



The Poet's Handbook

The Comstock Writer's Group

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with additional selections from

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Introduction

Typically, handbooks are guides. Our Handbook For Poets is a guide. We certainly do not have all the answers for writers, but we do know what appeals to us as editors. We have myriad articles written for your edification, enjoyment and interest. You, of course, will glean what you can use and ignore the rest.

We have tried to provide a variety of articles which will appeal to novice, “closet,” average and exceptional poets. The Comstock Writers’ Group is committed to making your job as a poet easier, more productive and more successful. This handbook may be downloaded for free and used for workshops, classes or your own personal enjoyment. We appreciate feedback from our readers. You can use our online form to contact us.

Written in 1996 by
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Part I. Presenting Your Poetry

1. How To Present Your Poetry To Editors

You wouldn't believe our mail. We aren't talking volume or quality here. We're talking diversity ... good and bad! We are surprised that we have yet to receive a poem written on the back of White Cloud or on a napkin with golden arches.

For those who are new at submitting, please let us share some wisdom:

1. Type your poems just as you would like them printed.
2. Correct your own spelling, typos and smudges.
3. Either three-fold and put in one #10 size envelope (business size) or do not fold and put in an 8 1/2 x 11 manila envelope.
4. Enclose SASE (self-addressed stamped envelope) with submission or query.
5. Put sufficient postage on all envelopes. Special handling/delivery is not necessary. (Save your money to send for sample issues!!)
6. Put your full name, address and telephone number on back of each poem.
7. Optional: Send cover letter with questions or info. Send brief biography (list of publications)

2. Yes, Neatness Counts

Our mail is a veritable plethora of compulsions from the obsessively perfect to the obsessively messy. While most submissions arrive folded neatly with SASE in business size envelopes, there are others that boggle the mind. Some poets go to tremendous expense and lengths to have their work read in pristine condition while others seem to revel in dirty, stained, half-sheets, cross-outs, torn "manuscripts" with SASE 1/3 the size necessary to return the work.

We are average folk with average standards for hygiene. All you have to do is fold your poems in three places, attach a SASE and put them into a business size envelope with sufficient postage to receive your work along with our enclosure. Amy Vanderbilt is not on our staff but neither is "Pigpen."

3. Returning Poems Timely & Tastefully

There are, as we all know, twelve months in any given year. If a poem is submitted to any magazine and held there for between five and seven months (the average holding time for replies from many of the better known presses), this adds up to only one or two chances yearly for any one poem to be selected for publication, unless, of course, you simultaneously submit your poems, which we strongly advise against since this can result in embarrassment for the poet and anger from the magazine which must revamp its next issue to delete the poem published elsewhere.

The Comstock Review, whose editors, themselves, are publishing poets, face this same dilemma. We try to alleviate this problem by having reading periods and quick turn around times. When you are submitting poetry to journals, it is important to assess holding periods.

4. Dear Sirs: How To Offend

When Jenny and Kathleen used to sit down to go over the week's submissions and letters, it really was annoying to open missive after missive addressed to "Dear Sir." It certainly made us feel anonymous, if not androgynous. So, if you do not know an editor on Try Number 1, that's ok. You can solve your dilemma by trying one of these options:

Dear Poet; Dear Editor; Dear Colleague; Dear Reader; Dear Sir/Madam; Dear Staffer; etc, etc, etc.

There is no excuse for archaic appellations in this era.

5. When To Send Again

Magazines, like prisons, thrive on repeat business. But it is so difficult for a poet to know the difference between tastefully appearing in the post box and overkill. Even Robert Frost would not be welcome on a monthly basis to a magazine that publishes only two issues yearly. He would, however, be so very exciting to read two or three times a year.

We know most magazines do not get into the social amenities that we, at The Comstock Review, believe so crucial to the mental and spiritual well-being of poets ... so perhaps you could just keep sending until they or you were silly. But we do write back and try to be more than a rejection/acceptance machine. We love poetry, and by extension or declension, poets. Keep those cards and letters coming but be judicious in the volume of poetry for review.

6. Keeping Records

Record keeping is one of the most important aspects of submitting your poetry. Very few magazines do re-prints. Thus, it is very important that you select the "Right" magazine for a particular poem and send it for review. You must have, above all things, a SYSTEM ... Some method that is easy to use and to keep clear that notifies you instantly of these things:

Name of Poem/Magazine Submitted To/Date Submitted/Date Returned/Accepted/Not Accepted

Whether you use index cards, a copy of the poem itself or a computer file, this is information you need to know. You will be able to quickly re-submit poems to the next

appropriate magazine with a SYSTEM. You will not be embarrassed instead of overjoyed by having the poem accepted by two magazines in the same mail.

7. When You Care Enough To Send

We can always tell when a well-published poet has not seen The Comstock Review. We get a sampling of the poet's "B" stuff to peruse. As poets who love poetry, we read myriad magazines ... we all get different subscriptions and share them. We see the work of numerous outstanding poets whose excellent poetry adorns the pages of magazines throughout the country. Long before they've decided to test our journal we have followed them in their hops, skips and jumps through the major circuits.

We're always delighted when they re-submit after reading a sample copy.

Needless to say, when they send the "A" material we can publish them.

8. Bios

Many poets do not send their bios until after a poem has been accepted.

They are leery that an editor will think they are trying to influence decisions or they are concerned that they don't have sufficiently snazzy enough credits. CWG does not care. Nobody has successfully influenced us yet!

We welcome your bios with your poetry. We keep a file (many files actually) of bios and it makes it easy for us to draw on them for publication. It also gives us phone numbers if we need to call you and lets us keep up with which magazines are publishing the same poets we do.

9. Keep Those Cards & Letters Coming

We love your letters, notes, and postcards. We cannot begin to answer all of them but know they are shared with the Board of Directors and that they mean much to us. We like to know what you enjoyed in CR. We have some wonderful critics who critique each issue and tell us what they liked best and what they would change. Most of all, your communication reminds us that we do not work in a vacuum. Take a few minutes and share your relevant opinions on The Comstock Review.

10. Arrogant Editors

We read a particularly brutal outburst from the editor of a prestigious journal recently. The point of the diatribe was that too many poets of less than exemplary poetic credentials (ability and experience) were jamming their staff with crappola. They wanted to see only the creme de la creme. Well, who wouldn't! But there are many of us, damn fine poets, who would not like to have our work of twenty or thirty years ago paraded in front of us as what we were capable of writing. We do see some awful verse

but we never view the poet as anything less than a novice searching for a voice. It is our joy to lend support, encouragement, and hopefully, suggestions. Of course, we cannot publish such work. We are a magazine of high quality poetry. However, we are also people of quality and we never believe that we or CR will be enhanced by diminishing either the work or the character of any member of our poetry family.

Incidentally, none of us will be jamming this editor with our work!!!!

11. Contributor's Notes

We are always surprised after accepting a fine poem to receive a bio that is silly, bizarre or inane. It doesn't happen too often but it does happen enough to question why a poet who obviously has command of the language would send such a biography. Then, we receive a copy of a "poetry" magazine from somewhere in the country and check the contributor pages only to find that scattered throughout are unintelligible, cutesy, dippy "bios." We are not going to demean our poets, poetry or subscribers by wasting space in such a manner. Rather, we will do what we do ... name and hometown. Other poets do not care how many cats you have or that your baby is teething. They want to know your credentials ... where can you be read.

12. Recidivism At Its Best

One of the reasons that CWG enjoys CR is that we are getting to know our poets. We really do enjoy building a coterie of excellent writers and giving them a magazine that showcases their talents. We know that there are far too many poets who spend their careers in search of numbers ... the number of different magazines that they can get to accept a poem.

That's OK with us but we've found that most of the really solid poets prefer to build an audience for their work. Therefore, we do have many, many fine poets returning "home" with their highest quality work. CWG thinks they have learned the lesson of numbers ... publishing in a few fine journals is far preferable to publishing in numerous magazines of dubious distinction.

13. Who Are You?

Please remember to put your name and address on every poem you send.

There are always too many poems sent to the Summer Contest without identifying info. The contest is judged blind. Envelopes are separated from poems without looking at names so no reader is ever prejudiced.

Thus, until we select the poems, we do not see the back. It is heart-wrenching to find a finalist with no ID. It simply goes back to the circular file. Don't let this happen to you. Take your time.

14. Ouch, Don't Let Them Bounce!

Do you know that a bounced check for \$2 can cost a journal \$14? ... the \$2 loss and the \$12 bank fee. We have a couple of bucks in the treasury but no non-profit organization can handle too much of this stuff. We like to give the unrepentant deadbeats to Mr. Morgan. This is not a pretty picture.

15. What To Do With Your Best Poem

Are you hoarding your best poem? Do you have trouble finding a place or contest worthy of this absolutely marvelous piece? Do you visualize it (along with your photo) on the back of APR? Is it the next winner of the Chester Jones? Is it the centerpiece of your next volume? Is it all and none of the above? Is it just sitting in the bottom drawer?

Trust us. It will always be your best poem in waiting until you send it off. Pick a magazine, pick a contest. Do it today. Because your best poem hasn't been written yet and it won't be until you get this albatross off your back. Go on ... go find it.

Get out your Poet's Market. Check Poets & Writers. Better yet—send it to The Comstock Review. It deserves to be read by all our great subscribers. Hope to hear from you soon.

16. You Are An Editor

Believe it or not, you are an editor. When you send a batch of poems to a magazine, you are, in essence, saying, "I'd publish all of these if it was my magazine." But, would you, really? Probably not!

Before you ship out your "babies," make sure they don't embarrass you. Clean them up, trim them down, round them out ... Send only what you would publish if it were your magazine. Remember, you love them ... they are strangers to us and must make a very good first impression.

17. Copyright

When you are published in The Comstock Review your copyright reverts back to you. Good taste and the unwritten laws of poetry publishing dictate that:

IF YOU EVER PUBLISH THAT POEM ELSEWHERE (another magazine or your own book), YOU MUST ACKNOWLEDGE ITS FIRST PUBLICATION.

This is true of most of the poetry journals we know. Please check when in doubt.

18. Problems of Simultaneous Submissions

Boy, it is frustrating waiting for some bozo editor to return poetry sent months ago. The temptation to do simultaneous submissions is often irresistible. The problems this creates are not pretty. What if your poem is accepted at two (or heaven forbid more) places? What to do? You have to write one or more editors and say, "Oops, I am a jerk. You can't have the poem I said you could have" and either lie or say why ...

Neither of which will make that editor real excited about working with you in the future. Some poets, inexperienced or just plain arrogant, will let them both publish the same poem. Usually such indiscretion comes home to roost. Remember it is not just the editors who read myriad journals. All the other poets in those issues are potential jerk-discoverers. The Comstock Review usually sends a condolence letter because we consider the poet dead and we are always sad to lose a friend.

19. Overweight Envelopes

At the risk of sounding cheap, we will! We, like other journals, get far too many overweight envelopes. Because we pride ourselves on not being unprofessional, we often accept and pay for them. The staff who pick up the mail are the ones who have to pull out their loose change.

They do not charge the treasury. It's too much of a pain and they do not want to appear cheap!

Why do some poets understand that a hefty envelope cost two stamps but cannot seem to comprehend that a single stamp on a SASE will not get their poems returned? Not nice. Additionally, if you have a query or need our enclosures that increases the weight of the return. Take a minute on larger envelopes to make certain that the USPS has taxed it to the max.

20. How To Prepare for Submitting

Ok. You are new at submitting your poetry for publication. That's okay. What isn't okay is going about it in an unprofessional manner. May we offer a little help to assist novices?

Mini Guide to Submitting Your Poetry

1. Buy Poetry Markets (about \$20) at local large bookstore.
2. Read it.
3. "X" those magazines that sound like you.
4. Select your favorite few.
5. Send for a sample copy and guidelines.
6. Read the sample.
7. Decide if you would be proud to be published by this editor.
8. Select 4-6 poems and send them.

9. Keep good records of your submissions.
10. Keep good records on the kind of treatment accorded your work.
11. If you support the magazine, SUBSCRIBE!

21. Coping With Rejection

There are approximately 1500 small press magazines in circulation at any given time. They may range from the sloppy to the artistically perfect, from Xerox to typeset, from foldovers to saddle-stitched to perfect-bound. There is a market for everyone. Some magazines make an earnest effort to print at least one poem from everyone who sends ... others print only well-known names ... and others, like The Comstock Review, print ONLY high quality poetry regardless of the name of the poet.

We send back hundreds of good poems every year. We try to let the poets know that they have talent and are much appreciated by our editors. We look forward to the poem that will fit our publication. Excellent poets normally have stacks of rejection letters but they know that the poem and not the poet was rejected. Until you must rent a U-Haul to cart off your letters of “No Thanks” to the recycling station, you have nothing to worry about. Hang in ... search for your market ... it takes a long time to get into the major journals. We hope to read you soon.

22. This Is Weird ... Written In the Wind

We know people who write poetry are often stereotyped as impoverished free spirits who subsist on french bread and marmalade. Bull! There are many fine poets who are affluent or, at the least, middle class. Why, then, do soooo many writers never send for a sample copy of a magazine that they are willing to let publish their work?

We don't get much time to submit or even write anymore ... and we are each considered creditable poets. However, we assure you that when we do send out our own poetry, we know where and to whom the poems are going.

We have received some very bizarre stuff for The Comstock Review. Doggeral, greeting card verse, sexually explicit and obscure poems would never be sent to us if the poet had read a sample of CR and determined which 3-6 poems from his/her unpublished collection were appropriate.

Besides being able to read and enjoy a high quality magazine, our subscribers can determine whether they wish to be “seen” in CR and whether they write the type of poem that is acceptable to the editors. When you submit blindly, your poem could end up in a very trashable magazine, next to a piece that is embarrassing for your child to read, in with junk that is sophomoric or moronic. Spend a few bucks and save a lot of postage, downtime, and heartache. Get a sample before submitting to a magazine that “sounds good.”

Part II. Awards & Contests

1. Are the Major Awards Inbred?

We really do not know for certain. But, like you, we wonder if the next generation of Frosts, Whitmans and Millays are being groomed by association ... whether a fine young poet can ever become a “name” without the connections which come from having a mentor is debatable. We do not suggest anything salacious here. Rather, we worry that at these conferences and workshops when one well-known poet introduces his/her protege to other well-known poets and vice-versa what is the outcome.

Later, when chapbooks are entered for competition are the judges able to remain objective when they have met the up and coming proteges?

Perhaps. We do hope so.

2. What About Those Contests?

Contests are probably the most popular way of funding literary magazines. Without the fiscal power of a major press, university or grants (which often impose restrictions or inhibit individual creativity), most magazines must coordinate contests to meet the increasing budget demands of typesetting, lay-out, printing, binding, distribution and postage.

How do you know what’s legit? What is worth trying for? What prestige will your winning garner? Our theory is to order a sample copy. You can judge the competition by not only the winning poems, but also by those selected for inclusion in the issue.

For us, the yearly contest garners sufficient revenue to not only produce the magazine, but also to constantly upgrade The Comstock Review and increase cash awards to poets. Someday we may stop the contest (though it is such great fun for us), but for now, it is still a thrill to be out of the cupcake and turkey raffle business. Is ours legit?

You bet! We judge the poems blind and let the best rise to the top for our final judge (each year a different well-known, well-respected poet who is not connected to our group).

3. Anthologies: Should You Be In One?

We remember the exultation we had when in high school or college, the letter arrived telling us that we’d been accepted into a national poetry anthology. Yes, of course, we, or our parents, purchased it! Others, more affluent than we, bought copies for parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, neighbors, old teachers, on infinitum. Years later, after we read the twenty-seven others poems squooze onto the same page, we realized that everyone who had what s/he thought was a poem was accepted. How disheartening.

Should you be in an anthology? That you need to answer for yourself.

Knowing full well that shlock and genius poetry will appear side-by-side and that you may be required to pay for a copy (upwards to \$35) for the “privilege” of being printed, you decide. Is it worth it to me? Maybe. But don’t sell your poetry short or it will always come up “short.”

4. Common Errors In Contest Submissions

1. Remember to include ID info on the back of each entry ... [Name, address, telephone, e-mail, fax.]
2. Enclose a SASE for contest results.
3. Keep copies of your poems ... contest entries are not returned.
4. Put sufficient postage on your envelope ... no one wants to go to the Post Office and pay for it.
5. Follow the contest directions.
If you are asked to use white paper ... use white paper.
If you are asked to use 8 1/2 x 11 ... do so
If you are asked to double-space, double-space
If you are asked to anything, there is a good reason ... most contests will take your money and toss your poems if you fail to follow directions ...
6. If there is a fee to enter, enclose a check or money order.
7. Make certain you have sufficient funds to cover the check.
8. Please do not call within minutes of the deadline to get results ...

Reputable editors read all the poems at single sittings to give a fair, impartial reading to each ... in our case, 5-7 professionals read each and grade them 0-5+. Then, we send the top 25 to the judge hired for the final scoring. It takes several weeks for the process to be completed. We call as soon as the results are official.

5. Judging Our Contests

We are often asked by our poets how we go about judging our poetry contest, and we would like to share this with you. We think it’s a fair and impartial way; possibly it may give some ideas to readers who also must judge at contests. First, as poems come in, they are put in a file without being read. the envelopes are separated from the poetry. When all entries have been received, we read all the poems and score each one. Scores range from 0-5+. Since names are on the back of each page and not visible, we do not know whose poems we are reading ... and that’s the way we want it. When the Directors have read them, the scores are added and the highest aggregate scores are removed; these are the finalists. This process takes a while to complete. The top poems are brought back to the scoring table and those we deem superior (about 25) are sent to the final judge ... a renowned American poet with experience in judging national contests is hired each year by CWG.

We should note that we do have specific criteria for how to score the poems on the 0-5+ scale. They cover such points as originality of theme, vividness of imagery, musicality of language, correctness of grammar and syntax, understandability, richness of metaphor and excitement.

6. Win A Subscription

This is a contest for critical readers (we use the term critical as in criticism, literarily speaking).

Rules:

1. Read a copy of our current issue (or any future issues)
2. Write a critique of the issue
3. We can handle the good and the bad but you do not have to go looking for either ... write only what you believe
4. Cite some specific pieces, if appropriate
5. Between 1/2 and two typewritten double spaced pages should do it
6. Give the review a title; put your name, address & tel. no. on it.
7. Send it snail mail ... CWG Review Dept., 4956 St. John Drive, Syracuse NY 13215
8. If we use all of your review on-line, we will give you a one year subscription to The Comstock Review. We use part of your review, we will give you a half year subscription.

Part III. Poetic Posterity

1. Poetry Prize Endowments

If you are interested in endowing a prize in our annual contest, we are interested in hearing from you. Our major prize is \$1,000 and is the Muriel Craft Bailey Award. You may be considered for prizes that range from \$500 to \$750 in your name or that of a loved one. In order to be considered, you must do the following:

1. Send a letter (snail mail, please) telling us about the individual to be honored. A brief bio including any connection the person has or had with poetry or poets.
2. If the individual was a poet, we would like to see a sample of the poet's work. It will not be a criteria for selection, however.
3. Tell us why you wish to endow the prize for this person. What did s/he do that makes him/her important to you and/or your poetry.
4. Send a cashier's check in the amount of the endowment to The Comstock Writers' Group, Inc. If, for any reason, your proposal is unacceptable, your check will, of course, be returned.
5. Tell us whether you intend to make this a one year or permanent endowment. Your intention may change if your circumstances do so do not think you will be held to any decision made in advance.

2. Friends of CWG

Friends of The Comstock Writers' Group Application Form

Name:

Address:

Membership Category (Please consider the highest level that you can barely afford)

Benefactor\$1000 and up
Corporate\$500 to \$999
Contributing\$100 to \$499
Sustaining\$50 to \$99
Family\$20 to \$49
Individual\$15 to \$19

Method of Payment:

Check enclosed

Money Order enclosed

Installment enclosed

Mail to: Donations, Comstock Writers' Group, 4956 St. John Drive, Syracuse NY 13215

3. Gifts of Poetry

One of the ways in which we can promote, support, encourage and celebrate poetry is to take every opportunity to give gifts of poetry to friends and family. For as different as each of them is, there are infinite choices to show your sensitivity to their individuality and tastes. Children can be encouraged to enjoy reading and speaking poetry ... it is a chance to be center stage without pressure. Adults can realize, perhaps for the first time, that poetry can be fun, enjoyable, challenging and rewarding. When you think, "What shall I buy for ..." — think poetry.

4. Blank Page Books

Our book stores are filled with blank page books with beautiful covers attesting to the fact that thousands of poets are looking for a way to gather their poems in book form. We heartily encourage your doing this. It will give you a chance to see the results of your work collected in book form. It makes a beautiful gift ... your poems written in your own handwriting for a loved one to enjoy ... for you to enjoy.

Some use these books to write quotes that they enjoy reading and inspirational messages from which they can write their own poems. Give a hint to the person who always gives you ties or aprons that this is something you could really use.

5. The Present File

You are of an age where you already have too much generic stuff. Your friends and family would appreciate a little guidance when your birthday and holidays come round. Get a 3×5 card file and some cards. Go to the local book stores and on each card write the item, cost, store. You may end up getting Carolyn Forché's new poetry volume instead of a can opener or you may get that CD Reading of Alan Ginsberg instead of a new wrench. Try it ... you can always go back to getting whatever other people think you want.

6. Why Most Great Poems Die After Publication

New poets to the publication business invariably ask the same question in a poignant and sincere attempt to find a way to separate from that good poem that was printed in a pamphlet and is now relegated to anonymity for eternity. Well, what's the alternative? Seeing the same printable poem in four hundred magazines? It would happen without restrictions, you know. Nevertheless, it is still a dilemma. It creates hardships for both poet and publisher.

Some presses do re-prints. The Comstock Review does not. Like all journals, we get stung once in a while by a poet who is oblivious, ignorant or ignoring the rules of publishing poetry. However, it is rare. We find poets are like campers ... honest, caring and supportive of each other. If you have a poem published, NEVER send it out again without acknowledging its first printing. If the magazine accepts re-prints, insist that

they put the name of the magazine, volume, # and year at the bottom of the page. Otherwise, you run the risk of being viewed as a persona non grata in the poetry world!!!

7. Poetry For Progeny — Video Yourself

Many people write lengthy letters philosophizing for their offspring.

You don't necessarily have to do that because your philosophy may well exist in your poetry. Whether you give it as a gift or leave it as a bequest, you might consider this:

1. Ask someone with a video camera (or rent one) to record your reading from your collected works.
2. Set a pleasant scene in a comfortable, familiar place.
3. Be well-prepared and look into the camera.
4. You will forget about the camera soon.
5. Your children, grandchildren, etc. will have a remembrance of you that reaches from your soul to theirs.

8. How We Keep Poetry In Circulation

We are certain that you wonder how many poets actually get to read your poem once it is published. As we have the same fears for our own work, we can only take care to see that The Comstock Review gets wide circulation. Our methods are somewhat costly but worth it for our poets.

First, we print just under a thousand copies — amounts vary because some are lost in printing and at the bindery. Next, we spend many hours sending out CR to our subscribers and contributors. We must do bulk mailing so there are numerous steps in preparation. After the “spoken for” copies, we keep a few copies for the archives and for those who order back copies or more copies after they have seen the magazine in print. And, the rest ... they could gather dust OR, as we like to do, be sent to other editors who are also poets. Thus, our poets are exposed to many other magazine editors who learn to recognize them and to appreciate their work. We think this is the best use of extra CRs (though we have been re-printing as of late to meet demand).

It serves to let editors see your work, our magazine, and continues the trend of sharing volumes as we know poets do. We can guesstimate that about 1000 poets will see your stuff when printed in The Comstock Review. Not too shabby, eh?

9. Keeping Poetry Alive and Well — Making Your Will

Poetry is an important part of your life. You can make a commitment to poetry in some very significant ways:

1. Determine how much money you want to invest in poetry.

2. The amount will determine whether it is a permanent endowment where interest alone is tapped or a one-shot gift.
3. Decide whether to use the money in your own community or nationally.
4. Will it be a gift that starts or encourages a new magazine? that gives a prize in your name? that encourages children to write? that is given to a college English Department for Creative Writing? to a writing group? The ideas are endless. The decision is yours. Talk to your family. Whether it is \$100 or \$1,000,000,000 — do something for POETRY.
5. Talk to your attorney.

10. Swing Low, Sweet Muse — Your Poems When You Are Gone

Poetry lives forever but poets, sadly, do not. You have spent a lot of time and put some serious heart and soul into your Collected Works.

Now, take some time and decide what you want to happen to them when you slip into that metaphor in the sky.

Who will own them? Should they be published posthumously? Should they line the bottom of the bird cage? You're dead ... so who cares? The questions are endless. We think your writing is enough a part of your living that you should provide for your poems just as you would for other helpless survivors. Get a game plan together. Find someone willing to do what you need done and write it up formally. You'll feel better and your work will be in safekeeping. Provide well for your offspring.

Part IV. Poetry Groups

1. Hiring A Local Professor

Sadly, most college instructors do not get rich from teaching Creative Writing. Many augment their salaries by moonlighting in their favorite pastimes ... teaching and poetry. Your group of poet friends can get private instruction for reasonable amounts of money and your local prof can make a few bucks in the process.

The formula is simple:

1. Set a workshop schedule
2. Determine if it is a one-shot deal or a 4-6-8-10 week program
3. Set an hourly fee for the instructor
4. Determine how much salary will be given per course
5. Divide the full amount by the number of participants
6. Make the deal

For example, ten poets want a 4 week workshop of two hours duration per week. The instructor receives \$20 per hour or \$160 total. Divide \$160 by 10 = \$16 per student. All you need to do is provide a place ... large dining room will do, agree to the dates and times, and you are in business. You can raise or lower the fees according to the economics in your area. Everyone wins!

2. Creating Your Own Workshops

We believe that almost anyone can be a “teacher” — not necessarily a great one nor a dreadful one — just a teacher. You can teach yourself and you can teach others. In your local library, you will find books that illustrate form and style. You will find books and magazine articles that will show you techniques for getting people to write. If there are twenty of you or only you, you can design a poetry workshop that will stimulate thinking and writing. Draw up a list of poets in your area, send out an invitation to join you for cookies, iced tea, and sharing. That is how The Comstock Writers’ Group began over a decade ago.

3. Poet Groupies?????

After attending several conferences and workshops (the biggies), one of our colleagues remarked that there are, indeed, “poetry groupies” who follow the “stars” from place to place, readings to workshops. Young would-be’s sit at the proverbial feet of their heroes and are in awe, enamored, and in luck, apparently. Because scholarships are found for them, doors are opened, and introductions are made.

4. Pop Poets ... The Emperor’s New Clothes

Do some of these outrageously prolific poets give you pause? When we see very slight poems proliferating in scores of magazines and watch a “name” being built by virtue of volume not depth, we hope that not only the poet, but also others tempted to get onto the merry-go-round of submissions think about the ramifications.

Perhaps it sounds ludicrous to knock success. However, pop poets will come and go ... a legend in their own minds. We’d like to see these folks spend some time on their craft and not on their “career” so they can live in books that will be reprinted in perpetuity.

5. The Poetry Marathon

We have done this for our community and you might like to organize one for your community.

Poets love to be with poets. Poets love to share poetry.

Poets love to listen to poetry.

Poets love to read their poetry.

This is how to run a Poetry Marathon in your city:

1. Select a site that is accessible, has good parking and can be found with minimal effort by out-of-towners.
2. Print out the addresses of all the poets in a two-hour travel radius from the location selected.
3. Write a letter inviting poets to read from their own work for a specific amount of time. (In our case, dozens of poets read for five minutes over a five hour period)
4. Enclose a stamped reply envelope to see who plans to attend. Expect 70% of positive respondents to actually be there (poets, you know)
5. Make some good eats, coffee and punch.
6. Let your wonderful poets create a day for each other.
7. Repeat yearly.

How much will this cost? Get a site donated (museum, library, school) ... make your own goodies ... ask each poet to contribute a few stamps for next year ... do a cover charge only if you must.

V. The Printed Word

1. Why Subscribing is Not Enough

Most small magazines fold for one of two reasons (often contingent on each other) ... lack of energy and lack of money. To make a poetry journal thrive, you have to have workaholics and high achievers. In order to produce the magazine, you need money. If you figure the energy it takes to prepare a professional looking magazine and the money that printers charge, you know that each issue can run over \$5000. When you are doing your yearly charitable contributions, do not overlook your favorite journals.

2. Good Poetry Mags ... We Want To See Them All!

We try to see what other magazines are out there for poets. If you are an editor, send us a copy ... maybe we will have a chance to plug it down the line.

3. How the Comstock Review Is Made

We receive an amazing number of letters noting the manner in which CR is produced. Thank you. This is how it is done.

1. All poems are professionally typeset. It gives a superior appearance than typed or dot matrixed books have.
2. All graphics (when we use them) are camera-ready and do not require extraordinary life-saving efforts from our printer.
3. The book is professionally proofed ... proofed and proofed until we are silly ... and, then, proofed again. When you find an error, we have worked very hard to miss it.
4. CR is layed out in four page increments on 8 1/2 x 11 grids, printed two up on both sides and then cut.
5. If we raise the cover, it is done with thermography (heated sand in the press).
6. It is sent to a bindery for perfect-binding (squared and printed spine) and trimmed.
7. This entire process takes time, effort and money but the finished product houses outstanding poetry by poets who deserve our best effort.

4. You've Got The Wrong Journal

Our last reading yielded many surprises. Most of them were pleasant ... but others were more difficult to handle with tact and aplomb. Those were the wonderful poems whose only flaw, to a magazine designed for a broad audience, was that they lapsed into sexually graphic descriptions or unsuitable language that was not necessary to the tone of the poem. The poems that were not good, and fell into that category, were not difficult to handle. But a great poem whose obscene language or momentary lascivious

bent has created real concern on many occasions. We have published both when they have really been outstanding. We have lost a couple of readers by doing so. In general, we prefer great poems that do not use blasphemy, obscenity or sexually explicit reference. We usually err on the side of good taste. The blatant stuff is for other venues. Don't send it to us.

5. How To Make Your Own Chapbook

Everyone is not a professional poet ... but most poets love to see their poems in a book ... and would love to give this book to their friends and family. If you would like to make your own chapbook, you do not need a vanity press. You can, with a little effort, do the job yourself. Here are some suggestions to help:

1. Neatly and consistently type your poems (decide the size of your book) — Use the same type font throughout!
2. Get some graph boards (they have blue grids that do not show when xeroxed).
3. Lay out the poems using the graph to make top and bottom and side margins even — hot wax is good, but glue sticks will do.
4. Get a sheet of rub-on numbers for your page numbers (most programs will do this for you, i.e. Pagemaker).
5. If you lay it out on 8 1/2 x 11 to fold in half, it will be chapbook size and save you xerox \$.
6. Do your book in 4 page increments (total number of pages divisible by 4)
7. When you are ready, take your boards to a friend with a copier or to PaperCutter/Kinko's and print.
8. Select a nice graphic (clip art) or draw or photograph your cover. Put it on heavier stock.
9. Find someone with an industrial strength stapler. Fold and staple.
10. For \$3-5 each, you have a 36 page chapbook to share with poet friends and family.

6. Poetry Collections — Unifying Theme or Random Selections?

Most poets, if only in the privacy of their thoughts, have a “collection” of poems. Some are called “Selected Poems” or “Collected Poems” often with the years they were penned used as a divider. We are seeing a trend in collections centered around a theme. Within the Comstock Writers' Group, members have the following collections in various stages of publication:

Jenny MacPherson's “Another Use For Husbands” and “Cute & Perky & Slim & Sexy: A Poet's Guide To the Personal Ads”, Peggy Sperber Flanders “The Divorce Papers” and Kathleen Bryce Niles' “Ashes From A Long Dead Fire: A History of the Collins Block Fire”, “Parochial Habits”, and “A Catechism of Regret” all are theme-based collections. We believe that thematic collections are stronger and more universally appealing but that is a matter of taste.

7. Where Are The Ethnic Poets?

As we read dozens of poetry magazines, we have to express our disappointment in not seeing any measurable number of poems by ethnic poets. Sadly, we ask whether they are not sending to traditional magazines in favor of those journals which publish exclusively the work of minority poets. Is it because their work is not middle-of-the-road or strong in language or theme? We do not have the answers but would like to know your thoughts.

Part VI. DOO WAH DITTY!

1. ...; ...!!!! ...;—-;, ETC.

We hope that when you are in a bind about what to do and pull out your ellipsis or dash that you know what it is used for other than getting out of an uncomfortable grammatical jam ... get the drift — hope so; whatever!!!

2. Greeting Card Verse

Periodically, we receive poetry from poets and we want to tell them that their verse would sell a million, if written inside a beautiful card. However, greeting card verse has somehow been relegated to just above doggeral.

While we do not use it in The Comstock Review, there isn't one of us who hasn't spent countless hours searching the card racks for exactly what is in front of us as a submission. How can we say, "We love this just for what it is" and not be held in contempt for destroying a poet's vision? How can we say, "If we had the skill to write like this, there would be no blank cards safe from our verse?"

When anything takes on a pejorative connotation such as "greeting card verse." it makes it difficult to communicate our appreciation for the form without denigrating the poet. There's \$ to be made in the field, and if you think you can do it, check into it.

3. There's More To Trim Than The Trees

One of the most common complaints we have regarding the poetry submissions which come our way is the excess baggage they carry along, all those little adjectives and adverbs which do wonders in describing things in prose but which do nothing to help the development of a poem.

We find ourselves constantly telling poets that they need to trim their poems; sometimes, especially if we sense this is a beginning poet, we will show him/her what we mean by "trimming" one of the verses of a submitted poem, usually one of theirs which has possibilities. We can imagine their dismay at not seeing some of the phrases which they spent hours thinking up, wondering how some heartless creature could discard their beautifully worded phrases and lay the bones of the poem so indecently bare. Or they may find whole stanzas eliminated because they indulged in a little discourse or philosophizing somewhere in the middle, telling the reader instead of continuing to show him/her. Many an otherwise good poem has been returned for this reason. Luckily, our poets generally listen to our suggestions for improving a piece and often the poem returns, far superior in its new casting.

It is important to remember one distinction between prose and poetry. Prose is expanded language while poetry is compressed language. Adjectives and adverbs must give way to metaphor and simile. It is the idea which must be stunning, not just the words in which it is clothed.

Sometimes we are all in danger of forgetting that words do not the poem make. Before a poem is anywhere near complete, the poet should read through it and remove all qualifiers to see which ones are not germane.

Chances are, most of those adjectives will stay out once s/he sees the uncluttered poem and revision may take the poem in a slightly different and more unique direction than the poet had originally planned.

4. Bad Poems & Great Last Lines

Take a cruise through your collection ... without a doubt you will find one or more poems whose only life depends upon a great last line ... a hook, or dynamite conclusion, a twist. But can one line save the entire poem? Not usually! Get that poem out and throw everything except that brilliant last line in the revolving file and write a poem worthy of the line saved. If you wrote that line, there's more greatness in you ... dig down and find it today.

5. Ontogeny Recapitulates Phylogeny

In ninth grade General Science, the only thing I learned was this phrase. Isn't it magnificent? Why did it stick in my memory ... not the theory, not the concept ... just those three wonderful words? Easy. At age thirteen, it was very neat to be able to run three big words together and watch the reaction of others. As poets, we have the capacity to do that in our work. Sadly, many poets do just that.

We do not, by any means, imply that we are seeking monosyllabic grunts.

We want words that work. However, as editors, we refuse to read poems that require myriad forays into Webster's. If we cannot grasp it, it isn't going in CR. Call us picky but don't call us Thesaurus.

6. Beautiful Words That Say Nothing

We read an absolutely lovely collection of words recently. And we read it again and again. We loved it but what did it say? In truth, nothing at all. We couldn't justify printing it though there would be those to argue the point. What do you say to the poet? What do you say to yourself who feels betrayed by a glib poet with a magnificent gift for sound and no gift for sense? You say, if I could have done that in college, I'd be a Ph.D. in B.S. today. Develop your sense and your sound will make you great.

7. Titles ... Why They Make A Difference

Titles are one of the toughest parts of writing a poem, mainly because they are much more important than many people credit. A weak title weakens the entire piece. A title grabbed from an interior line doesn't add to a poem. No title gives you one less opportunity to communicate (and looks awful on the printed page). A pretentious or silly title demeans the piece. Soooo, when you think your poem is finished start to look very carefully at its title. An oversight here may mean the poem won't be accepted ... a coup here may mean a less than terrific poem has just been elevated and will be accepted for publication.

8. Are You In Adjectival Overdrive?

We read a few poems submitted recently and saw a very promising poet drowning in adjectives and metaphors. There are times when poets jam their work with so much wonderful imagery that the reader just wallows. Some poems should be broken out into several pieces.

Look at your work. Do you have too many metaphors in a poem? Are they climbing over each other in an attempt to be seen (heard). Do you have more adjectives than nouns? Is your language so rich, your reader gains weight?

Simple is good sometimes.

9. What's Wrong With English?

We think it is a perfectly acceptable language. Why, then, do so many so-called poets feel they can abuse the language? STOP ... don't cry "creative" writing. We are 100% in favor of using language to its utmost. What we reject is the absurd notion that a "poet" is anyone who puts words down in the shape of a poem without regard for the principles of English.

We do not publish people who, for whatever reason, elect to use no punctuation until, say, the end of the poem and throw in a period. We publish fine poetry only when the lack of punctuation is consistent. Two stanzas of no commas, periods or any other sign of punctuation followed by a punctuated stanza is just silly. We, ain't? interested! no how,

10. Religious Zealots

No one would argue that the spiritual dimension is an important aspect of our lives; most people have been raised in a traditional faith and have either retained their early belief systems, somewhat modified and developed as they themselves have developed, or have embraced a faith more congruent with their adult values. There are also many adults who, while not denying their spiritual needs, satisfy them in nontraditional

ways, not subscribing to any particular code of belief or set of rituals. Poetry is often a celebration of the spiritual; who has ever equaled the Psalms?

Unfortunately, belief in the infinite does not guarantee a good poem. The same care for craftsmanship, originality, fine imagery and superb language usage is as necessary in religious poetry as in any other subject matter. Everyone can write God love letters, but no magazine is required to publish them. Be assured, we, at The Comstock Review want to see fine poetry dealing with the spiritual dimension of our lives, but poems dealing with “what a nice day God made ...” just will not make it in top literary journals.

We do get many poems with a religious theme but rarely an excellent poem on a universal theological theme. The ones we see are often paeans to God, Christ or love as a beatific wonder. They remind us of the litanies from the Baltimore catechisms. They are heartfelt, sincere and lovely for the genre. However, they fail to meet the standards set for poetry in secular journals. It is very tricky to write on a religious theme without that preachy, sermonette quality that detracts from the purpose. We are never adverse to poetry with spiritual themes. We just have difficulty with proselytizing and poor imagery.

Part VII. The Pro Circuit

1. Will You Ever Be Poet Laureate?

If you have reached your 40's and have not devoted the last twenty years of your life to getting a name by attending classes, being mentored by a “biggie,” attending scores of workshops and summer programs throughout the country, 99% of you can kiss the Poet Laureate job bye-bye. It doesn't happen because you are a great poet. It doesn't happen by osmosis. It happens because of a planned course of action ... an obsession, in most instances. You should have the desire to write great poetry. We all do. However, most great poets never become well-known poets. And, if you will pull out one of your modern American poetry anthologies, you will readily note that the quality of many poems probably does not exceed your finest stuff. So, unless you are prepared to change your entire lifestyle so that someone knows your name when you are dead, give up on the “let's get famous” stuff and settle down to the writing of great poetry.

2. What It Takes To Go Pro ... Could You Do It?

We were struck, when watching the PBS Poetry Series, by the absolute single-minded pursuit of fame that characterized Robert Frost. Frost sold his home, left his work, and took his wife and many children to Europe in search of making a name for himself as a poet. They suffered hardships and dedicated themselves only to this goal. After RF made a success in England, he return to the United States with credentials and the rest, as they say, is Poetry History.

Are you ready to be a professional poet? Very few of you will make much money or become famous. Most of you will have to be content to go in one of two directions. First, you could be an academic ... make your livelihood by teaching a few college poetry classes and write on the side. Or, you could be peripatetic — wandering from workshop to workshop, grant to grant, trying to eke out a living and writing on the side. The field is not what it was in years gone by. Don't give up the day job just yet.

3. Connections

Recently, one of our members shared a copy of a new magazine. It was a revelation. Most of the poetry was written by top of the line name poets. Even though much of the poetry wasn't the greatest, the poets ...

Wow, the poets! How could this be? It didn't take long to figure it out. One of the workshop regulars decided to start up a magazine. By using the contacts from the poetry workshops around the country, s/he was able to write or call and get some tremendous support for Vol.1, No. 1. We were, of course, a tad jealous until we read our latest volume.

We realized what wonderful names our poets have and how we love to see those unfamous but most welcome names in our postbox. We have the quality because it was built from scratch not because we knew someone.

Our pride is not in one issue. It is in all of them ... about twenty five by now.

4. Should Poets Be Paid?

We had a poet chasten us a few year back about free readings and giving our services to the community. The admonition was that poets are professionals who should be paid for their efforts. Why did that stick in our poetic craw? Simple. This is a world in which there is far too little respect for poets and poetry and anything that limits or restricts our building positive bridges between poets and their potential audience is not only selfish, but also self-defeating.

We are not stupid! We'd like to make a buck from the myriad hours devoted to The Comstock Review and Poetpourri, Jr. However, if we get into personal aggrandizement our financial rewards will be meager and our dreams for what poetry could mean to the "masses" will be dead. While it would be nice to live in a world where we could be paid ... until this community, any community recognizes the intrinsic value of poetry, it is our obligation to do whatever it takes to create an atmosphere wherein poets can someday be financially rewarded for their efforts.

Part VIII. Humor

1. Actual Chinese Rejection Slip

“We have read your manuscript with boundless delight. If we were to publish your paper, it would be impossible for us to publish any work of a lower standard. And as it is unthinkable that, in the next thousand years, we shall see its equal, we are, to our regret, compelled to return your divine composition, and to beg you a thousand times to overlook our short sight and timidity.”

Part IX. Additional Articles by Other Poets

A note from the Handbook writer:

While we all enjoy the sound of our own voices, as conscientious editors it is incumbent upon us to make room for other voices. This space is provided for poets and readers of Comstock Review to make contributions. If we decide to use your work, we will feature it on this page. If not, our web “mistress,” Peggy Sperber Flanders, will get back to you. [Contact us now.](#)

— Kathleen Bryce Niles, Editor Emerita

Articles are added on the pages which follow, with the newest listed first.

Lost In The Woods

by Angelo Giambra, Largo, FL added 8/08

Beware the pitfalls of the vaunted online “Poetry Workshops”. While workshops can be a valuable tool for a starting poet, it’s easy to get waylaid, a King’s messenger caught in the forest by Robin Hood’s Merry Men. You start to really like this roisterous bunch, their carefree bandying out here in the woods away from the world. You forget the message you were sent to deliver.

The idea of the poetry workshop is certainly worthy. Here, among your peers, you can hone your craft, sharpen your skills, getting immediate feedback from other poets on where your poems have missed their mark, muddled the metaphor. But unless you continually remind yourself why you’re here, it’s easy to discover you’ve gotten lost in the woods, become a member of the merry band.

Online workshops allow a venue in which a poet can upload a poem written just minutes ago and post it where other poets can read it. In just seconds, there’s your sestina, on the screen for anyone who might come along and stumble upon it. It’s like freeze-dried publication. Add water and you’re an author.

It’s easy to get caught up in this aspect of online workshops. All the muss and fuss of submitting poems, waiting months for some anonymous editor to say “No thanks”, bypassed. The instant gratification of seeing your work out there in the world, the eyes of other poets dripping with tears of joy at the profound beauty of your words.

The ease of it can make you lazy. I’ve seen submissions on online workshops accompanied by comment like: “I just wrote this a few minutes ago. See what you think.” As if we could spray paint poems. Whoosh, here’s a new batch, how do you like ‘em?”

Online workshop usually require an author to critique a certain number of poems before being entitled to upload. There’s a limit, say fifty words or more. You end up with a lot of folks counting words, offering you meaty gems like, “Nice poem. I liked it a lot.” You can almost hear them counting, their final word right at fifty one. We don’t like to admit it, but we end up doing it ourselves. We’re so eager to get that new poem uploaded, show them all up, but we’ve got to do those dratted critiques. Feels too much like school, homework due tomorrow morning.

Sadly, a lot of what you read isn’t all that good. Face it, the stuff just came into the world moments ago, like babies still coated in all that afterbirth. They’re not as pretty as they’ll be when they have a chance to grow, take shape, learn who they are, unique little beings alive in the world.

If what you’re constantly reading isn’t the best poetry you can find, what are the odds you’ll be writing that bit of Frostian wisdom, your poem shining like an apple after apple-picking? What I’m saying is this. Workshops are a great place to get opinions about your work, to get advice from other writers about your strengths, your weaknesses. Just don’t get lost in the forest. After you’ve been there a while, tell the merry men it’s time to move on.

Creative Cowardice

by Diana Anhalt 02/06/07

Some poets, the brave ones, throw themselves in front of their writing and confront a poem head on, knowing exactly what needs to be done. They grab it by the horns, wrestle it to the ground and, when successful, tame the beast so it will follow them home like Mary's little lamb. Then there are the rest of us. I, for example, approach a poem obliquely, teasing, cajoling, flirting with it, without the faintest idea of what I'm supposed to do should it succumb. (Spaniards have a term for this, *capotear*, which means to waggle a bullfighter's cape in front of the bull long enough to tire it out and distract it from what's really going on.)

Each poet approaches the beast according to his or her nature. (In referring to poetry as a beast, I do so because no literary form is more challenging, more terrifying.) Words are potentially lethal. They bolt away, disappear, then attack you from behind.

Now, some poets speak of divine inspiration or writing in a trance-like state. I don't doubt this is true for others and only wish it were true for me, but mine is essentially a case of—to a paraphrase an unknown poet—'more perspiration, than inspiration.' I will stumble across a phrase or an image—I think of it as something found, like a marble or a rainbow in a puddle— and without knowing why, will be moved to write about it.

But in the end, words are all you've got. You do not have Technicolor, stereophonic sound or animation, but you do have rhythm, rhyme, cadence, symbolism, imagery, the pattern on the page—all those techniques which affect the sound, sight and meaning of a poem. And—miracle of miracles— when you place all the right words in all the right places you may actually convey meaning and evoke sensations so succinctly and effectively a bulb in your reader's brain will flash on and off, and for an instant, she will grasp some elusive truth. (Better yet, you may grasp some elusive truth—about yourself, when you're honest— although honesty alone won't make a great poem.)

In the end, I find the hardest thing about taming words and getting them to perform for me is believing in myself long enough to see the task through. After all, to assume the role of poet-hood is tantamount to declaring, "Oh, I position the stars in the sky, demolish superstition, pull characters onto the page and shoot them dead. You know, that kind of thing," because, let's face it, there is nothing a poet doesn't do: We recreate universes and ourselves out of thin air and throw words up into the void of empty space—but not just any words and not just any space. And that is nothing short of miraculous. Or, as poet Mary Oliver wrote when asked to describe her work: "... glory is my work."