**Revising Your Poem:** Here are some general revision thoughts and some questions to ask yourself. Remember there are a vast array of poets who write very differently and very well. This is a creative pursuit, after all. The most important piece of revision is asking yourself a lot of questions and having answers to why you made the choices you did. Every poem needs us to ask different questions, but here is a starting place 😊

**Do I have to revise?**

The final draft of a poem should not look just like the first draft. The main reason for this is that poetry is crafted, that means it is purposeful. You can almost always do better than your first draft. I recently heard Mary Oliver, a renowned and lifelong poet, say on a podcast, that she wrote so much bad poetry she had to throw away and in her whole life she wrote a handful of poems that didn’t change from the first to final draft. When starting to write poetry, you are learning how to craft the sentences, lines, stanzas, ideas in a way that best reaches your readers. This takes a lot of practice to find your voice, but there’s no time like the present to start finding that voice. Here are a few questions to get you thinking:

**Content**

* Do the words on the page say what you want them to say?
* Does the poem leave some room for interpretation? For example, you wouldn’t want to say “I was sad” in a poem. Make the reader feel sad without telling them the word “sad.” A poem should expect an active, engaged reader.
* Does the poem rely on poetic devices like images and metaphors and personification? Why/ why not?
* Does the poem include fresh images, ways of thinking that people aren’t used to? You want to avoid any clichés in a poem. So instead of writing “it’s raining cats and dogs” you could write “the rain puddled into sorrows” or “the rain danced in staccato pulses inviting us outside.” Consider the different meanings in each.

**Organization**

* Is the poem ordered in a way that invites readers in? In revision, it’s a good idea to consider what ideas you have to keep together and what ideas you could move around. Play with what line is the first line and what line is the last line. You can chunk information that belongs together and physically cut up the pieces and rearrange them on a table. Consider the effect of various organizational strategies.
* Try to read the poem as if you didn’t write it. Think about where it leaves readers. Is that where you want to leave them? What is the impact of the last line?

**Sentence Style**

* Poems have more freedom in sentence structure than other kinds of prose, however, you want to set readers’ expectations early in the poem so that they know what to expect. You can then break those expectations, but your sentence choices should be intentional. If you use a fragment, it should emphasize something important. If you drop some punctuation, it should be purposeful. Don’t think that because you are writing poetry, you can throw out the rules. The best poets know grammar rules better than anyone and then break those rules to certain effect when advantageous for relaying their message.

**Diction** (the choice of certain words)

* Make sure your nouns and verbs do the heavy lifting in the poem, meaning that you avoid boring nouns like tree and say something more specific like maple (unless the specific is distracting and the kind of tree isn’t important) and you avoid boring verbs like “to be” verbs and include more specific verbs. Minimize your use of adverbs and adjectives. They are fine to use here and there, but pay special attention to nouns and verbs.
* Pay attention to the sounds of words together. Maximize your use of alliteration, assonance, even rhyme to focus readers’ attention on certain words. Much of what is published in modern poetry journals doesn’t have a set rhyme scheme like ABAB, but poets still pay very careful attention to the exact word choice so that readers slow down and pay attention. One thing that distinguishes poetry from most prose is that it is pleasurable to read because of the words the poet chose.

**Layout**

* Consider the layout of the poem. First, decide on your lines. There are two ways to end a line: an end stop or enjambment. An end stop is where the line ends with punctuation, either a period, a comma, a semi colon, or a complete thought. Enjambment, on the other hand, is where you end the line on an incomplete thought. There is a place for both of these line ending in most poems, but you want to make these choices intentionally and in a way that maintains tension in the poem. Don’t let your readers rest. Entice them enough to keep going. Often poets will use enjambment and cut the line at an interesting word that keeps readers going, not an article or preposition. There are exceptions, of course, but look over some recent poems published in *The New Yorker* or *The New York Times* and pay attention tp how the writers break their lines.
* The next question is do you want the whole poem to be one long stanza or do you want to break it into neat stanzas, all couplets (2 line stanzas) or tercets (3 line stanzas) for example, or do you want to have stanzas of different lengths? Many poets use all of these strategies, often in the same book of poems. Consider the effects of breaking your lines in different ways. Consider what you want to draw attention to and how breaking the stanzas differently amplifies or diminishes that attention.

**Final Revision**

* Another helpful note on revision: the real writing is done in the revision process, so give it time. As you revise for the above questions, consider writing various options for yourself (like listing as many metaphors you can think of to choose the right one for that moment) or changing the stanzas and looking at the different options. Keep track of your revisions by labeling them “draft one” and so on with the date / time at the top.
* It’s hard to know when a poem is “done.” It often feels like creative work is never really finished; it could always be improved. But at some point, you have to decide it’s finished. Once you have asked the above questions of your poem, looked at it at multiple sittings, and tinkered with various elements, it’s great to have someone else read over your work. Choose someone or more than one person who you trust, who will take the work as seriously as you do, and ask them to just give you their reader impression. This may be exactly what you want them to get from the work. If it doesn’t match what you wanted, you may want to tinker some more. Remember the more poetry you read, and the more you write, the more satisfied you will feel when you finish that poem. What is more important to the human experience than self-expression? Enjoy yourself 😊

For more info about the elements of a poem, Take a look at Billy Collins’s “6 Elements of a Poem” here: https://www.writerswrite.co.za/billy-collinss-6-elements-of-a-poem/