



Picking a Winning Poem

A NOTE FROM MICHAEL CASTRO

Based on the experience of being a poet for more than forty years, including stints as a radio host, literary magazine founder and editor, performer, contest judge, translator, reading series director, and educator, I have been asked by The 7th Grade Poetry Foundation to share my insight into how a poem may be selected as the winner of a writing competition. Here goes.

You need not be a poetry connoisseur or expert to choose a winner. Your ear, based on a lifetime of familiarity with the English language, and your open heart are your best evaluative tools. For poetry is ultimately human communication—mind to mind, heart to heart, soul to soul.

Perhaps the over-riding criteria in **declaring a poem a winner is whether it has the power to move a reader**. Does it make you laugh, cry, think, smile, go “aha,” or “ah!”

Some prominent ways it can do that are listed below.

CRAFT

The poem employs precise wording and uses poetic form and/or devices skillfully.

IMAGINATION

Something is original in or about the poem. The poem engages the reader’s imagination.

AUTHENTICITY

The voice the poem creates is convincing, even compelling; the poem expresses a truth.

INTEGRITY

The poem stands on its own: a reader does not need to know much outside the poem in order to live inside it.

UNIQUE PERSPECTIVE

The poem reveals the familiar in a new, fresh way.

SURPRISE

The unexpected in a poem (often related to humor) delights us.

EFFICIENCY

The poem says a lot with a little.



Remember, the contest requires educators to select the winner based solely on the written content, not a student's personal identity or performed presentation of the work. This is similar to how most poetry journals worldwide select their best poems to publish. So a winning poem should exhibit its power on the page. I can attest to this as a founder, editor and board member of one of the nation's most well respected poetry and prose journals, *River Styx*.

Virtually every young poet who submits for a contest *deservingly* hopes and deep down feels their poem should win. And although you will be picking one winner, we hope the process leading to that selection produces many winners in terms of the raised language awareness and personal empowerment that poetry studies can achieve. Toward that end, we urge you to establish that writing and judging poetry are subjective matters, that the beauty of poetry is that all poems are worthy, that their efforts should make the students proud, and that the poem itself is always available for self-driven revision. We wish you luck in creating a joyful and memorable learning experience for all.

Michael Castro

Michael Castro is a widely published poet, translator, and arts activist who has served poetry as a radio host, reading series director, magazine editor, and educator. He is the recipient of the Warrior Poet Award and Guardian Angel of St. Louis Award, both for lifetime achievement. In 2015, St. Louis appointed Michael Castro as the first official Poet Laureate in the City's 250-year history.

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