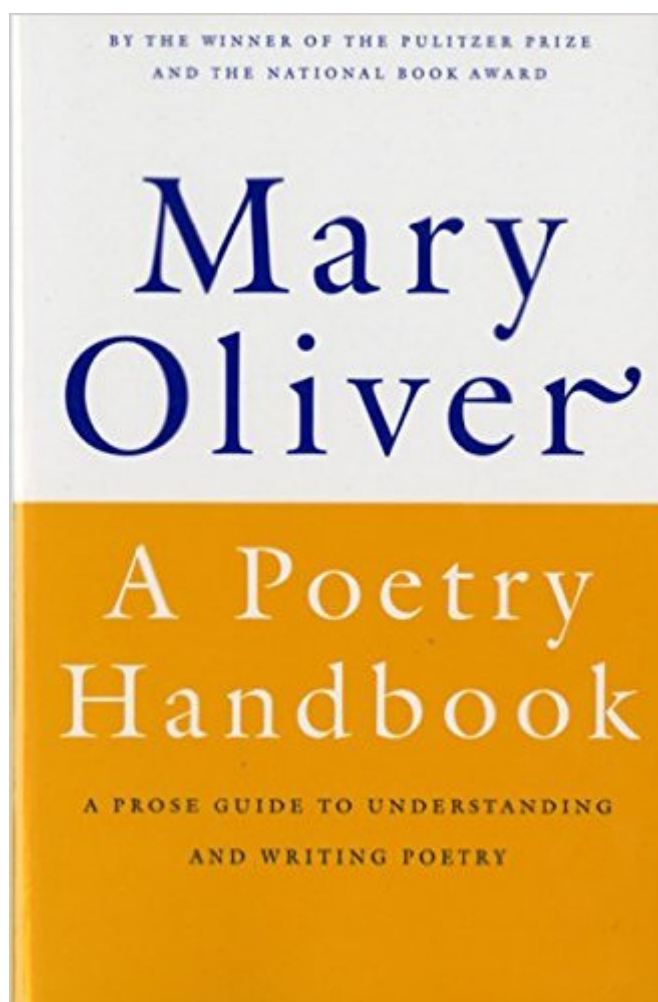


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# A Poetry Handbook



## Synopsis

With passion, wit, and good common sense, the celebrated poet Mary Oliver tells of the basic ways a poem is built—meter and rhyme, form and diction, sound and sense. Drawing on poems from Robert Frost, Elizabeth Bishop, and others, Oliver imparts an extraordinary amount of information in a remarkably short space. “Stunning” (Los Angeles Times). Index.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Mary Oliver is a well-known, distinguished poet. Her book "A Poetry Handbook" was recommended to me by a professor from my current MFA Poetry program and it has been both a surprise, and a confirmation that poets themselves (not academics and critics) have the deepest insight into how to write a good poem. Oliver suggests that poetry is like a current ready to flow through you. It is not merely "an acquisition," a skill, or something outside yourself - but more a combination of punctuality in "showing up" to do the work, and an opening of the heart (or, as Oliver calls it: "that shy factory of the emotion.") Each chapter addresses component parts of poetry writing: line, sound, diction, imagery, voice and more. Oliver's choice of poets: Whitman, Bishop, James Wright, Frost, Pound, are all strong choices, their poems providing supportive examples of her discussion of craft. Most importantly, however, she provides the best piece of advice in her opening chapters: read, read, read poems. To be a good poet, you must read a range of poetry, spanning history and geography and style. And after that, Oliver provides the surprise (a heady permission I learned in my very early years of writing which has held fast through many moments of flagging confidence and motivation)

"Imitate." We read, we imitate, and from this process we find our own voice and style. As Oliver tells us: "It demands finally, a thrust of our own imagination - a force, a new idea - to make sure that we don't merely copy, but inherit, and proceed from what we have learned." Though beautifully simple and straightforward, I would not categorize this book as being for any particular level of writer: beginner, or accomplished. The beginner will learn well and happily, and the more accomplished writer will find again and again, much needed resonance for the continuing passion of writing poetry.

"A Poetry Handbook," by Mary Oliver, is a nonfiction prose text about the art of writing poetry. In the book Oliver, herself an excellent poet, gives a clear and painless introduction to some structural aspects of poetry. She defines many technical terms: alliteration, onomatopoeia, alexandrine, caesura, quatrain, persona, etc. She also discusses various poetic forms: sonnet, free verse, etc. Other topics addressed include imagery and diction. Throughout the book, Oliver illustrates her points with poetry by some of the greatest practitioners of the craft: Robert Frost, Walt Whitman, William Carlos Williams, Elizabeth Bishop, etc. The book is aimed at both readers and writers of poetry. For the latter, Oliver reflects on such practical issues as revision and participation in poetry workshops. The book reflects Oliver's own philosophy of poetry. She stresses that poetry is a craft that requires work and discipline, and encourages the reader to think of poets as constituting a "tribe" that transcends all geographic and cultural boundaries. The book is not without flaws. I found it quite Eurocentric; she never discusses the haiku, a Japanese verse form that has been embraced by many in the English-speaking world. Other non-Western forms are similarly neglected. Some of her opinionated pronouncements also seem open to debate. She notes that a poem "gives pleasure through the authority and sweetness of the language," but I think some poems are effective conduits of rage or outrage and make use of unpleasant language to shake up the reader. Regarding the revision process, she notes that sometimes "it is simply best to throw a poem away" -- but, I ask, who is to make that decision? Something a poet might want to discard may in fact be a great poem in another's eyes. Also, although she gives many good examples of good poems, it might have been interesting if she had included some bad ones to illustrate her points further. Despite its flaws, however, I think that "A Poetry Handbook" would be a solid text for both individual reading and classroom use. And I think that some of Oliver's questionable statements could trigger productive discussion! Ultimately, I appreciate Oliver's declaration that poetry "is a life-cherishing force [...] as necessary as bread in the pockets of the hungry." Recommended as companion texts: Audre Lorde's essay "Poetry Is Not a Luxury," from her collection "Sister Outsider," and Pablo Neruda's prose collection "Passions and Impressions."

Mary Oliver's poetry itself can do some teaching on its own, but we can be grateful she's chosen to articulate the writing process so richly in this book. The book will almost certainly will wring some writing out of you; it will also inspire you to examine your work habits and technique. Oliver's intelligence shines through, and will make you a better reader of poetry. Small note on the previous review: Mary Oliver does, indeed, teach, at Bennington College currently. If you can't enroll there, this book is your next best choice.

Say what you will about her poetry, Mary Oliver clearly understands the technical aspects of the craft and in this small tome she conveys them brilliantly. With a clear voice and plenty of examples drawn from the masters of poetry, Oliver is able to bring great insights to the beginner or amateur poetry writer. It may be going just a bit far to say that Oliver's book is to poetry what Strunk & White's is to prose, but for the non-expert it feels awful close.

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