

What Poetry Does

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1. **Poetry stops us short.** It recalls us to contemplation in a world of action. Unlike narrative, which moves us through time and plot, poetry makes us pause, look again, go back and reconsider what we thought we saw or knew the first time.
2. **Poetry trains us in a metaphorical habit of mind** so that a world of flat surfaces becomes charged with meaning and what seems discrete may be perceived as connected.
3. **Poetry teaches us to dwell in paradox;** it trains us in “negative capability”—the capacity to sustain paradox or contradiction without striving after resolution. It thus challenges us to move to a wider vision of truth.
4. **Poetry schools us in subtlety**—demanding that we look closely, make precise distinctions and comparisons, pull apart the strands of sound and sense and reflect on our very processes of making meaning.
5. **Poetry disciplines us to see with precision.** Poets don’t deal in general truths or abstract propositions, but in concrete particulars—the meticulously chosen word, name, image. Pound, among others, believed that the central source of the power of poetry is the precise image, which could bring together “a complex of feelings and ideas in a single moment.”
6. **Poetry calls us to play, and to laughter,** by the unexpected turn, the sudden reframing, the comic slippage of one possibility of meaning into another. Poems share with jokes the experience of “sudden seeing.”
7. **Poetry reminds us of the hope of wholeness.** It reunifies what Eliot lamented were “dissociated sensibilities”—affections and intellect, mind and heart, the wisdom of the body and the yearnings of the soul.
8. **Poetry teaches us how to honor the complexity of things**—reminds us that what we think we know is not that simple, that what we see may be seen differently at second glance, and so teaches not to leap to judgment too quickly.
9. **Poetry, by asking us to widen our imaginations and suspend our judgments, trains us to compassion,** which begins in the empathetic imagination.
10. **And so poetry calls us to attention.** Poets are people who pay attention, framing the ordinary in such a way as to see it new. One poet called poems “acts of attention”: “Attention—deep, sustained, undeviating, is in itself an experience of a very high order.” The practice of poetry is the practice of paying attention, noticing, looking again, and correcting our vision.