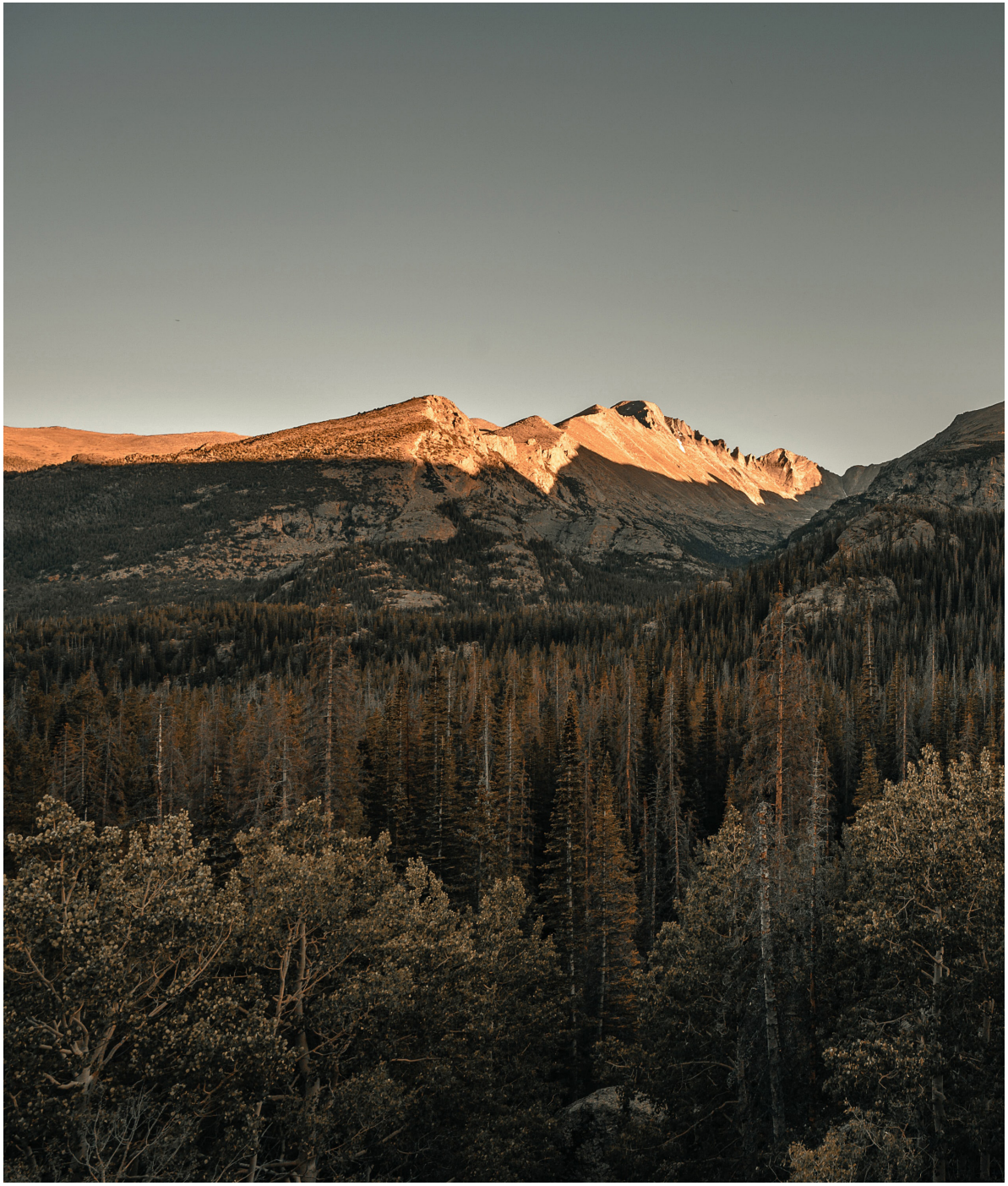

ADVICE FROM EDITORS

FP / Poetry Lab 2021

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From a craft standpoint, what causes you to accept a poem?

We asked dozens of editors from all over the lit mag community this question. Here are their responses.

Don Share

Poetry Magazine

I don't worry about craft as such as a specific criterion. Instead, I think about whether or not a poem succeeds on its own terms – formal and otherwise - and I consider how it might be in dialogue with other works constructed in more or less analogous ways. Beyond that, poems that subvert conventional notions of technique can be exhilarating and illuminating, witty, and even monumental – many of the best poems are slippery, in formal terms.

Hannah Aizenman

The New Yorker

I'll preface my answer here by noting that, while I'm very involved in the reading process, the final decision always falls to the poetry editor, Kevin Young, who actually selects every poem that we publish in The New Yorker. That said, my most honest answer to this question is probably also a bit unhelpful: I don't really know what moves me until I find it (and if I did, the purpose of my work would be somewhat defeated). What I mean is that I'm always after a poem that I haven't seen before, a poem that makes something happen with language in a way I couldn't or wouldn't have imagined, a poem that creates the space in language for its own (and maybe other, heretofore-unfathomed poems') possibility, even necessity. It's not a matter of abstruseness—seemingly simple poems often open language to us (or vice versa) in powerful ways—but of clarity and confidence in the medium. Although the submissions toward which I gravitate are more different from one another than alike, their common thread, I think, is an earnest concern for and engagement with language. However that manifests stylistically, whatever the subject, I'm struck by a poem whose language feels honest, in the sense that it's considered, urgent and specific to that poem's particular project. Of the thousands of submitted poems I read, those that go on to appear in the magazine, and those that stick with me (the latter a larger category containing the former—inevitably, we receive more great writing than we are able to publish), seem to me events or occasions in themselves, managing to locate or create a sense of drama, of tension, within their very material, their attention to meaning and to music. I admire technical skill, but clever tricks and performative indulgences resonate far less than when a poem's craft is in service to a real spirit of inquiry: when it genuinely wants to figure something out and requires these particular words, sounds, images, and spaces to do so—when the language is the story. I'm most intrigued and impressed when a poem seems to have surprised its author, because then it can surprise me. I love when a poem is, well, itself—whatever that may be.

John Skoyles

Ploughshares

The most obvious is the use of familiar language (clichés). Also, sometimes a poem is difficult to read, not due to heady content, but because the syntax is contorted, resulting in the additional problem of lack of music or even readability.

Sumita Chakraborty

Agni

I honestly prefer to think about what causes me to accept a poem rather than what causes me to reject it. Practically, the volume of submissions we receive is massive, and thinking in terms of rejection makes the inbox seem more enormous, I think. More importantly, though: reading submissions involves close reading (even if done quickly), and I like to think of close reading as an act of generosity. I prefer to approach the task from the position of someone who wants to inhabit the work, wants it to inhabit me. And when that doesn't pan out, the causes for it are often at the intersection of the linguistic and the political. I don't mean that a poem must be political in subject matter; rather, I think one of the most remarkable political strengths of language is that words do stuff, to steal one of my favorite phrases from the field of literary theory (it's J. L. Austin's). If the language is not working particularly hard, if the poem isn't doing something, I'm ultimately left without something to inhabit or with something that can't inhabit me.

Luther Hughes

The Shade Journal

Wow, this is a great question and one that I often don't think about considering I think craft and content go hand-in-hand. I should probably talk about what I mean when I say, "craft." To me, craft, is attention to form, structure, syntax, figurative language, and prosody. When I read a poem, what first concerns me is, of course, the content since I'm looking for what jars or takes me to a place I didn't know language had the power of going. Or, maybe more accurately, was reminded what language can do. But, most times, the elements of craft that are behind something that is strikingly beautiful or wrenching, is complimentary; it fine tunes the strike. For example, a poem's content can be tender or can render me motionless, but if the poem has horrendous line breaks, it could distract me from what it wants to say. Or, for another example, if a poem is addressing chaos, unboundedness, or, I don't know, erraticism, having irregular stanza lengths or broken syntax could highlight such themes. I don't believe a good poem can live without attention to craft elements. Whether I recognize it or not. But at the end of the day, I want a poem to make me rethink the human experience. I like to be completely undone by a poem. I want the poem to make me want to throw everything across the room.

Marion Wrenn

Painted Bride Quarterly

As a reader, I love when a poem's craft makes me trust that the poet is up to something. Something witty, smart, fierce, funny, urgent—something that's about two steps ahead of my sense of the poem or the story or the essay—so that when I arrive at the end I'm caught up in this tremendously pleasurable, table-smacking, "wait, whoa; hey, how the? What the? Oh, hell yes!" Craft is an invitation. It's a way to signal to your reader that you've figured out a way to express what you've discovered – even if it's merely an echo, a pattern, a resonance in the world worth noting, worth making me pay attention to with you. And this manner of expression you've crafted? It imagines my experience. "Craft," then, enacts a kind of intimacy. What if we think of craft as a wink, a flirt? Side note: I write under the influence of Roland Barthes here—who wrote about "plaisir" (the pleasures of recognizing how things work) and "jouissance" (the kind of pleasure/threat/bliss involved in not-knowing, when you are on the edge and unsure). When I can detect how a poem is made-- and simultaneously root for the poet as she takes expressive risks—well, I'm in. Finely crafted poems make a do-it-again desire rise in me and I think that's because of the pleasure of recognizing the poet's choices. Which is also to say: some of the best craft choices seem artless. And it's in that seeming artless-ness that a poem comes across as somehow both effortless and simultaneously audacious. Complexity – and its design—sits on the back of the tongue, delayed, delicious. If it's on the nose and too obvious, I'm not interested. If it's a "closed system," as my friend the writer Richard Larson puts it, if it's one that "locks me out" or makes sense only to the author, I get grumpy and faithless and will likely stop reading. As a reader, I like to work a little bit, and I love to be rewarded for the practice of reading (and re-reading). A quick word about my duplicity and fuzzy language here. That "something" I refer to above? Not exactly helpful, right? "Something" is a placeholder meant to capture the way it feels for this reader when form and idea fuse in great poems. And, yup, there's another one: "idea" is a placeholder, too. By "idea" I mean the poem's preoccupation, its insight, the discovery it holds out for me to take, to consider, to receive. It's a cliché to say that form should serve a poem's idea—that image, rhythm, line breaks, all of it, should resonate, reverberating toward the "sound of sense." It's a cliché because it's true. But I'm not saying that all things have to correspond so tightly that there's no work for the reader to do. I find myself saying "yes" to poems that feel like writer has discovered "something" and uses craft to stage the drama of that understanding so that it seems as if I participate in that discovery right along with her. When that happens, it feels like a magic trick. Smoke and mirrors and muses.

Rick Barot

New England Review

It's worth saying first that you can have a poem that has a competent, even elegant use of craft, and yet this poem is lacking in memorability or impact for the reader. There's something beyond craft that makes a powerful poem powerful. Maybe that something is the alchemy created by what the poem is about, what it's saying, what led the poet to the page in passionate inquiry and emotion, along with all the craft elements being used in the poem to generate that heightened linguistic experience. Taken individually, these craft elements—whether it's imagery, figure, music, lineation, syntax, diction, structure, and so on—hold up when you apply hard scrutiny to them. That is, when you get into the weeds of the poem's mechanics, each craft decision made by the poet has a kind of inevitable rightness to it. But most readers aren't in the weeds—they're in that alchemical space where pleasure and mystery are being experienced. When I accept a poem, it's because I've experienced that pleasure and mystery first. Then, on further readings of the poem, I discern all the technical rightnesses that generated the poem's alchemy

Anthony Frame

Glass Poetry Journal

This is a really difficult question to answer because each poem is coming at us with its own rhetoric and, as a reader and as an editor, I try to honor that individual rhetoric. Now, at the same time, I have specific tastes and there is certainly an editorial aesthetic at Glass, even if it's an aesthetic I fight against in order to approach each poem on its own merits. I'd say that the most important thing, for me, is a poem that understands itself and isn't afraid to follow its own internal rhetoric.

Xandria Phillips

Winter Tangerine

I should start by saying that I see craft and content on the same continuum. They are inseparable for me. I dislike being removed from the stakes a poem has set up, when the text's underpinnings feel at odds; in other words, feeling the poem struggle against its own construction. Most often I think I find myself rejecting a submission for one of two reasons. The form and line-breaks of the poem feel like an afterthought or the approach and proximity to the poem's subject matter feel less-than honest or under-excavated. I look for forms that fully hold their poems. By this I mean that I want to see invention in the form itself and its relationship to the way the poem asks questions and makes claims. Sometimes interruption can manifest in the technical construction of each the line. The syntax isn't quite singing, or the tone doesn't feel intentional. I appreciate when poems trust their readers. I read poems on cellular and macro levels. I like being swept away by the small details in each line, as well as the way meaning is built through the expanse of a poem's language. I like being able to build trust with a poem. I do not read poems in a vacuum. I come to them with the baggage and insight of someone who has been a victim of the English language's veiled and blatant anti-Blackness, homophobia, classism, and exotification. I want poetry that puts pressure on my ability to imagine and reinvent ways marginalized people can exist in their worlds. I reject submissions most easily when they either reify tropes or build a false proximity between the poet and whatever social subjects are being explored.

Jessica Faust

The Southern Review

I look for work that is engaging, fresh, and that has perspective—in the subject matter or in the approach to the subject or in the presentation of the subject, but preferably all of these. The writer should demonstrate she has control over the writing and the poem, through development of theme, consistency of images, grammar, plausibility, and style for that particular poem.

Nothing does that consistently. Any number of things can go wrong at the level of craft, but a move that constitutes a misstep in one poem can be a stroke of brilliance in another. It's all a matter of how the parts of a poem work together. I would say this: When people tell you, "Do this," or, "Don't do that," remember that they are probably imagining certain aesthetic contexts that in their minds render those moves advisable or not. Try to figure out what those unenunciated contexts are, and then make your own assessments as to the wisdom of the editorial dicta in question; otherwise, you might go around obeying a bunch of rules that have nothing whatsoever to do with your own artistic vision.

Gabrielle Bates

Seattle Review

When I think of craft, I think of a relationship between content and form that feels meaningful, resonant, thought provoking. If a poem is lineated, I look at how the poet is treating their lines. Is the lineation working with the syntax or against it? What sort of rhythm is being created? Is the poet working with a received form? Are they creating their own? We only consider poems that are 10 pages or more in length, and that parameter brings with it its own set of craft challenges. Across a 10+ page poem, if you're doing the same thing over and over again, readers get bored. As the piece progresses, there's got to be some kind of variation, escalation, evolution, deviation. This is important for all poems, but the long poem exacerbates the need. Pacing, I think, is a larger concern in long poems than in short ones (though poets don't really use that word). At the Seattle Review, we also like to see poets giving themselves challenges and pushing through language experiments. In our latest issue (Double Issue 10), Kelly Nelson did this incredible experiment where she erased letters and words in Allen Ginsburg poems to pull Spanish words out, then she translated those Spanish poem erasures into English. The resulting poems are so strange and wonderful. Of course, we're never going to publish something just because the poet did a cool experiment (the end result has to be strong enough to stand on its own), but experimentation definitely catches our eye when we're cruising the queue.

Melissa Crowe

Beloit Poetry Journal

I read for a certain feeling, a kind of electricity. I feel that scalp tingle when I don't know exactly what the poem is doing but I have a sense it's doing something different/surprising/important. I know I'm going to have to be my smartest self to understand it more fully, but something about the poem makes me believe the effort will be worthwhile. I'd say that's where craft comes in. I'm looking for some combination of music and mystery. I'm listening for a real-seeming, particular, and urgent voice talking to me. I'm alert to fresh use of language, an exciting relationship between formal choices and content. I want wisdom but not didacticism—a wisdom that arises in the poem, that's born there, that seems like it's born through my own act of reading. Maybe we'd call this immediacy? I want to feel like the poem needs not just any reader but me specifically. I like to feel, as a reader, like I—with my body, my senses, my memories, my methods of perception—am integral to the fruition of the poem. The poems I'm moved to accept feel honest. They feel moral, not because they stay out of ethical messes but because they move right on into them with open eyes and hearts. They implicate themselves. They may implicate me. They tell me something I didn't expect—maybe even didn't want—to hear, but they make me know I need to hear it. They're complex, layered. They seem to have been arrived at through experiment, through risk, and I mean emotional and intellectual risk as well as formal risk. They don't seem canned or written by someone who had a foregone conclusion in mind though they are finely wrought, made with care. They hold up to several readings, and I keep moving further into their worlds. They keep surprising me. I want to read them again and again. I want to publish them to make it possible for other people to have this experience.

J.P. Dancing Bear

Verse Daily

I wish I had one answer for this, but I don't. Our tastes range the entire spectrum and if I had to say there was one common thing we look for it might be an economy of words. There's a happy zone where a poem isn't oppressed with words and also isn't starving for words.

Talin Tahajian

The Adroit Journal

I'm interested in work that knows what it's trying to do—or, rather, perhaps, I want the poem's own logics and syntaxes to know themselves, infinitely and indefinitely. This is how a poem can be, simultaneously, "tight" and capacious, rolling, sprawling. It's not a perfecting machination, but a trust-building one. When a poem's got it, it's got it, clearly, and when it doesn't, it can be difficult—though, sometimes, thrilling!—to sift through the rosy water—

Esther Vincent

Tiger Moth Review

The poetry that I look out for in The Tiger Moth Review should firstly address one of the themes of nature, culture, the environment and ecology, which is the focus of the journal. How a poet chooses to engage with these themes is really up to them. I prefer poems that are concrete rather than abstract, poems that are accessible and local in subject matter yet global in its outlook and perspective. It is also crucial for the poet to commit to imagery that is both striking yet nuanced, and in terms of tone, I am drawn to the introspective, contemplative and self-reflexive persona who speaks to me hidden truths which are revealed by the end of the poem. I don't look for specific styles or aesthetics, just a poem that observes, thinks and poses questions to the reader. A poem that adds value to anyone who spends their time reading it, one that brings readers on a journey of self-discovery and insight.

Chelene Knight

Room

For me as an editor and a writer, I need that initial hook. Whether it's the title or that punch-me-in-the-gut first line, start strong. I also love when a poems leaves me with a bunch of questions right from the get go because that creates a drive to read on. A good poem also uses the poetic devices organically. I'm drawn to poems that have a narrative but still stay true to it being poem by making sure to infuse assonance, rich imagery and unique enjambments.

Kristin George Bagdanov

Ruminate

I'm looking for poems that treat language with care. This is not to make a distinction between so-called lyric and narrative modes or to pit form against content, but to emphasize the fact that the parts of the poem do not merely add up to or work in service of the "whole." If I sense that the poem is simply using language as a vehicle for larger, pre-determined ideas, rather than allowing those ideas to emerge from the relationship between parts within the poem, I am unlikely to accept it. It's hard to describe what this attention to language looks like in a poem, as poets accomplish it through different styles, tones, and forms. Something these poems often have in common, however, is that by tending to language they also show their fault lines and vulnerabilities, the cracks from which a green shoot might suddenly burst. This is far more interesting to me as a poet, reader, and editor than a well-wrought poem.

Kimberly Ann Southwick

Gigantic Sequins

The best advice I ever got as a writer is that just because 29 journals reject a poem doesn't mean that the 30th place you send it won't accept it. I am not sure if 30 is the best specific number, but that was the exact number that the fellow writer gave me, so it stuck with me. Just because one group of editors doesn't like a particular batch of poems doesn't mean there's anything wrong necessarily with those poems. On the other hand, time is probably the best judge of your work--when I write a new poem, I often have an impulse to want to send that particular poem out right away because it's resonating with me, only to come back to it in a week, a month, 3 months, etc. and find what then appear to be obvious flaws--and maybe what caused that poem to be rejected by however many places I sent it to. So, in short: send, send, send. But also: wait, edit, wait, wait, wait, edit some more and then send, send, send.

Jessica Fischoff

[PANK]

I have three pieces of advice I think every new poet should consider. First, familiarize yourself with a publication before submitting work. The more developed a concept a writer has of what an individual publication is looking for, the better grasp a writer has of what fits. Second, make sure that your work is exactly where it knows it needs to be. Edit, explore the artistic choices and be confident that you've written the poem to the best of your ability. Third, be fearless. Don't be upset with a rejection, be patient.

Madeliene Barnes

Cordella

Don't give up! Submitting is a tough process and you have to cultivate resilience and tenacity. Don't let your sense of worth rely on the submission process. Aim to have countless rejections, and aim high. We get hundreds of submissions for each issue and have to make tough decisions as a team. Get competitive, get ambitious. A rejection is information—if your work is rejected, revisit your submission and see if there are ways to strengthen it. Please read a journal's submission guidelines. We often get submissions from men even though the magazine is clearly dedicated to women and non-binary writers and artists, which is a waste of everyone's time. Finally, be respectful of Editors! This is rare but sometimes writers will respond to a rejection and say that our decision was wrong. Trust that your work has been carefully considered and submit something else instead of insisting that your submission was a good fit.

Rob MacDonald

Sixth Finch

There are definitely no hard and fast rules about what we accept, but poems that feel authentic and quirky tend to jump out. We tend to reject poems that feel either forced or familiar in terms of syntax, lexicon, sound, structure, etc. If a poem is trying really hard to be a “poem,” I’m unlikely to get excited about it.

Hannah Norman

Permission Granted

Balance. I would like a poem to have a strong and consistent narrative voice, whilst retaining beautiful language. Sometimes features that make poems poignant and evocative, such as beautiful imagery or careful attention to sound, are discarded in favor of a storyline. Other times a poem has a powerful idea, but the language itself is didactic or disjointed. Poets who craft language that stands out both for its own sake, and in the context of the entire piece, create the most impactful work.

Dorothy Chan

Hobart

Precision. Exactness. Quirk. Romance.So first off, I have a soft spot for the sonnet. If a poet can write a good contemporary sonnet, then I'm totally in. I like to look at ways poets take a traditional form and contemporize it -- give it that quirk -- give it their own signature style, so that's where the "quirk and romance" comes in. In order to do so, the poet must have a full understanding of the history of the form, along with a respect for the form. It's like I always tell my students: if you're going to write a sonnet that is thirteen or fifteen lines, thus breaking the mold, you must first be able to explain the reasoning to yourself, because if you're not convinced, then the editor/reader won't be. At the same time, you have to practice the form about 100+ times in order to get it right. Writing takes discipline. Craft and style takes discipline. In terms of overall craft, I think about 1. Whether there is a single line or word out of place, because according to my Poetry Uncle, Alberto Ríos, "The best line of the poem is the one that I am reading, and that does not exclude the title" and 2. Whether or not the poem surprises me. We all love surprises. So, surprise me.

Maya Marshall

Underbelly

This sounds trite, but I'm listening for a distinct voice. The poems that pull me into a place (soundscape or visual)—the ones with distinct music—are the ones I'm likely to say yes to. I love a distinct lexicon and it's a joy to see a poet delight in language, to see a poet play. Much of the slush is nebulous, full of centered column poems with indistinct images and overwrought adjectives, so to see a poet choose a form that serves the poem's content and to hear the world of their imagination clearly is a boon. It's important to me that a poem have a clear sense of grammar even if that grammar is only internal to the poem—think e.e. cummings or M. NourbeSe Philip's Zong. Errors in grammar, punctuation, and spelling, are distracting and indicate a lack of care and attention to detail. I'm not saying it must be perfect, but, particularly in spare poems, punctuation has a substantial job to do. As a reader I don't want to split my attention between trying to understand the sentences and fully realizing the figurative choices.

Danielle Zaccagnino

Third Point Press

I accept a poem if it hits me in a powerful way, if it engages with a deeper, trance-like self, if it tells a complicated emotional truth, if it is aware of sound, if it has a clear sense of resolution or irresolution. I wish more poets knew about Rachel Richardson's article on revision, "The Warmth of the Messy Page." It's a thrill to send out a new and exciting first draft, but they do usually read as first drafts.

Kelsey Nuttall

Black Warrior Review

In a lot of cases I haven't seen what will cause me to accept a piece yet. That is, broadly, I'm looking for things that surprise me, things that I don't expect or don't see. One of the great things about BWR is that our editors turn over annually—we get fresh eyes on work all of the time, and so, while folks tend to be looking for things that align to their aesthetic preferences, we mitigate a sense of monotone by switching eyes around, keeping things changing (an oxymoron?) but, what I will say is that BWR values in its editors that sense of the new and innovative and weird, so that element of "surprise" stays a pretty consistent way to hook us as a publication.

Jenny Molberg

Pleiades

My co-editor, Erin Adair-Hodges, and I make the final poetry selections for Pleiades: Literature in Context, but we have the help of several wonderful readers and guest editors who bring unique perspectives to the content we publish. From a craft standpoint, we are relatively open—we look for work that surprises us, engages us, even changes us as readers. It is important to our mission at Pleiades that we publish emerging writers alongside writers who are more established in our careers—one of the most exciting parts of my job is to accept work that is the writer's first publication. We respond to work that engages thoughtfully with elements of poetic craft, but we also look for work that contributes to larger dialogues about our current world, and we seek to publish work that is representative of a variety of voices and communities.

Su Cho

Cream City Review

Work that shows me even a glimpse of the world your poems live in stands out to me. For poems, that means that everything has to be intentional. A kind of thoughtful exploration. When we write poetry, we like to discover something new, something lost. If you can take us on that journey, your poem is a strong contender.

Matthew Henry

The Weight Journal

Intention is one of the things that I look for in a poem. Not just in terms of content or message, but also elements like interesting capitalization and spacing. I love enjambment that presents a cliffhanger, or gives a double meaning when the next line is read. We don't get a lot of rhymed poetry at The Weight Journal, but when we do, I appreciate when it is paired with a consistent meter, or meter that is broken for effect. Mostly I'm looking for works with great turns of phrase and images I can vividly picture in my mind, things that make me swear out loud from jealousy.

A. Prevett

New South

I'm always in search of construction/use of language that surprises me and causes me to shift my way of thinking. A professor of mine in undergrad, when talking about metaphor, used the specific example of "comparing a hammer to chocolate" as a poor metaphor, because, in his estimation, they share no similarities, and thus the metaphor fails. I'm looking for the folks who are comparing hammers to chocolate.

Caroline Chavatel

New South

As unsatisfying as this answer might sound, there isn't really a singular craft technique or mode that causes me to accept something. A lot of the time, there is a feeling from the craft that will draw me toward a poem, but I attribute that more to the poet themselves than their choice of tools in that particular poetic moment. I'm personally drawn to strangeness and poems that compel me philosophically or intellectually toward an idea I've yet to come across. I'm always looking for the made-strange, poems that keep me awake at night.

Lesley Wheeler

Shenandoah

As Rick Barot says, irresistible poems possess a force beyond craft. More good poems are submitted to Shenandoah than we could ever accept, so we choose the crafty poems we as individuals have the strongest responses to. Usually that's Editor-in-Chief Beth Staples and me, comparing our reactions and considering how our initial feelings of amazement evolve over multiple readings. I personally love complicated sound structures and syntactic surprises—poems that leap from sentence to sentence in unpredictable ways—but the poems I can't say no to convey intelligence, too, and emotional urgency. Craftiness in style and structure carries the poem's charge, but the fundamental obligation is to choose powerful material, to be interesting.

Cass Garison

Five South

I'm particularly attracted to poems with vivid and unique language, strong line breaks, and some sort of momentum or energy that I can feel through the page. A title/strong first line is a huge thing for me too, if you have me in from the get-go that's always a good way to start. Although am also a fan of a slowly unfurling poem. I guess its poem by poem basis, but above all am looking for the energy behind the craft of a poem.

Elizabeth Powell

Green Mountain Review

First, I have to be lured into the poem by a voice I trust or find thrilling or smart or inventive in someway. Once I'm securely in the perimeter of the poem, I like to feel what it is like living there. What is the lineation like, does it mirror the breath? Is it a revelation or formal choice? Then I dig into imagery and figuration and varied language or speech acts, and see if I want to hang out in the poem for a good while.

Cass Garison

Five South

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Emily Holland

Poet Lore

This is such a tricky question, and one that I ask myself often! For me personally, I find myself leaning towards poems that teach me something. This could be as literal as introducing a piece of information, or it could teach me new ways to metaphor or new ways to line break. The poems I find myself drawn towards are those that move in mysterious ways, that beg me to read them again and fall into their new landscape of language. I love to find myself in the poet's headspace, to discover their unique way of seeing the world. While I always read every submission, at Poet Lore we also have a team of volunteer readers who screen submissions, and with their input acceptances become a collaborative process. When they love a submission, it causes me to give it greater attention, even if I might have passed on it during my own screening process. This is, after all, not a magazine for me to read, but for everyone to enjoy, and I love going back to poems and re-discovering what might make a different reader fall in love with it. A poem that surprises me is often one I want to hold onto. As far as "turning the page" on a submission, this is all so subjective and of course there are always exceptions, but I find that poems I leave behind most often are those that feel tired in their movement or their language. I know that isn't exactly a concrete answer, but when reading thousands of poems, a small spark of a metaphor or a glistening image can really lift a poem off the page (and into the acceptance pile). A slow start to a poem doesn't always mean that it won't pick up speed, but I look for intentional and provocative movements as the poem progresses.

Joanna Valente

Yes, Poetry

I love when poets take risks, even if it seems bizarre or unconventional. I love that. I love when there's strange punctuation and line breaks. Give me the unexpected. So really, I kind of tend to reject work that I feel like isn't challenging me or saying something that surprises me – or teaches me.

Alan Chazaro

Headfake & Agni

Lately, I'm interested in layered complexity, fragmentation, experimentation, and surprise. I often use the phrase "multidimensional" when I'm working with younger poets to describe this feeling. Some poems can feel flat or "one dimensional"–maybe they're relying on the easy and obvious elements or are playing it too safe. But whenever I sense a poet is taking a bold risk and is in tune with themselves in a genuine way, it comes across in the smallest craft choices and language/imagery being used. Don't worry about sounding weird or not making sense; I'm a fan of organic wandering in a poem rather than a strict adherence to some antiquated expectation of what a poem is supposed to look or sound like.

Emily Schuck

Foothill Journal

This is a tricky question! We have an editorial board of ~10 folks, and everyone's idea of what makes a poem "good" is wildly different, which is wonderful. The way we approach our submissions is on a scale from 1–4. The idea here is that you can't be on the fence about something; there's no middle ground. If an editor rates a poem at a 3, they have the burden of proof and have to come to our meeting ready to defend a poem. My favorite meetings are the ones where one editor comes with a 3 or a 4, while most of us are at a 1 or a 2. Often the discussion concludes with the whole board enthusiastically wanting to publish. Personally, I am compelled by poems that surprise me—when the volta takes me somewhere I had no idea I was going to end up. I also love funny poems. Sometimes poetry carries the assumption that it has to be serious. This is not the case! Poetry has as much opportunity to be silly as prose. (I mean, think of Mary Ruefle's "Red.")

Jane Huffman

Guesthouse

Di, who I mentioned above, works as our poetry editor, so she and I work as a team to curate the poetry we publish. (We publish prose, too, and have great fiction and nonfiction editors at the helm of each genre). What I look for in a poem for Guesthouse is brains, a poem that is rigorous in its vision, no matter what that vision is. Be rigorously playful, rigorously meditative. I tend to go for poems that use form as a tool rather than a container, a poem whose form is considered. I'm also deeply moved by surprise. If that sounds all-encompassing, I'm glad. I try to be open to many different poetic approaches and traditions, and I hope that diversity is reflected in our issues.

Thoughts in Review

Write above the three editors whose responses were the most insightful to your particular journey as a poet.

Write above five words / phrases you saw coming up most often in all the editors' responses.

What element of craft do you commit to improving upon, based on these responses?

Which one of these magazines will you submit to, again and again, until you get in?

What advice do you have for new poets who are submitting work?

We asked dozens of editors from all over the lit mag community this question. Here are their responses.

Don Share

Poetry Magazine

Be as generous in your approach to sending things out as you'd like editors to be in reading your work. When the response is disappointing, keep trying, without rancor or invidiousness. We may not keep your work, but it means something to us. Always assume that there's good faith on the editorial side, and bring good faith of your own to the table. I'd also suggest that you don't send work you think, for some reason, that we or I might like; don't worry about that, just send the very best work you can.

Hannah Aizenman

The New Yorker

I think right now is probably a particularly wonderful and difficult time to be a poet just starting to pursue publication. Largely because of the Internet, new poets are, or are capable of being, more educated and celebrated in their craft today than ever before. This, however, can pose its own obstacles when finding one's footing: especially with social media, but even outside it, the poetry world can feel extremely public and fast-paced, creating a lot of pressure, actual and perceived. I'd encourage new poets to enjoy the benefits of our contemporary landscape—read widely (in and outside of what's canonized, currently fashionable, and to your particular taste); form (symbiotic, non-exploitative) literary relationships and communities; seek out and create supportive opportunities and platforms—but also to be wary of its more insidious seductions. It's crucial to allow ourselves the (head)space and time to discover and develop our own voices. In my experience, that can be very tough to do while dogged by more superficial "po-biz" preoccupations: if we believe we have to confine ourselves to a certain style or subject; if we value appearances, approval, and easy affirmation over our capacity for questioning; if we become more concerned with publication credits, prizes, and prestige than with poetry—that shows in the writing. Remember, the writing is the important part. Resist the impulse to shape or judge your work and worth as a writer according to illusory, capricious metrics—instead, hone your faculty for curiosity; learn to follow what truly interests, excites, perplexes, or pains you; put it in the poems. Poetry isn't a means to an end—it doesn't have to be competitively regimented in the way that capitalist-careerist culture pretends everything must. Prolificacy and popularity may be fine, but imagining they have any connection with poetry itself will drive you crazy; "playing the game" is all well and good, but pointless if it causes the poetry to suffer. It isn't so simple, but, also, it is: write what you want to write, pursue what challenges you, remain open to possibility. There's no magic key, no perfect hack, to unlock poetic "success"—and if there was, would any of us really want to know it? If there's a secret, for me, it's to focus on becoming the reader and the writer that you want to be—which is to say, on the reading and the writing. Be generous; trust yourself. Your love of the art is all you can really count on. Let the practice, the process, be what ultimately matters. Let it be enough.

John Skoyles

Ploughshares

My advice is to send a poem out only when you are certain it is finished. And then not to take an editor's rejection or acceptance as a verdict on the poem's quality. It is not a judgement—it only shows an editor's particular leaning. The other thing is not to take editorial comments on the poem too seriously—often, the editor likes a rejected poem enough to write a note, but just as often, the note, while well-intentioned, is written offhandedly, and as such it should not be taken as serious literary criticism.

Sumita Chakraborty

Agni

Try to think of finding a journal for your work as a process in which you have agency. Truly, carefully read the journals you're submitting to as though you're picking them. The close reading I think of as so important for reading submissions is also so important for sending submissions; think about places where your work could find a home, and think about what kinds of homes your poems dream of. Also, while I think there's much good to be said about how much candid conversation we're having online about the numbers of submissions people have out at one time, and about how many rejections people stack up in the process of publishing their work, it's never helped me personally to think of publishing as a numbers game. Publications are—increasingly!—forever. You need to make sure you're ready and each individual poem is ready, and if that involves quite literally only submitting two poems one particular year, so be it. Your craft and development are your craft and development.

Rick Barot

New England Review

Read the publications you submit to. If it's a print journal, seek out issues of that journal and read the work that's published there. If it's an online journal, do the same. Get a feel for the kinds of poems that appear in each journal. If you encounter poems in a journal that move you, that should say something about whether you want your own work in that journal. And if you read a journal and don't feel strongly about the poems you see there, don't send your work there, regardless of how aspirational or well-regarded the journal might. In terms of the actual submissions, be personable and professional. By "personable" I mean writing a cover letter that's addressed to a person at the journal—usually the poetry editor. This will show that you've done some legwork to find out who works behind the scenes at that journal, doing the good work of producing that journal. The cover letter should be succinct, it should highlight your professional accomplishments thus far, and it should not disclose things about you that seem charming to you but actually come across as annoying to the person on the other side. And by "professional" I mean presenting your work with care. Don't use a fancy font. Have your contact information on each page of your submission. Don't send more than 6-8 pages of work.

Xandria Phillips

Winter Tangerine

As a poet and editor I know for myself I prefer it when someone has read and critiqued my work before I send it out. My best readers are people close to me spiritually. They are honest about the work I share with them. It is important to contend with comments that rattle the post-draft glow and push the poet for the sake of stellar craft and execution. I recommend exchanging writing with other writers and developing a code of accountability with your analysis of each other's work.

Marion Wrenn

Painted Bride Quarterly

Read. Write. Revise. Repeat. And find your tribe. A writers' group can be one of the most powerful and transformative gifts you can give yourself as an artist. Find folks to write alongside you; find writers to read or listen to your work; build a community of people whose work you trust and who you trust with yours. Literary friendships can sustain you in surprising ways. Plus: do readings. And submit. Do both. A lot. It takes time and effort to find a place for your work, to find an audience. And you never know how that connection will be forged. Someone might hear your work at a reading and solicit you. Or your work might cut through the clutter of a slush pile, land in an editor's in box, catch her eye, move her, and she'll recommend the piece for publication. You won't know unless you try.You might also try this: read poetry strategically. Find the poets whose work you admire most. Buy their books. Or go to the local library and borrow them. As you try to figure out why you're moved by the poet's work, you'll be honing your craft and figuring out how you might characterize your own poems. Then, if you think your voice or style or project resonates with the poet you've found, flip to the end of the book and see where those poems were first published. Make a list. Submit to these magazines. And, finally, listen to podcasts! Check out PBQ's "The Slush Pile" for a real-time glimpse of our editorial process.

Jessica Faust

Southern Review

I know you asked for beyond “follow the guidelines,” but I wouldn’t undersell the advice of “follow the guidelines.” It really is important—especially with the smaller staffs of literary journals now—to respect that guidelines are in place for a reason. Requirements like font size, page limits, include an SASE, put your contact information on each poem, and so forth make the reading/response process most effective and efficient, which is critical when editors have numerous responsibilities beyond reading, accepting, and editing work. Additionally, I would say try to read the journals where you are submitting (The Southern Review and many journals are now available through Project Muse, so it’s more convenient to peruse the literary landscape) to get a sense of what they might and what they probably will not publish in terms of style or subject matter. If they’ve published a poem about drive-in theaters or quantum theory in the past couple of issues, they probably aren’t going to be ready to publish more on those subjects for awhile, no matter how good the poems may be.

Luther Hughes

The Shade Journal

Be patient is probably my biggest advice. So much of our community is built around exposure and sometimes this feels like it's the only way to succeed. And, yes, in one way, exposure is key. I mean it sells books, it gets you readings, interviews, etc. So, I'm not saying exposure is a bad thing. But, I am saying that exposure isn't everything. I was editing my CV not too long ago and came across some really old poems that were published when I was a fetus poet. Needless to say, those poems were just not good and I began wondering what made me want to submit those poems at all—why did they need to be in the world. I didn't have an answer for myself. I can only assume it was because I thought that's what poets do. But that's not true. Being a poet isn't only about getting published or being in the spotlight. Well, maybe being a poet is, on some level, about that. Although, writing poetry isn't. And I think that's the distinction between art and business. As a poet, getting published in business. As for writing poetry, it's an art. I'd recommend knowing the difference between the two for the sake of your art and craft. If your art isn't where it needs to be, then your business will fail. My teacher always says once your poem is out there, it's out there and you can't take it back. I agree with that whole-heartedly. Okay, this is sounding a little preachy now and I'm beginning to think I'm sounding like an old grumpy man. Lol! For those who are eager to send out work, do your research. Read recent issues and look at their masthead. Are they publishing poetry that converses with yours? Are they racist, misogynistic, ableist, homophobic, transphobic, xenophobic, etc.? You know, do your research.

Anthony Frame

Glass

Again, this feels like a really individualized question, one that each poet would have their own techniques to consider based on their needs and interests. And I'm someone who thinks everyone can benefit from occasionally stretching their various poetic muscles. I see a lot of young poets who are really good at understanding the persona of their work but who might want to look more closely at the music of their lines and young poets who are in the opposite position and young poets who are everywhere in between. Personally, I'm in in the sonics of a poem and in a strong sense of how the poetic line works. But that is probably because those are two aspects of my own poetry that I work on the most. If I'm asked advice about what a poet should be thinking about with their work, I tend to tell them to look at other poets, especially maybe a poet whose work they don't like but who other poets they admire seem to like. Read those poets and study those poets. This has helped me because I don't get distracted by falling into the work (since it isn't my personal cup of tea) but I can also feel confident that there's valuable lessons in the work because it is the cup of tea of people who I admire.

Greg Brownderville

Southwest Review

Be all right with sounding like yourself, as opposed to sounding like your peers. And in looking for material, be open to nonliterary sources. I always think of Shakespeare, how he cauldron'd together everything from street-corner gab to childhood rhymes to history texts to small-town folksay to books on shipbuilding. When editors read through man-tall stacks of manuscripts, there's no shortage of stylistic sameness. And a lot of it feels awkwardly posed because folks are working so hard to sound exactly like each other. Here's a practical suggestion: offer to read manuscripts for a journal sometime. After reading a couple thousand submissions, you might find yourself rejecting poems because of formal or aesthetic moves that you, yourself, have made time and again in your own poems. That's an eye-opening experience.

Gabrielle Bates

Seattle Review

My advice, in general, is to get feedback on work and revise before you submit. Don't fling off, in the creation-afterglow, something you just wrote. Other general advice: Don't try to get cute or wacky in your cover letter; just showcase professionalism then get out of the way. Read the guidelines. Expect lots of rejections. Oh, and if an editor includes something in a rejection like "I'd love to see more work from you" or "We encourage you to submit new work in the future," they mean it! Follow up.

Melissa Crowe

Beloit Poetry Journal

I'd love for new poets to know that editors aren't in the business of rejecting poems; I'm not looking for poems I can single out for a hard no, not reading for failure to live up to a list of predetermined requirements. In some ways this may sound like bad news; if I did have an explicit and nameable list of moves that would get you the gong, maybe you could avoid them and be assured a yes. But the reason the absence of this set of irredeemable missteps is good news for poets is that the poem tells me what I want. I'm waiting for your poems to tell me something about what makes me love poetry. I'm reading wide open. I want to be engaged, moved, surprised, rearranged, and I read in faith that I will be. When I am, I choose that poem (or, given our process at the BPJ, I choose to share that poem with my colleagues, to see if they'll choose it, too, to see if we'll choose it together). At that point I haven't rejected the others in an active or pointed sense. I just haven't chosen them—right now, for this magazine. This may seem like a slim and sorry distinction, but it's big for me as a poet who submits work, too. Everyone who didn't marry me didn't single me out for non-love! It's just that only my beloved chose me—and that's what it's about, in life as in poetry. It's about who does choose you! If you can manage to spend less time feeling rejected by the others, you've got more time and energy and faith to spend on finding the ones that will choose and champion your work because it's truly, truly for them.

J.P. Dancing Bear

Verse Daily

Embrace rejection, don't bury them or burn them or blame the editor… learn from them. Go back and read more than one issue. You've misunderstood something about what delights the editor. Rejection is a necessary, if not often neglected, tool. If a poem is rejected by more than one editor, you can start to triangulate what is wrong with the poem if you've done your homework on the editor.

Talin Tahajian

The Adroit Journal

Writing the cover letter should be an exercise in minimalism. Choose an nonabrasive font. Be gracious, always. Also, Duotope!

Esther Vincent

Tiger Moth Review

I would say to take the time to read what the journal is about, to understand its vision and then think about whether or not your work resonates with that journal before submitting. Every editor takes the time to share what their journal aims to do, and it's only respectful to read before submitting. Read previous issues to see the kind of work that has been featured, so that you can gauge whether or not your work is suited to the journal. Be ready for rejection, take it in good stride and see it as an opportunity for growth rather than getting disappointed or defensive. Always be professional and respect the editor's decision. Lastly, edit your work before submitting it for consideration! It is a big no-no to submit drafts of your work and expect the editor to proofread your submission for you.

Chelene Knight

Room

Workshop, revise, and make sure your work is polished. I would also recommend that folks KNOW their work and own it. Doing this will help you know when to stop editing. Ask yourself what the core of the poem is ... what do you want readers to take away? If you aren't writing to that core, then there is still revision to be done. When workshopping, ask for specific feedback from your peers: "What do you feel after reading this poem?" "Are you pulled in immediately?" "Do the line breaks work?"

Kristin George Bagdanov

Ruminate

I think it's important to ask why you are submitting your work. As a new writer, publication can feel like an initiation process or proving ground, and thus rejection can be interpreted as a sign that one doesn't belong or isn't "good enough." However, rather than letting the gatekeepers get you down, I try to encourage new writers to reframe publication as way of participating in creative community. My advice then is to find the communities that value your work and challenge you, that extend beyond the page or issue in which your poem appears. I think the true gift of publication is being able to share your work with others and participate in a creative community that values you.

Kimberly Ann Southwick

Gigantic Sequins

Line breaks! Play with them! After you write a poem, save every previous version of it and play with the line breaks! Playing with line breaks is my personal favorite part of editing--I take something that was one big stanza and break it into couplets or take something that was in couplets and put it in quatrains--I make my short lines long, I try to make all my lines match in line length or try to make them NOT the same length, I take something in verse and put it into prose. I always pay special attention to the longest line, the shortest line, and every word that begins or ends a line. This helps with so many other things, too—it helps with word choice, rhythm, emphasis, tone—on and on—and as it is one of the major things that makes verse unique from prose—the fact that verse has line breaks—paying attention to them should be crucial.

Jessica Fischoff

[PANK]

At [PANK], we look for pieces that are not simply original in voice or content, but know exactly what they are meant to do. Is each word the perfect word to portray the thought? Is the speaker the right choice for best expressing the work? Do lines break where they are the strongest? Is the blank space or playfulness in form adding what it needs to? We look for pieces that are just as strong in the start as the end. We look for pieces that keep us desperately awaiting the next line, that flow succinctly, and that make us take pause when we finish no matter what style or approach.

Madeliene Barnes

Cordella

We love to come across a poem that makes use of the push and pull of line breaks, silence and sound—you can feel the power and intention behind the words chosen, and your attention is sustained from beginning to end. It's wonderful to read a poem where the lines break feel right and the stanzas are confident. We pay attention to how lines turn, and as Carl Phillips writes in The Art of Daring: Risk, Restlessness, and Imagination, "any poem that has resonance will contain tension." We look for that tension. Imagery, musicality, and emotion are vital. We also love experimentation and poems that bend genre. Overall, we look for poems that are felt more than read, poems that have a strong voice and feel alive. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we are drawn to poems that have been thought over and revised—it's important for the poem to be the best possible version of itself. We want to read your most polished work.

Rob MacDonald

Sixth Finch

One way to be much more efficient with the submission process is to develop a real sense of the distinctions among journals. Take the time to figure out which journals are a good fit for your work, and focus your efforts on those journals. Then go outside.

Hannah Norman

Permission Granted

Especially when dealing with emotionally impactful and relevant topics, I am always looking for poems that use metaphors to add nuance, subtlety, and create something new. A great strength in poetry is the many layered messages that can coexist, and metaphors are a powerful vehicle for truth. I also love to see poets that hone their usage of different forms. Whether that is the ability to create a sonnet that does not feel constrained, a villanelle that drives home the cyclical nature of an event, or free verse with carefully chosen line breaks, poems that are natural and eloquent in their form and syntax are always impressive. Ultimately, there is no formula to follow- any poem that says something and does it well is welcomed.

Dorothy Chan

Hobart

Don't be afraid to submit! Get it out of the way! Submit sooner rather than later just for the sake of the experience. I think it's important that new poets submit their work ASAP once they feel it is done for now. Like anything, the more you do it, the more you get better at it. Don't count the rejections. Submit and then forget. Don't overthink it. And always put your best work to the forefront -- don't be afraid to take risks. Also, don't write for the sake of impressing editors -- it never works. But what does work is writing based on instinct and what truly interests you.

Marisa Crane

Collective Unrest

I'm sure that this has been said a million times before, but I would tell any new poet (and myself) to read, read, read literary journals, both print and online. There's no way to know what type of work a journal publishes without first reading a few issues. Who knows, maybe you aren't even a huge fan of that particular journal. Then you will know it's not on the top of your list of places to submit. Conversely, a journal you'd never heard of may wind up surprising you, and you'll get to delight in the fact that they've got a new fan! Submitting work isn't just about submitting, which I think a lot of writers learn over the years. It's about reading and supporting fellow artists and in turn, reading and supporting the journals so that they stay alive. You won't have anywhere to submit if you don't engage with the magazines and the authors they have published. This doesn't mean you have to spend hours each day reading various journals, but I would say that reading journals should be built into your schedule just as writing, reading books, and researching publications are.

Maya Marshall

Underbelly

Be sure your poem is finished before you send it out into the world. Make sure your work is a good fit for the journal you're asking to house it. Everyone says it because it is important: read the journal you're submitting to before you submit. Send your work somewhere where you really want it to be because you want it to be in the right place for it, not just some place. Also, it's a numbers game. Send your strongest 3-5 poems to the optimal three journals for you. Track your own submissions using a spreadsheet you made or Submittable or a page in your notebook—whatever works for you. It's not the cover letter, it's the poems; focus on those.

Kelsey Nuttall

Black Warrior Review

First I would say: “Oh, gosh, I’m sorry. (And congrats! I guess that’s exciting too, but submitting is really hard and vulnerable sometimes.)” Then I would say that I’m a funny person to give advice because I’m doing this myself, too, as often as I can, but that’s perhaps the most important thing? Expect to do this as often as you can for perhaps a while, and develop a relationship to it and a routine for it. That has worked best for me—a modestly rigorous schedule (spreadsheet) and a tiny reward system, and an ability not to put too much pressure on yourself when you have to break from those things. Use off-time submitting-wise for your writing. Then, there’s the obvious bit (right?) which is targeting. Target publications that will understand your work instead of sending out to everyone always. The obvious bit within the obvious bit is that you should read recent issues of wherever you’re submitting so that you understand them and whether they’ll understand you.

Jenny Molber

Pleiades

My first piece of advice for new poets would be simple: read. Read the work being published in literary journals you admire; read new collections of poetry; read the great masters like Heaney and Plath and Clifton; read work that may have been overlooked by a canonical history through collections like the Unsung Masters Series. The work of other poets is a gift—let it inspire you; let it influence you. My other piece of advice would be to not take rejection so seriously, or at least take it with a grain of salt. When editors say that they have not found a place for your work, this could be for many more reasons other than the work not being "good enough". If writing is something that edifies you—if you must write—then keep writing. Try not to rely so much on external validation. That is not the true reward.

Su Cho

Cream City Review

Share work with friends and readers who are willing beforehand! Ask them to look through your submission packet. Sometimes, I've been working with a poem for so long that I can miss obvious typos. It's like a practice run but with those who are excited about your work. Besides, it's great to have people rooting for you! Double check everyone's submission guidelines. Please be kind and courteous. Most literary journals, ours included, are volunteers. Ask any editor and they can tell you how one unkind email threw their day off. When you pour all the energy you have into creating a beautiful space for others' work, it can be crushing to read something ill-spirited. If you ever receive a tiered rejection or a personal rejection, celebrate! In my experience, editors rarely send those out unless it was good work. It's a good thing, and you should definitely submit to them again. Lastly, don't forget to read work that inspires you! I don't know quite how this works, but I like to read the books/writers I don't think I'll ever be able to write like. That feeling of awe and respect, I don't know, it makes me feel more tender toward myself and my poems—especially when I'm putting my work out there and feel vulnerable.

A. Prevett

New South

When I was first starting out, I just sent stuff everywhere. I wasn't particularly discerning and didn't do much research. I don't really recommend that approach because it led to a lot of initial rejections and a feeling of "oh, maybe this isn't for me." If you're trying to get into submitting, I really can't recommend enough just spending the time trying to find journals that you like. Even if you're not actively submitting work, Entropy's "Where To Submit" list is great to check out because it has a pretty big catalog of journals, updated every few months and available totally for free. It even lists the kind of work the journals are seeking. It sounds silly, but I've found a lot of journals just by going through that list and saying "oh, my work is like that," or "oh, I like the name of that journal, I'll check it out." This is also how I often shop for wine.

Caroline Chavatel

New South

The most important advice I received as an undergraduate was to not be afraid of journals you have “no business submitting to.” I sent A LOT of work (and received A LOT of rejections) from places I probably still have “no business submitting to,” but sometimes things just...landed. I think one of the most important things you can do is read archives from magazines you admire and perform your own case study, in a way, of whether you think your work will be a fit. The capitalist-literary complex has somewhat turned publishing into a hyper-professional game, but at the end of the day I do think it’s about finding the right homes for your poems and maintaining relationships with those editors and communities.

Matthew Henry

The Weight Journal

Don't make a change to your work that you don't agree with, especially not to get published. Editors are humans with their own biases, so their suggestions can reflect this. I'm sure I'm guilty of this too. Finding your own voice can be difficult, but it shouldn't be dependent solely on what some editor like me has to say. While I have received excellent feedback on submissions which has improved my poetry, I have also had to turn down offers for publication when an editor wanted me to change something beyond a typo or an ill-worded phrase; times when they wanted me to change my work in a way that was in complete opposition to the poem's vision, be that adding or deleting sections, or changing intentional choices about capitalization. New poets, especially those fighting for their first publication, need to learn that only they can decide whether the suggestion is pushing the poem in the direction it "should" go. And then weight what is more important: the poem or publication?

Lesley Wheeler

Shenandoah

I remember feeling frustrated at editors' advice to read several issues before submitting. Living in a rural place and teaching in an undergraduate program, I don't have regular access to physical literary magazines except the ones I subscribe to, and no one can afford to subscribe to every interesting journal. Early on, "read several issues" felt like an insider's reprimand: if you don't already know everyone, don't try. What I gradually realized is that, whoever and wherever you are, learning markets is a necessary obligation for a writer who wants to publish. You're basically acquiring an advanced degree in magazine culture, and that takes years. It's a pleasure, but it also involves an enormous amount of labor and time. Most of us can't skip it and leap right into po-biz stardom. I ended up developing a shorthand in my submission notes so I could remember trends across issues after reading them: this editor seems to like poems that are surreal, narrative, jumpy, political, emotionally stark, formal, free verse, etc. Because aesthetics and mastheads change, you can't rely on old notes alone, but having them helps me when I consider venues.

Daniel Lawless

Plume

I'm afraid the advice I have is not new or notable, and involves, generally, housekeeping. First, and though one would think needless to say -- proofread carefully, and then proofread again, whatever you submit! There is little more off-putting to an editor than a typo in a poem, nor less embarrassing to the one who has made it. As with reading anything (I am looking at you of late, NYT), such errors render the whole less credible, and are liable to send the work to the Decline pile immediately. Second, I suppose there is the matter of the cover letter. Journals receive many, many electronic submissions, and, truth be told, I imagine a few harried editors facing hundreds if not thousands of them may well click on the bio note/cover letter and decide either to read or pass on the spot. Terrible, I know, but there it is. So, keep the cover letter brief, mentioning only three or four books or previous publications. Do not advertise the work's themes or origin stories; the reader will come to them in the poems and such is a mark of the insecure or the amateur. It is not out of bounds at all, however, to note briefly how you came to submit to a particular journal – citing your admiration of a recent issue's poem, for instance. Last – editors are humans, and susceptible to flattery, up to a point, but we can sniff out obsequiousness like ferrets.

Leeya Mehta

Plume

My advice to new poets would be: as you write and submit, build a writer's community and read and listen to poets from your immediate community. Embed yourself in community as much as is possible. For the good times, for the dry days. Many of your first readers will be in this close-knit group and they will support you—a writer's community is an end in itself. Share your work with other writers even if you are simultaneously submitting work. Poetry production and publication is a lifetime's work, there is no one size fits all. Find poems you love, and look for journals that they are published in. I assume that you will tend to write the poetry that you love. When you submit, do not fear rejection. Editors are not gatekeepers as much as we think they are. They are facilitators. A journal may have someone who advocates for your work, so if you are rejected it doesn't mean someone doesn't love your work. Send work out as widely as you feel like, or as narrowly, but keep writing and sending out, especially to small and new journals in your community so you build confidence and a paper trail.

Cass Garison

Five South

I would say to submit work that excites you, that you're compelled to see in the world, that you keep coming back to and want to read again and again yourself. Poems that you love the way you love your favorite poem by another poet.

Elizabeth Powell

Green Mountain Review

Stay true to you. Stay true to nurturing your original voice and vision no matter what anyone else says. Then turn toward craft as a rocket launcher to send your voice and vision into orbit.

Emily Holland

Poet Lore

Always put your best poem first. It sounds too simple, but when we are reading thousands of poems across all of our submissions, it really helps to have something grab our attention right off the bat. Your poems could be someone's first submission of the day, or their 100th and it really does help to have something standout and keep our attention throughout the entire submission packet. Personally, I love when poets submit a few poems that are on similar themes, or even sequenced together. At Poet Lore we do often accept multiple poems from a single poet, so having some continuity between some of the submission is a good way to think about possibly having more than one poem featured. Don't be afraid to take risks, with form or content or both! We have published some newly-invented forms, poems with intricate footnotes, and poems spanning over five pages. Just because you are doing something new and innovative does not mean that there are not already readers waiting to see it. Also, just remember that rejections are so subjective. Sometimes it's because your work is not the right fit. Or we've already accepted a few poems in a similar style, or on similar themes. A rejection does not reflect back on the quality of the work you send, so please do submit again, especially if you receive a decline letter encouraging you to do so.

Joanna Valente

Yes, Poetry

Read the magazine and get an idea of the aesthetic, but also just be true to yourself. Write your observations and your truths. Just show up as you are.

Alan Chazaro

Headfake & Agni

Be your fullest self. Don't play into what you think others want. Write the poems and stories that only you can write. Don't be afraid of rejection, it's part of the process, and every editor has their own idiosyncratic tastes. The things I might not like in a poem, another editor might love. It's completely subjective. You kind of have to develop a bullet-proof sense of confidence– as hard as that may seem–and constantly remind yourself that at the end of the day, you are writing for yourself and no one else. You're not writing for acceptance from an institution; you're writing to tell your truth. Eventually, you'll find the right audience for it.

Emily Schuck

Foothill Journal

Simple: keep submitting and keep writing. Rejections have a very particular sting that, at times, can be absolutely devastating. (I know anyone reading this is familiar with that sting.) Sending rejection emails is the very worst part of working for a journal. That said, when we say we want more work, we really do want more work.

Jane Huffman

Guesthouse

I'd advise anyone who is submitting work to cast a wide net and research smaller, independent magazines like ours. There are entire universes of literary publishing beyond the major players in the field. I'm all for divesting from the paradigm that creates a fixed hierarchy among publishing venues. It's a hard paradigm to break because it is reinforced at every level of the industry –– and I don't think there's anything wrong with holding a venue in high esteem, including the big dogs. But there's so much value in publishing small, too.

Thoughts in Review

Based on these responses, describe in a sentence the kind of poets editors respect.

What advice do you see come up most often in response to this question?

Which editor do you feel is the most helpful for your individual journey? Why?

Which one of these magazines will you submit to, again and again, until you get in?


Frontier Poetry Lab
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