

# How to write a shape poem

By Stephanie Wong Ken, WikiHow, adapted by Newsela staff on 04.02.20 Word Count **1,264** Level

## *Concrete Cat* by Dorthi Charles



**MAX**

Image 1. A concrete poem about a cat written by the poet Dorthi Charles. Photo: WikiHow/Creative Commons

A shape poem, also called a concrete poem or a calligram, describes an object and is written in the shape of that object. You can create shape poems of all kinds, using objects or subjects that inspire you. To write a shape poem, you will need to brainstorm ideas, create the shape template, and then add in the poem so it sits within the form properly.

### **Brainstorm Ideas**

Read examples of shape poems. To get a better sense of what you can do in a shape poem, you might want to read examples of the form, such as "Concrete Cat" by Dorthi Charles (pictured above). After reviewing examples, think about how the author uses the poem's shape. How does the author use the shape to emphasize the meaning of the poem? How do the text and the shape interact in the poem?

For example, Charles' "Concrete Cat" uses the text to form the shape of a cat, with each word forming its shape on the cat's body. "Whisker" forms a whisker on the cat, "eye" forms an eye. This creates an interesting visual for the reader.

After you have examined other examples of shape poems choose something to write about. To get an idea for your shape poem, you might focus on an activity you enjoy, such as playing tennis or reading books. Or you might focus on a hobby, like woodworking or singing. You could then use

this subject as the inspiration or the subject of your poem.

Another source of inspiration could be something in nature like a favorite tree in your backyard, a birdhouse or nature on a larger scale, such as a famous waterfall in your area. Animals might also inspire you such as the fierceness of a lion or the grace of a gazelle.

Another possibility is to choose a favorite object or something with sentimental value. Maybe you have a family heirloom that has been passed down to you from your mother. You could then write a poem in the shape of the object that focuses on why you love the object so much or why you value it.

### **Select A Shape**

Once you have selected the subject of your poem, you should think about what shape best represents the subject. You might choose a more obvious shape to represent your subject, such as a tennis racket to represent a poem about tennis. Or, you may choose a more obscure shape, such as the shape of your grandmother's watch to represent a poem about your grandmother.

Keep in mind you will need to fit the text of the poem in the shape. So, you might want to select a shape that is wide or has a wide center. If you select a shape that is more challenging, such as the shape of a hand or the shape of a long, thin pen, you may need to be more creative with how you fit the text within the shape.

One option for creating the shape template is to design it on a computer. You can download shape templates online. Existing templates are widely available if you are using a common shape, such as the shape of a heart or the shape of a butterfly.

If you would like to get more hands-on, you can draw the shape on a piece of paper using your drawing skills and your imagination. Make sure you draw the shape template so it is big enough to fit the text.

### **Writing The Shape Poem**

Make a list of keywords and terms about the subject. To get your creative juices flowing, sit down and write as many keywords and terms you can think of about the subject. Try to be specific as you make this list, as you can then use it to pull words for your poem later.

For example, if you are writing a shape poem about tennis, you might write down "strings," "grass," "sweat," "armbands," "two-handed forearm" and "tingling hands." If you were writing about an object of sentimental value, such as your grandmother's watch, you might write down terms that relate to both your grandmother and the watch, such as "ancient," "ticking," "delicate" and "wise."

Now that you have an idea in mind, consider how the subject of your poem might, smell, sound, look, taste and feel. These are known as sensory details. Include these details to make your poem feel more vivid.

For example, maybe in your poem about tennis, you write about the smell of the grass courts, the sound of the ball hitting your racket, or the taste of sweat on your lips as you play a match. You might focus more on short descriptions of these sensory details, as your shape might only allow you to include a few lines of text.

Just like other kinds of poems, shape poems use literary devices such as rhyme and repetition. Rhyme is a pattern of words that produce the same sound or similar sounds. It is often used in shape poems as a way to tie the lines together, especially if your shape creates breaks or gaps between the lines of text.

Repetition is a pattern of the same words that repeat in sequence. Many shape poems use the repetition of words to create the shape of the poem or to reinforce the shape. For example, Charles' "Concrete Cat" repeats the word "stripe" to create the striped lines on the cat's body and repeats the word "whiskers" to create the whiskers of the cat.

### **Arrange The Text Within The Shape**

Once you have created your poem, you are ready to place it in the shape. You might do this by writing the text directly into the shape, making sure the text stays within the lines of the shape. Or, you might want to cut out the words on the paper and arrange them so they form the shape of the text.

Have fun with this part, as it is a critical step in making a shape poem. Focus on arranging the text so it forces the reader to look at the words within the shape or in a different way. For example, if you are writing about tennis and placing the text within the shape of a tennis racket, you may include details about the racket strings in the string section of the racket and details about swinging the racket in the handle section of the racket.

Edit the text in the shape. With your text in place, step back from the poem and read it within the shape. See if there are any words that do not quite fit within the shape. Edit them so they are shorter and more concise, or remove them. Check if there are ways you can make the text more engaging by placing it in a different section of the shape. Most shape poems use the shape to play with the meaning of the text.

You might also decide to edit down certain lines so they create the shape of the subject or object more clearly. Similar to "Concrete Cat," think about how your poem can represent the shape in very few words. This could be a fun challenge if you are looking for a different approach to your shape poem.

**Write your own shape poem.** Select a topic you are very familiar with and brainstorm everything you know about that topic. Write those ideas down. Complete a poem using the information you brainstormed. Write this poem into a shape that resembles that information. Send a picture of your shape poem to Mrs. Johnson at [coljohnson@joliet86.org](mailto:coljohnson@joliet86.org) or save it with your paperwork to be turned in.