

# Poetic Methods that Move Prospects

By: Frankie Frontis

**P**oets have developed and sharpened some of the finest tools a copywriter will ever need to produce lively, resounding and memorable ad copy. Some tools, namely rhyme and alliteration, are used regularly by most copywriters. However, only a comparative few of them have mastered poetic devices sufficiently to understand how they work to influence readers.

Thanks for the few! Joy Blair, a copywriter for *Good Advertising* in Memphis, Tennessee is one of them. In addition to writing advertising copy, she also writes poetry. Blair has put her pen to the severest of tests, writing Haiku, a very compact, precise and powerful Japanese form of poetry. Some of her work has been published in *Modern Haiku*.

Blair describes both poetry and ad copy as very disciplined uses of the language, having concise forms and much precision in choice of words. "Poetry," however, says Blair, "is a lot more challenging than ad copy." It is more precise and, unlike advertising copy, places a stronger emphasis on the interpretation of facts over the mere reporting of them. "Writing poetry is more involved and a lot more fun," says Blair. "You have to put more of yourself and your emotions into it."

If so much goes into the language of poetry, it would seem only reasonable that quite a bit would come out of it as well. Blair agrees with this notion. "Poetry," she says, "has given me an awareness and appreciation of the subtleties of the language."

This feel for the "subtleties of the language," suggests Blair, works to enhance her advertising copy in a number of interesting ways:

**A) Rhythm.** As a key element in most poetry, rhythm is naturally appreciated by nearly all poets as well as many copywriters, Blair, among them. Rhythm in advertising copy, she contends, catches the reader's eyes and ears and complements the message of the copy. Notice how these two examples of advertising copy use rhythm to accomplish these goals:

1. Magically slim. Small, sleek and very beautiful. Quartz, in 14 Karat gold. The 5.5 Ligne, by Movado (Movado-elegant watches).

2. Roughing. High Sticking. Tripping. Slashing.... The perfect skills for a *Sporting News* sales rep. (Sporting News)

Another poet, Janet Burroway, author of *Writing Poems*, speaks of how rhythm can be used to enforce what's being said. "This is especially true," she says, "when the rhythm of a sentence itself imitates the action of what's being described." The following piece of copy illustrates Burroway's point.

Running with the wind to great ports o'call  
in the exotic Caribbean. For old salts' and  
landlubbers; join intimate fun loving ship-  
mates for 'barefoot' adventure under white sails.  
(Windjammer Barefoot Cruises)

The copy is about ocean line cruising and its movement sails smoothly from beginning to end.

As a message enforcer, rhythm then can be of much benefit to ad copy, a form strives to communicate its point rather quickly. Blair, however, suggests that we not give undo attention to rhythm. "It comes naturally," she says. "All good writing has rhythm."

**B) Rhyme.** Though used much more extensively in poetry, rhyming words still have a role in advertising copy. Blair says that rhyme is emphasized more in the copy of lyrics and jingles, copy which is more often heard than read. (This seems only appropriate, given the musical and pleasing sounds of rhyming words. Note the jingle-like quality of these slogans:

1. "When it says Ore-Ida, It's All-Righta" (Ore-Ida potatoes).
2. "Within is as different from other Multivitamins as women are different from men (Within).
3. "Trident is Good to Chew, and Fights Cavities, Too" (Trident chewing gum).
4. "Put your Program on Ice with the Sifto Salt Price" (Sifto Salt).

**C) Alliteration.** The repetition of initial consonants is used more often than rhyme in regular copy, says Blair. She believes that alliteration can add a certain attractiveness to advertising copy. Note the following examples:

1. "The Tape that Lasts as Long as The Legend" (Memorex).
2. "Boating's Best Values Just Got Better" (Master Boats).
3. "The smell of Giotti Cologne is wild, yet controlled—like a Fistfull of Fury" (Giotti Cologne).

Blair's ear for alliteration is also shared by Laurence Perrine, author of *Sound and Sense*. Perrine says that alliteration adds a sense of impressiveness to language. For this reason, alliterative clichés have become quite popular.

Blair stresses that alliteration should be used thoughtfully. "Don't overuse it," She cautions. "Too much of it draws attention to the language itself instead of the message."

Examples of the overuse of alliteration:

1. Boating's Best Buys Might Be Better (invention).
2. The Look That lasts as Long as The Legend (invention).

**D) Onomatopoeia.** Sometimes, both the language and the message may blend together as one in advertising copy. This is especially the case in the use of onomatopoeia, a poetic method which uses words that imitate sound.

Blair says that she recently created the copy for a TV ad which makes use of onomatopoeia. The ad is for a local supermarket. It begins with a view of the meat section of the store, then shows close-up spots of various meats in that area. While the close-ups are showing, a voice-over can be heard saying, "STEAKSZZZZZZZ..."—an onomatopoeia adds more quality to the message."

Other examples of onomatopoeia:

1. Listen to the Quiet rmmmp-rmmmp of whole grain oats being ground (Cheerios).

2. If your cooling fan goes hummmmmmmmm... Don't say shhhhhh. Switch to Quietronics—The silent folks (Quietronics).

Not a mystic, but a poetry writer and an ad copyist, Blair yet believes that some things about language run profoundly deep. This is revealed when she is asked to explain a linguistic experiment involving Chinese first graders.

**Experiment:** An instructor drew figures of two men on a blackboard. One was a skinny man; the other, a fat man. The instructor then told the first graders that one figure was named "Pim" and the other "Pum" and asked them to try guessing who was who. Eighty-five percent of the kids identified "Pim" as the skinny figure and "Pum" as the fat one.

85% of the kids were correct in their guesses according to linguists Roman Jakobson and Linda Waugh in their book *The Sound and Shape of Language*.

Are such results a matter of mere luck or chance? Blair doesn't think so. She believes that the phenomenon illustrated above is shared by all. "It's part of our collective unconsciousness," she says. "Words are symbols that communicate certain things to people."

**E) Phonetic Symbolism** is the term used by poetry critics John and Edith Rylander in describing the association between a word's speech sound and its semantic significance—what the word means. In their book, *What's In a Poem*, the authors say speech sounds are capable of suggesting "nonacoustic meanings," such as feeling soft size, brightness and darkness, solemnity or delight, beauty or ugliness, etc. For example, they say, given the two nonsense syllables "keek" and "mool," if ten people were told one word meant a small, sharp rock and the other a large, soft pillow, nine of the ten, they say, would associate "keek" with the rock and "mool" with the pillow.


The Rylanders contend that high-pitched, frontal vowels such as "a" in *act* and "i" in *wit* suggest smallness, lightness, quickness, delicacy, etc. Accordingly, low-pitched, back vowels, such as "o" in *old* and "u" in *ugly* are associated with things that are large, heavy, slow, rugged, etc. The consonants "b/p," "d/t," "g(hard)/K," and "c" (hard) symbolize power and force, while softer sounding consonants such as "j" and "m" are associated with things having soft or mild qualities. Phonetic symbolism, say the Rylanders shows up frequently in poetic works, whether through a conscious awareness of it or not.

Conscious of it or not, copywriters may, too, sometimes make use of phonetic symbolism, especially when they participate in the naming of products. The list below

reveals how the sound of product names suggests certain qualities about the products themselves.

- I. Allara (feminine cosmetics)
- Almay (feminine cosmetics)
- Amolin (deodorant, woman's)
- Eve (woman's fragrance)
- Inning (woman's perfume)
- II. Brut (men's cologne)
- Gambler (men's cologne)
- Gunk (engine cleaner)
- Gook (strong adhesive)
- Thor (car tires)

List one consists of products with gentle qualities, whose names are composed mostly of high pitched frontal vowels and soft consonants. List two contains products with tough, rugged qualities whose names are constructed from a large percentage of low-pitched, back vowels and harsh sounding consonants (plosives).

Poetry aims to enforce meaning and message through special use of the language. As a writer of poetry, familiar with the "subtleties of the language," Blair is in an excellent position to enforce the meaning and message of her ad copy. By now, she has become a real pro at doing this. "These things come naturally," she says. "I don't have to sit down and stop to think about doing them." 

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