

Writers Workshop #2 Shopping List Poems

I love this exercise. I use it with people who say they hate to write or are scared to write or can't think of what to write about. I also use it just for fun, with writers of all ages and types. It's a great warm-up exercise for anyone.

1. Make a list of seven items: a shopping list, or a list of what you ate for breakfast, or a list of things you love, or a list of what you wish you could forget.
2. Make a list of seven adjectives.
3. And make a list of seven verbs.
4. Now, put them together to make a poem. You don't have to use every word on each list, and you can add new words that aren't on any list. The main thing is not to think too hard. Let yourself throw together combinations of words. Be impulsive.

Here's an example:

Seven items:

- Bell peppers
- Salt
- Chicken breasts
- Toilet paper
- Sliced ham
- Mayonnaise
- Chocolate chips

Seven adjectives:

- Ornery simple
- Red
- Silly
- Daunting
- Spicy
- Protective

Seven verbs:

- Run
- Give up
- Smell
- Embrace
- Laugh
- Cry
- Bounce

5. Now I'll pick from my lists, trying to match some of the nouns and verbs with each of the seven items. I come up with this:

I want to run with the red bell peppers,
Throw salt over my shoulder,
And wish for something simple
Like a ham sandwich with mayo
Or chocolate chips.
Instead, I am waiting in a long check-out line
With only chicken breasts in my basket,
Not wanting to give up my place
To get the toilet paper
I forgot.

6. Look at what you've written. Read it aloud--to yourself if you're alone, to others if you're in a group. Tell each other (or yourself) what you like about this poem.
7. Look over your poem and your lists. Do you want to change anything? Add words you left out? Cut words or phrases?

I look my example over, and change it to this:

Standing at the cash register

I want to juggle red bell peppers,
Throw salt over my shoulder,
Bounce lemons off the walls,
And wish for something simple:
You, making a ham sandwich with mayo,
surprising me with the smell of fresh-baked cookies.

Instead, I am waiting in a long check-out line
With only chicken breasts in my basket
Not wanting to give up my place
To get the toilet paper
I forgot.

Ta da! A poem is born.

Some of these poems will come out silly. Some will be serious.
Some will have stories, and some won't. Play with them. Experiment
with combining words.

Enjoy!