

TEACHING THE ART OF POETRY

WORKING YOUR VERBS

by Clare Pollard

Verbs are the doing words in the English Language. And if you want your poetry to be powerful, you have to see verbs as the muscles. They give poems strength and momentum. Lazy verbs make for flabby poems.

TRAPS

- **Clichéd verbs** Zadie Smith has said 'In each of my novels somebody "rummages in their purse" for something because I was too lazy and thoughtless and unawake to separate 'purse' from its old, persistent friend 'rummage'. To rummage through a purse is to sleepwalk through a sentence.' How many other verbs do we sleepwalk into? Do you always 'fall in love' or 'sink into depression'? We are often alert to clichéd adjectives or phrases, but not verbs – freshen them up and your poems get an instant energy-boost.
- **Unnecessary adverbs** In a good poem every word deserves its place. But adverbs are often only compensation for an inadequate verb. Take 'John walked slowly'. You wouldn't need the adverb 'slowly' if your verb was more expressive – John could saunter, amble or trudge. I'm not advocating a complete ban on adverbs, but always ask whether you'd need them if your verbs did more work.
- **Watch out for 'ing'** It makes verbs passive. 'I was running' 'I was eating' 'I was looking'. Why not 'I ran', 'I ate' 'I looked'? It can be much more dynamic, and stop that unnecessary little word 'was' cluttering up the poem.

TIPS

- The easiest way to make your verbs interesting is to use them in unexpected contexts. Ted Hughes was a master of this, as in the poem 'Hawk in the Rain' where wind 'Thumbs my eyes, throws my breath, tackles my heart, / And rain hacks my head'. The brilliance of these lines lies entirely in the verbs. Yet thumbs, throws, tackles and hacks are not unusual words in themselves: it's their context that is new.
- You could also become a collector of verbs: unusual, specific, local. Jen Hadfield's recent collection *Nigh No-Place* includes a glossary of Shetlands words including the verbs 'glinder' which means to peer through half-shut eyes, and 'broal' which is to cry as in pain. In a recent poem I wrote about a bearded lady I discovered some wonderful verbs in Polari, (the slang used in 19th century fairgrounds, and also, famously, adopted by the gay community), including 'shushing' for stealing.
- Another strategy is inventing verbs. It worked for Gerald Manley Hopkins, who coined the verb 'twindles' in 'Inversnaid' (a mixture of twists and dwindles?). Making a noun into a verb is also an interesting technique – there are good examples in Daljit Nagra's poem 'Bibi & the Street Car Wife!': 'legs / of KFC microphoning her mouth' or 'beefburgering her backside.'

AN EXERCISE:

Here are three dull lines of poetry:

The sun was shining, clouds drifted above
that bustling city street. You held me tightly,
and I could I feel your heart was beating.

First, change the verbs following Hughes' example. Can you use everyday verbs, but surprise us by applying them to the sun or the street? Next, try replacing the verbs with more unusual ones. Could a dialect verb give the speaker a more distinct voice? How about inventing a verb?

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The Poetry School, 81 Lambeth Walk, London SE11 6DX, UK Tel: +44 (0)207 582 1679