hughes

"Common Things" by Paul Laurence Dunbar

"Wilderness" by Carl Sandburg

## **Subject Title**

Along the same lines as the Theme Title above. This works particularly well if your poem revolves around one specific subject- a person, an object, an event. Unless it's a riddle poem, you don't want your readers trying to guess who or what the poem is about. They should be enjoying your words, and considering your point of view instead. A subject title also lets the reader know who or what is most important in the poem, which will aid their analysis and overall understanding. They will appreciate this much more than the poem that keeps its subject (and, therefore, purpose) hidden.

Examples of subject title include:

"The Two-Headed Calf" by Laura Gilpin

"The Lady of Shalott" by Alfred Lord Tennyson

"Telephone Poles" by John Updike

## **First Line Title**

The introductory nature of the first line often makes it an appropriate title. As always, it must draw the reader in to read the poem. It must intrigue, enthrall, astound. It must make the reader want (and need) more. Not all poems begin in this way, however. Even great poems sometimes start off soft, before reaching heights of beauty and dazzlement. If you wish your first line to be your title, make sure it is dynamic enough to ensnare a reader. Imagine skimming through a Table of Contents, and coming across your first line. Is it interesting enough to make you turn to the page? Does it create images, emotions or questions in the reader's mind? If so, then you've got yourself a winner.

Examples of first line titles include:

"Then came I to the shoreless shore of silence" by Conrad Aiken

"Batter my heart, three-person'd God" by John Donne

"There will come soft rains" by Sara Teasdale

## **Phrase or Line Within Title**

Does one of your lines summarize the essence of your poem? Does one phrase send shivers down your back every time you read it? That's an indication of a potentially good title. Unless the line contains some twist or surprising statement, consider it for your title. A good title is intriguing, dynamic and thought-provoking.

Examples of phrase or line-within titles include:

"Never Again Would Birds' Song Be The Same" by Robert Frost

"When the Year Grows Old" by Edna St. Vincent Millay

"And I Raised My Hand In Return" by Joseph Stroud