

UNLOCKED

Reading & Writing Prompts
for Practising Poets

by

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Foreword

A TRUE POEM—the kind that lifts off the page and flies into the reader’s heart—is a mysterious creature. But the skills and experience and practice that go into making such a thing are somewhat less mysterious.

A poet is simply a writer who makes poems. And writers aren’t born; they’re made. Their training involves close reading, extensive immersion in language, and continuous practice. Most poets build a sizeable mountain of forgettable work before there’s any chance of a poem that sings.

Even after decades of practice, each new poem is a unique challenge, and each poem that’s read (not written) may teach something useful—a trick, a shape, a form; or even what *not* to do. It’s a life-long apprenticeship. ‘What is art,’ said John Masfield, ‘but delightful work?’

All the same, occasionally people get stuck, or lose confidence. The delight evaporates. Writers can feel (or *be*) locked down. This book is one way of unlocking mental doors.

The reading texts here precede the writing prompts, because we need to read as poets before we can write as poets. It may be useful, and fun (depending on your circumstances), to talk about the reading sections with friends. The sample poems are chosen for their accessibility and human interest, and because each contains at least one technique of particular interest. The writing suggestions follow. They offer a chance to try things out, or take off into an idea of your own.

We suggest you tackle one section at a time. Give it space and thought before moving to the next. It’s a good idea to write down your thoughts about someone else’s poem before starting to work on one of your own. All writing is good for you: it’s your mental exercise, your warm-up. It makes your brain supple and flexible and word-friendly.

If you don’t like one of the sections (or sample poems) *at all*, don’t worry. Turn the page. Try another. They can be approached in any order.

Helena Nelson & Sue Butler

LOCKED IN



TO ALTHEA FROM PRISON

Richard Lovelace, 1617—1657

When love with unconfinèd wings
 Hovers within my gates
And my divine *Althea* brings
 To whisper at the grates;
When I lie tangled in her hair
 And fettered to her eye,
The birds that wanton in the air
 Know no such liberty.

When flowing cups run swiftly round,
 With no allaying *Thames*,
Our careless heads with roses bound,
 Our hearts with loyal flames;
When thirsty grief in wine we steep,
 When healths and draughts go free,
Fishes that tipple in the deep
 Know no such liberty.

When (like committed linnets) I
 With shriller throat shall sing
The sweetness, mercy, majesty,
 And glories of my King:
When I shall voice aloud how good
 He is, how great should be,
Enlargèd winds, that curl the flood,
 Know no such liberty.

Stone walls do not a prison make,
Nor iron bars a cage:
Minds innocent and quiet take
That for an hermitage.
If I have freedom in my love,
And in my soul am free,
Angels alone, that soar above,
Enjoy such liberty.

Reading

The Cavalier poet Richard Lovelace fought for the King in the English Civil War. It cost him dear. Charles I lost his head in 1649 and Lovelace died in poverty eight years later.

But this poem was written well before that (1642). At the point of writing, young Lovelace is locked up, an aristocrat, a political prisoner, idealistic and utterly determined. He has time to polish every twist and turn of this perfectly formal piece.

Take a look at the structure. He's a master of rhetoric. Can you spot the pattern of 'when' clauses in the first three stanzas? It's the same sentence construction in each case, building anticipation line by line. The fourth stanza differs. Here, an 'if' proposition moves the whole performance into the grandest assertion and biggest theatre of all—eternity.

The theme is nailed by the last word of every stanza, identical and sonorous—'liberty'.

If you read the poem aloud, you'll hear how Lovelace builds the intensity line by line. How many words directly connect with freedom/prison? Look for his techniques of high drama: repetition, alliteration, assonance, rhythm, rhyme.

Is there anything you can learn from here—or use in a poem of your own?

Notes

[The Notes pages in this book are for anything you like.]

Writing

Think about any situation where you've felt severely restricted.

The restriction can be literal or metaphorical, but you *might* try a structure that resembles Lovelace's (though in a more relaxed and contemporary form).

First note down three (or more) ideas or images that belong to this restrictive situation. Try to capture precise and specific detail: facts, not feelings.

Then start with 'When' and use one of these ideas. Something like this:

When my mother puts the kettle on
and reaches for the biscuit tin;
when she takes the tablecloth out of the drawer
and grandmother's plates from the glass cabinet,
it will not be possible to leave
for at least another hour.

Now add in two more stanzas using a similar sentence pattern (drawing on the ideas you listed earlier).

Your fourth and final stanza should draw attention to itself by following a different pattern.

You *might* experiment with the idea of using the same word as the last word of every single stanza.

Or

Ignore Lovelace and his brave statements. Write about utter despair. Focus on a kind of imprisonment (literal or metaphorical) that's getting worse by the minute. But before you start, choose a metaphor—just one—that conveys your sense of how it is.