

Authenticity of voice

Poets often begin by writing from their own experiences. While memories and personal philosophy on life can yield an infinite supply of inspiration, at some point every poet needs to learn to write about things OUTSIDE of their experience. Poetic license can be evoked for artistic reasons, but you should always try to be authentic when writing about someone else's experiences. Writers need to have the freedom to write from perspectives not their own, but at the same time they bear the responsibility of being careful not to exploit someone else's experience. A superficial dip into somebody else's culture that relies on stereotypical assumptions, for instance, can be highly insulting. Here are three steps for writing authentically:

Step 1: Imagine yourself in the role – pretend that you are the character you're writing about. Try to think in terms of the character you're adopting as being as complex and layered as you are. What would you feel or do if the events you're writing about happened to you? Imagine that the reactions of the character you're writing about would be as complex and variable as your own. Doing so will help you write more realistically and avoid melodrama and hollywoodism.

Step 2: Imagine THEM in themselves – in reality, you and your character are not the same, which is why you are writing outside your experience. Think of the differences between you and your character, what each of you has experienced, how you think and act differently, and then think about how your character really would react if placed in a situation. Remember, never base a character on convenience in your poem (i.e. don't create a mobster character just because you want someone to be shot.) Always think of a real human being, not someone two-dimensional.

Step 3: Research – taking the time to find out the reality of the experiences of people other than yourself will help you better imagine characters who are authentic. If you are writing about real people or real events, it is always important to do research. Make sure you have your facts straight, names right, and whatever details are important to your poem accurate. Even if your poem is about fictional events, it is often useful to research people in similar circumstances so the voices you create ring true and full.

You can research a lot over the internet, but whenever possible, you might consider primary sources as well. Talk to the waitress in the restaurant if you want to write about her, interview your grandmother about what it was like in 1950 in Alabama and listen to the sound of her language as well as the content. Then you'll be able to write with authentic language as well. The most important element of authenticity is always to keep your eye on the humanity of other people – do whatever you can to avoid portraying them as cardboard stereotypes.