



dorothea mackellar poetry awards

Mentoring Kit: a guide for young poets



By Lorraine Marwood and Claire Saxby

PART ONE

Journal writings

The basis of any good writing is observation. Journal writing or keeping a diary of unusual images or happenings is a vehicle that will:

- provide an ideas bank, that can be dipped into at any time
- sharpen your poetic eyes – really record concrete details as this is the basis of great Poetry
- stimulate regular writing time that is fun.

Ideas and images will come to you at the oddest times. Trying to hold thoughts in your head can be like juggling balls – it's easy to drop one.

Having a journal allows you to record the image for later attention and development. Ideas captured on scraps of paper can be transferred to a journal, so they don't get lost.

To start a journal buy yourself either an exercise book, a blank note book, a fancy notebook. It should be something that is both portable and appealing to you to record images.

Take your journal with you when visiting places such as a shopping centre, a sports game, a café, an entertainment event, wherever there is a diversity of people.

Pause, watch and then record:

- snatches of conversation
- descriptions of people – what they wear, mannerisms, body language.
- images that really grab your attention
- elements of the five senses – poetry evokes images which have sensory associations
- your interactions with the image and question it
- date the entry

It's fun to look back and recall that sense of surprise and atmosphere – how quickly we forget things unless it's recorded.

One of the great things about a journal is that you can arrange your writing and ideas for your own pleasure. You can draw, add clippings, a ticket, a photograph, make lists, doodle and have question and answer sessions with yourself. You don't have to share your journal with anyone.

Here's a sample from Lorraine's notebooks:

- 5 o'clock in afternoon – elderly lady in street in blue dressing gown with pliers trying to unlock her mail box padlock as she obviously had lost her key. She looks furtively at us as we pass her by – do we offer help? Or can we feel that embarrassment?

- Watching a surfer alone on winter waves. Suddenly after a ride he loses his board and has to hunt for it – don't all surfies wear Velcro ankle straps? The board looked like a yellow shark just cruising onto sand.

Here are some of Claire's journal entries:

- Near sunset, by the beach. A seagull strolls to a car and pecks at a tyre, like a parking officer checking to see if the car has been there too long.
- 7 am Lorne. The sun rising from behind a headland with lighthouse on it. Is the lighthouse guiding the sun past the rocky headland?
- Small boy moving between small and big swimming pool. His mother is in one pool, his father in the other. He runs/walks between the pools as his parents remind him to be careful. It seems the constraint of walking is almost unbearable, especially when contrasted with the freedom he has in moving through the water.

The following books about journal writing are helpful:

- 'The New Diary,' by Tristine Rainer – 'How to use a journal for self guidance and expanded creativity'
- 'Writing your life' by Patti Miller – a journal of discovery, ways to record family histories and look at incidents from your own life
- 'In the Palm of your hand' by Steve Kowitz, the poet's portable workshop.

PART TWO

Creative writing strategies

Two of the best creative writing strategies are like a poetry warm-up exercise.

Free Writing

Materials: timer, pen paper – preferably another exercise book set aside for the purpose of free writing.

Method: Set the timer for five minutes and start writing. Write about anything – what is in the room around you or simply write ‘I don’t know what to write’ until you start writing. Try not to lift the pen from the page; really exercise that writing muscle.

This technique may help you overcome writing blocks. It often empties your mind of trivial distractions and allows you to explore the subconscious. Often you can go back over your writing to pick out a phrase to continue writing from. This is a great thread for future free writing sessions. Try this as a warm up technique every time you start to write – make it a regular habit.

Inspiration may come from a phrase or a headline from a newspaper or magazine. Free writing can be used when you are trying to hone a poem. It can ‘accidentally’ uncover the answers you’ve been seeking.

Brainstorming

Brainstorming or ‘clustering’ according to ‘Writing the Natural Way’ by Gabriele Rico, is a popular idea.

Materials: pen, paper.

Method: write a word in the centre of the page (for example, ‘spider’) now surround it with words you associate with ‘spider’. Circle each idea and see how many legs and feet that spider can grow.

Pause and look at what you have written. Which ideas inspire you to write? Now start developing that idea into a small poem.

Any word or phrase can be treated in the same way – even an idea first surfaced in the free writing technique.

Brainstorming and free writing are two techniques used to harness creativity and ideas. These techniques can also help when you are stuck. Keep developing these strategies and try variations of your own. Also keep a thesaurus handy.

PART THREE

Where to now with your writing?

Two of the best ways to develop your writing is to sharpen a few strong poems and send them out for publication in small magazines or into competitions. This is one way of developing your voice and confidence as a poet.

Always send a stamped self-addressed envelope for a reply when submitting to small magazines. Keep a record of where you send your poems and the result of your submission.

Competitions:

- The Dorothea Mackellar Poetry Awards – www.dorothea.com.au
- Writing centre journals – often available in public libraries.

Some competitions are restricted to certain age groups, while others are open to all ages.

Some will offer payment or prizes, but many may just offer publication. All opportunities are valuable as they help to build a publishing history and to establish writing credits.

Poets to read:

To be a writer, you must read widely in a variety of forms. Immerse yourself in poetry.

Australian poets

- Catherine Bateson
- Eric Beach
- Sherryl Clark
- Bruce Dawe
- Diane Fahey
- Gwen Harwood
- Steven Herrick
- Lorraine Marwood
- Les Murray
- Thomas Shapcott
- Judith Wright

Other poetry collections to read include:

- Australian Society of Authors – has readings on the web from contemporary Australian poets such as Dorothy Porter. www.asauthors.org
- Collected volumes of Australian poetry: for example 'The Oxford book of Modern Australian Verse' edited by Peter Porter.

World poets

- ee cummings
- Seamus Heaney
- Sylvia Plath

Organisations and networks to join:

- Poets Union provides a quarterly newsletter with news on poetry publications, discussions and book reviews www.poetsunion.com/news.htm
- Writers' centres are great supporters of writers across the genres – there is a writing centre in every state. Here are the web addresses of a few:
 - www.nswwriterscentre.org.au
 - www.qwc.asn.au
 - www.sawriters.on.net
 - www.sawriters.on.net
 - www.sawriters.on.net
 - www.writerswritingwa.org
 - www.writerswritingwa.org
- Fellowship of Australian writers
- Poetry Australia foundation – promoting poetry in all its forms – publishes Blue Dog poetry magazine www.poetryaustraliafoundation.org.au/
- www.australianpoetry.org/education/

Small magazine publication:

- School Magazine (NSW)
Tel: (02) 9889 0044
Fax: (02) 9889 0040
Email: schmag@geko.net.au

The following magazines can all be contacted at the above address:

- Countdown
Specialisation: readers aged 8–9 years: short stories, poetry, non-fiction, articles, short plays to 3000 words.
- Blast Off
Specialisation: readers aged 9–10 years: short stories, poetry, non-fiction, articles, short plays 500–3000 words.
- Orbit
Specialisation: readers aged 10–12 years: articles, poetry, short stories, fiction, short plays 500–2000 words.
- Poetrix poetry for women
 - Poetrix, PO Box 532, Altona North, Vic 3025
- Libraries will have books like 'Writer's Marketplace' for both local and international opportunities. Ask your librarian.

Online Australian journals

- haiku
 - www.haikuoz.org/musing.htm
 - <http://members.optusnet.com.au/paperwasp/selections2005.html>
- For young writers
 - www.vibewire.net/2/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=8924&Itemid=68
- Stylus
 - www.styluspoetryjournal.com/main/master.asp?id=652

SUMMING UP

Just like an athlete training for a competition, writing and keeping a journal takes practice. Polish your work and read as much about technique and poetry ideas as you can.

- Attend workshops, network, find another writing friend you trust to give you feedback on your work.
- Send your poems out to small literary magazines and enter poetry competitions.
- Read poetry, read poetry, write poetry.
- Trust in your own voice, don't be put off by rejection, keep writing, developing your writing style.
- Enjoy the journey, learning your craft, learning about the world and about yourself.