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# Found & Headline Poems

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## Start here

A nice thing about "found" and "headline" poems: you don't start from scratch. All you have to do is find some good language and "improve" it.

How? You find interesting, ordinary "prose" (prose is language like this-not pretending to be poetry) and turn it into a thing-like-poem. We'll be more specific later on.

But first-this exercise gives us a chance to celebrate ordinary prose: its concreteness, its richness, and its surprises. In this exercise we're against fancy language. Words with too many syllables.

Hollow words (such as "destiny" or "happiness") that can mean too many different things, and hollow titles for poems (such as "Feelings" or "Reflections"). We're against "poetic language," that is.

Plenty of strong and beautiful poems are made from plain language. You sometimes hear such language in conversation, when people are talking their best. Listen. Sometimes you yourself say wonderful things. Admit it. You can find moving, rich language in books, on walls, even in junk mail. (From such sources you'll probably find better poems, or better beginnings for poems, than from dictionaries and other word books.)

So, poems hide in things you and others say and write. They lie buried in places where language isn't so self-conscious as "real poetry" often is.

This exercise is about keeping your ears and eyes alert to the possibilities in ordinary language.

Not incidentally, it would be a good idea to start a poetry notebook. A place to collect your poetry stuff. As if you haven't already.

## Found Poem Steps

### Step 1.

Find from fifty to one hundred words you like. Words that really interest you. They may come all at once from one source-but they needn't. If you half-remember a good passage from a book or old magazine, track it down. Copy it. Check out mail, talk shows, walls, and malls. If you have a recorder, use it-but ask permission first. Hang around where people talk, where there's print. Eavesdrop notebook and pencil ready for action. How much ordinary language? Fifty to one hundred words. That's not a whole lot. This very *paragraph is more than one hundred*. The key is to find interesting, good stuff.

It's probably easier to discover poems in printed materials than to try getting them through the ear, by hand, from conversations, televisions, or radios. Sure, some people who write fast or take shorthand can capture talk. Recorders do it better. We've read fine found poems recorded from a radio ministry, from speakers at a Martin Luther King celebration, and from hallway talk. Remember, get permission from persons you record. Found Poem poets have discovered good raw material in notices on bulletin boards and on highway maps; in insurance policies and in letters; in books, magazines, and newspapers. Obituaries yield good poems. So do some pieces of "junk mail." Old diaries.

Are those the only places?

No. Menus and notes left in desks. Historical plaques along the highways and classified ads. But while we're on *that* subject ... The forbidden sources are poetry and song lyrics. They're both already poetry. Stay away from commercial advertising and from other sources where the intent is to be "poetic."

But that prayer you heard? That letter from someone close? Ordinary or "poetic," it's up to you. The rule is: *Don't use language that has already been "artistically arranged,"* like song lyrics and billboards and new car ads.

And keep track of where you got your words so you can give the source credit.

**Step 2.** (On scratch paper.) Copy the language in the sequence that you found it. Double space between lines so it's easy to work with.

**Step 3.** Study the words you found. Cut out everything that's dull, or unnecessary, or sounds bad, or is otherwise offensive. Try to cut your original find in half -twenty-five words from the fifty you copied down, fifty from the hundred. *Change punctuation if you need to.*

But adding your own words to the found words is "illegal." Not tolerated in official Found Poem circles. A found poem is *found*, after all.

On the other hand ... We've worked on found poems. We know how difficult it is. And we're easy. So how about ...

When you're close to an edited-down version, and you truly need to add a word or two-to smooth things out, to make sense, to make a point-you may *add up to two words of your own*. Remember, that's two (2) words. Total. Make other *little* changes, too-tenses, possessives, plurals, punctuation, and capitalizations.

**Step 4.** Read your cut-down draft one more time. Is there a better title than "Found Poem"? Put the words into your notebook, spacing or

arranging them so they're poem-like. (Sometimes you will put key words at the ends or beginnings of lines. Sometimes, for interest or surprise, you may want to break up words that often "go together" [like "white clouds," by ending one line with "white" and starting the next line with "clouds."] Break lines so you emphasize key words, get good sounds at the ends of lines, or heighten the reader's interest.)

Here's our best advice: READ ALOUD AS YOU ARRANGE!

Before you actually put the line on the page, test possible line ends by pausing ever-so-slightly at possible "breaks," or line ends. Reading aloud as you work will help you get lines that please you. In short, if it sounds good, trust it.

Which line breaks seem to add most? Sometimes you'll want lines to end with natural phrases or ends of sentences. Other times you won't.

Arrange the words so they make a rhythm you like. You may

*space words out so they are* *alone*  
*or allruntogether.*

Arrange them to read the way you like. You may want to put

*key*  
*words*  
*on lines by themselves.*

Or you may want to form the whole poem so it's fat, or skinny, or shaped like a polar bear.

People desperate to emphasize key words have been known to PRINT THEM LARGE, print them in colors, or underline them, use **different type faces** and even *italics*.

Your job is to arrange the language you found so as to enhance or improve it. To make it interesting, look good, and good to read. At the bottom of the poem, tell where the words came from. Give credit. It's OK to borrow language for good uses like poem-making. But say where you found the original. For example, "From Chapter 2, *Huckleberry Finn*, by Mark Twain." Or "Overheard while waiting in line to check out at Kroger's."

As for a title, find one or make one up.

**Step 5.** Well all right. If you began this exercise without a single poem in your pocket, you must be proud. You have found/ shaped a thing-like-poem. That makes you a poet-maker of a thing-like-poem, at least.

In your notebook: *Enter a good copy of your thing-like-poem, signed.* (Extra credit: Carry around a copy of your poem and try to sneak it into casual conversation. Not easy, but not impossible.)

Here are found poems we like. Notice how "Wanted By Sheriff" is balanced on either side of an imaginary line running down its spine. And notice how "Prairie Wind" is arranged so the right side makes a straight vertical line. Why are they arranged these ways? Simply because we thought they looked good?

*Text 1***Wanted by Sheriff**

Wanted By  
 Sheriff, Muleshoe, Texas  
 Al Halstead  
 alias  
 Hal Alstead  
 Scheme: Mail order parts for  
 model cars-never  
 delivered.  
 Last seen leaving  
 Muleshoe  
 Texas  
 in white Cadillac  
 If found, inform Sheriff  
 Muleshoe, Texas.

(Found on the wall of the Post Office, Nickerson,

Here's a paragraph we found:

The plain spreads southward below the Trans-Canada Highway, an ocean of wind-troubled grass and grain. It has its remembered textures: winter wheat heavily headed, scoured and shadowed as if schools of fish move in it; spring wheat with its young seed-rows as precise as combings in a boy's wet hair; gray-brown summer fallow with the weeds disked under; and grass, the marvelous curly prairie wool tight to the earth's skin, straining the wind as the wheat does, but in its own way, secretly. (83 words)

*Text 2*

## Prairie

Ocean of wind-troubled , grass.  
 Winter wheat, scoured and shadowed as if  
 schools of fish move in it. Spring wheat seed-  
 rows, combings in a boy's wet hair. Curly prairie  
 wool tight to earth's skin, straining wind, the  
 girl's hair. (38 words)

(From Wolf Willow, by Wallace Stegner)

Remember, we said, "you may add up to two words of your own"?  
 "Girl's hair" are the two words we added.

Poems in  
Response

Today Men Are Mere Numbers

In mathematics we always look for a valid shortcut  
to solving problems  
Many physical and economic phenomena can be  
described by exponential functions  
A batted baseball

The tractor operator rotating the tire

An airplane flying ten pounds of mixed  
nuts Interchange any 2 equations of the  
Woman who invested her inheritance  
An unending line of dominos  
We could knock down the entire line by knocking  
down only one domino  
A unique solution

The interchange of two rows

-Jennifer Plunk

(Found in *Precalculus* by Larson and Hostetler)

INVISIBLE DANCE

These are the mites,

Thousands and thousands of tiny  
mites: Male mites and  
Female mites and Baby mites and Even  
the mummified corpses

Brethren of theirs stir in the bed

Where they have spent the night  
snuggling Warm and cozy.  
Now beginning to stir for the day.

Sharon Plavnick

(From *The Secret House* by David Bodanis)

## Honey

Winnie-the-Pooh sat  
at the <sup>foot</sup> of the tree  
began to t-h-i-n-k  
buzzing and

buzzing and  
buzzing  
"only reason for  
buzzing is  
you're a bee"  
"only reason for  
being a bee is making  
HONEY!"  
"only reason for  
making honey is so  
I can eat it."

climbed  
and  
climbed  
and  
climbed  
and  
climbed  
and  
Climbed  
rather tired  
**CRACK!** (Oh help!)  
dropped,  
fell,  
plummeted  
flew gracefully into gorse-bush  
"It all comes of  
liking HONEY  
so much!"

-Stephanie Anne Molnar (from A.  
A. Milne's *Winnie the Pooh*)

## In the North

The boy giggled quietly, reaching out  
 to touch a fawn still red with  
 camouflage spots, walking out into  
 the water one careful step at a time,  
 stretching her nose to touch the  
 finger the boy was holding out.  
 Youngster meeting  
 youngster. Staged moment?  
 I have seen such a  
 thing from a canoe.

Cris Anderson

(Words from *woodsong* by  
 Gary Paulsen, 1990, p.

The Same Michael Gallatin was a  
 large man with

smooth grace white strong teeth  
 long, lean legs darkly handsome  
 face and green eyes, a place of  
 great danger.

The wolf was as big as a bull.  
 with a body designed for  
 special white fangs muscles  
 rippled along its back sleek  
 black fur and same green  
 eyes, danger

Both in one....  
 werewolf

-Suzanne Gorrell

(From *The wolfs Hour*  
 by Robert McCammon)

He's the **WARTIEST BOY**  
 Trying to cure **WARTS**.  
 plays with frogs so much  
 the charm's **BUSTED!**

Take 'em off with a  
 bean? No.  
 Cure 'em with dead cats  
 'bout midnight  
                                 at the

Jam your hand in  
 That'll fetch any  
**WART** and  
 pretty soon

off

she

comes

Sangrita Baruah

(From *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* by  
 Mark Twain)

Personals

Come hula  
 hoop in the  
 soft light  
 of a vintage 1928 armadillo lamp in  
 the swanky Bound Brook apartment  
 of this 26 year old  
 professional woman  
 who makes pumpkin  
 pie from scratch  
 and is able to converse

Stephanie Block

(From *The Medium*, The Rutgers  
 University Livingston  
 Campus Newspaper)



Indeed

to  
split  
ting  
in  
fin i  
tive  
S.

No point in m  
angling  
just to  
a(split  
) void.

You are  
entitled to  
HAPPILY go  
to HAPPILY  
go  
to HAPPILY  
go  
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and

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!

Donna-Marie Stubble  
(From an article by Richard  
Lederer "Good Usage and  
Good Taste" *Writer's Digest*)

## Something

Something very odd in the farmlands  
 Strange circular depressions appear,

flattened  
 pattern is a  
 swirling  
 leaving no clues  
 puzzling circles

The search for answers  
 continues to ripen  
 ready for harvest.

Single rings linked by a long curling tail  
 Puzzling disturbances wild as a vicious wind  
 sculpting creations

**SOMETHING** is responsible.

-Mary Moebius  
 "Around and Around in Circles," Sally B. Donnelly,  
 Time magazine, September 18, 1989, p. 50

## Headline Poems

The headline poem is a kind of found poem. You begin with words and phrases found and removed (by you) from a newspaper's headlines. You'll have plenty of pieces to work with. Your main job is to discover and present-in an artistic and attractive way-connections in the language.

Working on Texts 1 and 2 (above), we made decisions as to what words to keep, where best to end the lines, where to break for stanzas, how to punctuate, and what titles to give our work. The headline poem offers the same opportunities.

This could be a good time to work with others.

Three or four working together are not too many. Group work should be sociable, useful, and fun. Work with whom? Little brothers, friends, relatives, neighbors, parents, grandparents, maybe even with pets. Yes?

Solos are OK, too.

You'll also get help from the words themselves. You'll see. Whether you work solo or with others, stay alert for surprises and

## Headline Poem Steps

### Step 1.

Cut out fifty or more words and phrases from one issue of a city newspaper. More is better, here. One hundred pieces are not too many. Keep the mutilated newspaper for later-in case you need a certain letter or word or punctuation mark. (If scissors work embarrasses you, do it where no one can see you.)

Most pieces should be individual words cut from longer headlines. As a rule, *don't use entire headlines*. Stay alert for good little words hiding in larger ones. Create new words by taping together parts of ordinary words. (We made "snarkles" out of "snacks" and "trifles." We made "camp-ramp" from "campers" and "ramp." Don't ask us why.)

Have some scissor fun.

### Step 2.

Find a big clear surface to work on. Floors are good. Empty tables. Spread the pieces out and play. Move pieces around. Think about what you see. Read aloud individual pieces *and* other pieces that might connect.

Listen to the words. If a few of them seem to want to huddle, help them. Be open to strange connections. Be swift to embrace nonsense that makes you smile. Don't let "sense" take over too early.

As the poem settles down, continue to read aloud. Listen for sounds, rhythms, and connections you like. Listen also for good lines and for places to end lines. Test unpunctuated line ends by pausing briefly. Keep an ear open for a good line break.

Does a title come to mind? (Is there one hiding among the unused pieces?)

**Step 3.** Find a sheet of paper of a size you like and lay out your words on the page. Do they fit? If not, remove some; trim others. (It probably looks better to have too few than too many words.) You may need to find extra letters (like s's, or *ed's*) or punctuation. (Now aren't you glad you saved the newspaper?)

Find and cut out what you need to make your poem complete. Then paste, staple, tape, or glue. (Optional: Decorate to taste.)

**Step 4.** (Be patient. One step more.) Before you abandon your headline poem, read (on the following pages) the two we found. Both show influences and decisions that may interest you—for example, the alliterations in "Workaday Worm": Little leased lashes. (Are there other alliterations?) Notice the arrangement of lines in "Bad News."

If it would please you to impose rhyme on your poem—rhyme at line ends or inside the lines—it's not too late. How about a formal pattern—alternating lines three and four words long? Or something else?

The tougher the task you impose on yourself, the sweeter the victory.

Sometimes.

In your Notebook: *Copy/paste/staple in your headline poem, the original or a copy. At the bottom of your poem, for the sake of that person who will one day write your biography, write the name and the date of the newspaper you used.*

*Text 3*

**Workaday** worm **with**

Little leased lashes

*lures legless loon*

with Gold go - go **genes**

to *draft y* disco .

Tax man

takes **taxi - driver's tips** .

**Olympian** mess

rendered with flair .

*Text 4*

# Bad News

4 seal pups *mangle prayer book*

## Religious volumes go fast

sanctuary *Beavers romp,*

*Episcopalian editors*

*in moral crisis*

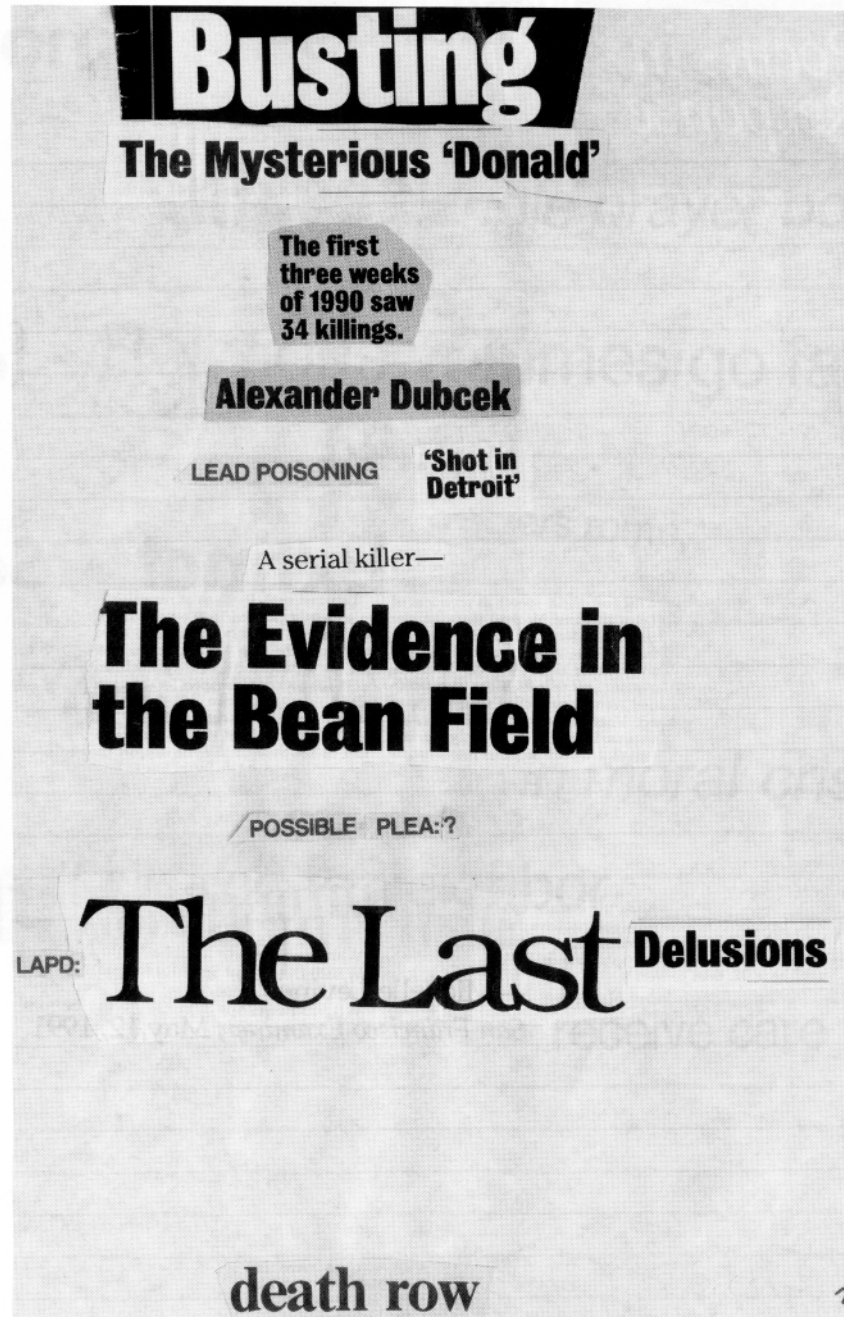
sell church to neighbor

receive care

*Poems in  
Response*

Teenage **Dinosaur** **Is**  
**seeking** to  
 rebuild fake feet of  
**Extinct** **Scholar.**  
 Intimate **'taboo'** **Troubles**  
 fuming **plums.**

-Michelle Levine



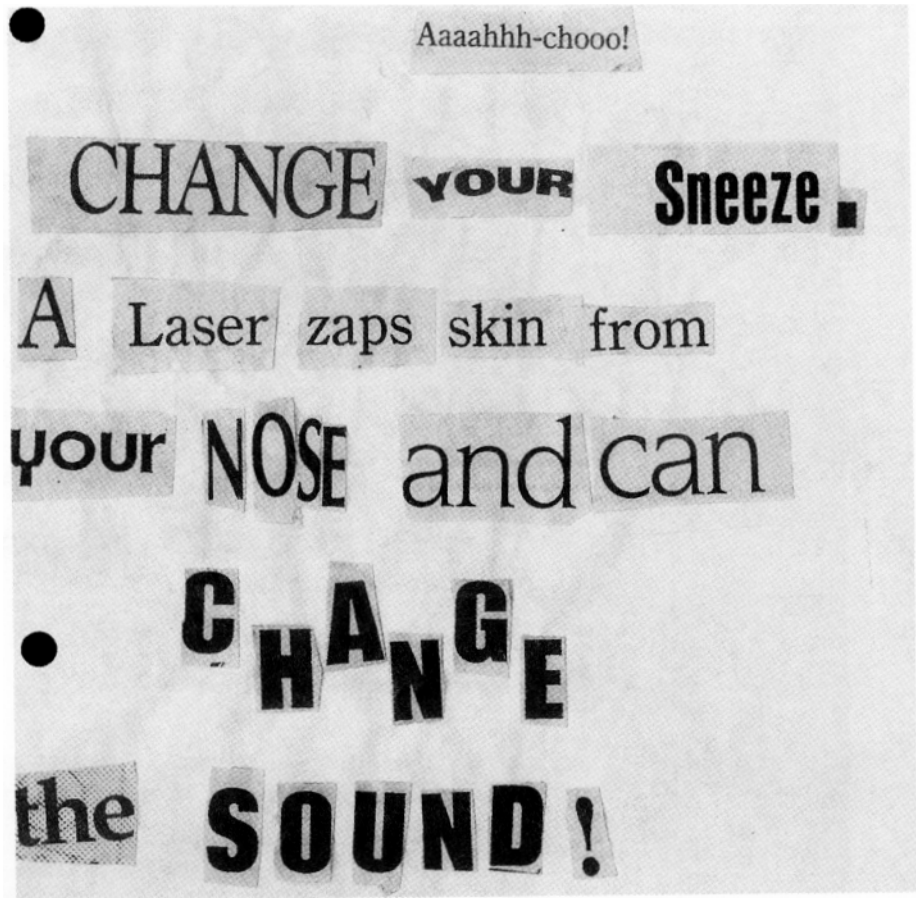


**The** boy's **firm** **Father** **faced** the  
**two** **federal** **partners**,  
 and **with** **his** plentiful **profits** easily  
**paid** off the **final** **PAYMENTS**.  
 The **community** **Company** **came**  
 and caught **the** **crime** **pair**,  
**and** **will** send **the** men up **North**  
 to **put** **Penguins** in **ponds**.

Amanda LaFond  
*Star Tribune*, May 3,

Unlikely Faces  
 Fading  
 In Pursuit of Promises  
 Precarious  
 Currents in a  
 Bitter River

-Carol Ja'go



-Vicki Bergeron

**mysterious**  
**Journal**  
**tells**  
**Crazy**  
**tale**  
**of**  
**wild** **White-Knuckle** **Man**  
**from** **vast** **Mars** **wasteland**  
*getting*  
**God's** **voice** **on** **TV**  
**love,** **peace** **&** **courage**  
**rise** **in** **The** **sky**

-Arlene Swora

It's time to leave

Flying cockroaches *spurn*  
pastures of plenty, storm  
*secret luncheon party for Stanley*  
the sailor, found guilty

of Pitching Physical praise  
at a good Woman,  
who took off  
for the Hills.

-William Burns