

11 Exercises and Activities for Creating Unexpected Imagery in Poetry

[Watch the Full Lecture](#) Presented By [Meghan Sterling](#)

1. Start by writing about what's on your desk, or a tree outside your window, or your father's beard or your mother's scent.

2. Showing Vs. Telling

In a poem one can show the sound of the neighbor's cough, or the feel of the cotton of a lover's shirt against the speaker's face, or the smell of snow in a Vermont town in winter. Focusing on the senses gives the reader a deeper sense without being lectured as to the meaning. Trust your reader.

Future practice: List all senses that are heightened during a particular experience—perhaps the last time you were in water—describe taste, touch, smell, sight, and sound.

3. 4 Part Exercise

- Sit in a public space for at least 30 minutes.
- Try to observe, using all five senses, what is happening around you. Record, in list form and in as much detail as possible, at least 20 different images that catch your attention.
- Then, spending at least 30 minutes on your own in a quiet space, go inward. Think of strong sensory memories and try to capture—again in list form, and without worrying about providing explanatory context for a reader—those memories in language, conveying the strongest sensory details.
- Weave together the new images with the memories—is there a poem there?

4. William Stafford's Daily Poetry Prompt

- Write down 10 images you saw in the last 24 hours
- Open a poetry book at random—write down one line
- Use the line you chose as either the first line, or write a response to it, or use some of the words in it—then use all 10 images to craft your poem.

5. Trace the Images

Choose one of your favorite poems and circle the images—

How do the images relate to each other? Is it an image carried multiple ways throughout the poem? Or a series of seemingly disjointed images? How does this translate into the poem's meaning—does it align with the poem's topic? Does it support the voice/style of the poem?

6. Describe a place using a repeated phrase as a refrain (such as “there are birds here”). Start each stanza with it. Use each stanza to invoke and evoke all the senses aroused by the subject in the refrain.

7. Describe someone using only non-human metaphors (similar to Plath's approach in “You're”).

8. Describe a landscape you know well in a long string of images, literal or figurative, and try to make some of them rhyme.

9. Describe one very small physical part of a landscape—a tidal pool, rather than a whole ocean or beach—in great physical detail. Try to imbue the small object, through as many senses as possible, with the feeling of the whole locale.

10. Mad Lib Lists

- Create two lists—one of nouns, one of adjectives.
- Mix and match. What comes of it? Is the sky maddening? Is the moon hungry? Are your shoes tricky? Is your skin incomplete?

11. Poem Exercise

- Write a poem with no adjectives, only nouns.
- Go back and fill in the adjectives (or descriptive phrase) for each noun—but make it weird or wild or unusual. What happens? Does a new meaning become clear?