

-There is often—not always, but often—a frame for the book as a whole. Think of Whitmans' *Leaves of Grass*—a kind of Bible, a spiritual text. Berryman's *Dream Songs*. Millay's *Fatal Interview* is a series of love sonnets with familiar themes: to put simply, meeting, loving, losing. Terrance Hayes' *American Sonnets for my Past and Future Assassin* explore & interrogate from the perspective of a black man. Plath's *Ariel*, organized after her death by her husband Ted Hughes, seemed to have an arc toward self-destruction, while her actual organization stressed her rage at his infidelity.

--**The opening poem:** A crucial poem. How will you invite the reader in? It's your introduction. It can establish your voice, your concerns. It can set an emotional tone or introduce a central idea. It can be a prayer. An *ars poetica* or poem about language. A personal account introducing the reader to the speaker. The first line of your poem is also the first line of your book

--**The closing poem:** how will you leave your reader? How does the final poem relate to the opening one? Just as the ending of an individual poem is significant, leaving the reader with a feeling of resolution, or unease, or joy
One poet said he thinks of the final poem as "a blessing." (My book *What Is This Thing Called Love* ends with the poem "Kisses." The arc of book goes from erotic love to gesturing toward agape. Last lines of book: 'When I'm dead kiss this poem, it needs you to know it goes on; give it your lovely mouth, your living tongue.)

--**Is there an arc**, a trajectory—sadness to joy, innocence to experience? Personal to political? Major to minor, or interwoven? Think of your book as one big poem.

--Think about the energy level/subject matter/theme of each poem—are there quiet ones, loud, discordant ones? In a set of music, a good performer knows how to bring the energy up, then switch to something slower.

My first book was a bit of a descent—from heaven to falling through the earth (where I grouped my sonnets together after much agony about whether to intersperse them) to a section called Real Life.

It opened with a poem called “What the Dead Fear”—in a word, being forgotten-- & ended with “Beds,” which mentions death in the context of being in bed with a lover and young daughter.

Potential (and simplest) way to organize: by subject matter (here are all the poems about my mother’s death, here are all the ones about marriage, etc.)

Sharon Olds did it for *The Dead and the Living*. Two sections.
Poems for the Dead subdivided: Public/Private
Poems for the Living: The Family/The Men/The Children

My collection *Lucifer* at the Starlite is structured as a night at a bar: Happy Hour, Jukebox, Dance Floor, and I Am Going to Have to Take Your Keys. My latest, *Now We’re Getting Somewhere*, has 4 sections, each of them the title of one of the poems within the sections: Night in the Castle, Songs for Sad Girls, Confessional Poetry, and Archive of Recent Uncomfortable Emotions.

Does your book have a source you could steal language from, and use that language as section titles?

Is there a title poem? If so, where does it belong? Your title is even more of an introduction.

ZEPHYR—A second book by a friend, poet Susan Browne. (She’s just had her fourth, or maybe fifth, book accepted by Four Way Books-- *Monster Mash*).

-Her opening poem establishes themes and a voice, mix of humor & pathos, various tones---there will be sadness and humor. There is a speaker here with a particular vision, a way of looking at the world. Her mother has died. She thinks about death, poetry, consciousness—all things that weave through the book.

Divided into 3 sections. In part 1 we hear about firsts. We hear about deaths—sister’s husband, later in section the mother. Not all grouped together.

-Part 2 begins with a poem called “Sadness.” From generalized sadness, next 2 poems are about the mother’s death. Then we hear about new life, a niece being born. Followed by grace, a robin’s “wretched singing,” the double awareness always. “Persevere” is followed by “Forgive.” Last poem in Part 2 shows the speaker climbing a mountain. Still struggling.

-Part 3 centers around aging—Hot Flash, Facing Fifty, Ode to Autumn, ends with “Last Day of Year.”

Some tips

-Most importantly: Polish the poems. Work up from journal publications. Get a sense of where you are. Get feedback. There is a lot of competition.

--Billy Collins: "Front load." Good idea for contests.

--I think you should show your range at the opening. If there are 5 sonnets in the book, don't start with all 5; have one early on, and a later one will call back to it.]

--Look for what you can cut. Be merciless.

--Know what your themes and obsessions are. Your poems are probably more unified as a group than you think.

--Look for unifying elements: are there colors that repeat? Particular subjects? A place? Traditional forms or kinds of poetic strategies (list poems, sonnets or odes or aubades, prose poems). Could you unify through either writing to some titles—or retitling already written poems?

-Dean Young has odes scattered throughout his book.

-Jorie Graham has several poems in one book titled "Self-Portrait As..."

-In *Zephyr*, Susan Browne has 2 odes; 2 poems that are "first times"; and 2 lasts, one being the last poem. They are not next to each other.

--Look for connections between the end of one poem and beginning of the next. Could be by contrast/opposition; by variation; etc.

--Put the poems in different contexts. In *Zephyr*, "Let Us Live Only For Passion" is the fourth poem from the end. It comes after a lot of darker poems, so it shines more brightly there than it would at the opening.

--There is great value in crawling around on the floor.

--Find your center—a poem or small group of poems that seem essential. When you have a bit of a collection, you may find that new poems suggest themselves.

--Be patient. Do the work. Trust your intuition.

