

The Snapshot Poem

Sometimes poets do their best work when they show us some everyday person, event, place, or object in such vivid detail that we really see it for the first time and perhaps appreciate it in a new way. Such poems capture a candid closeup of a narrow subject much as a photographer does in a snapshot or an artist in a quick sketch of a dog, a fishing boat, or an infant's hand.

To write a snapshot poem, 1) take a mental picture of a person, place, or thing, 2) jot down in no particular order all of the details of its physical appearance; 3) pick the one dominant feature that you want to emphasize; and 4) write down the subject's purpose or function in life—that aspect of its being that would leave a void in the universe if it no longer existed. These are the raw materials of your poem; putting them together is the artistic or poetic part of the process. One way to shape them into a snapshot is to begin with a noun phrase, followed by two verb phrases and one adjective phrase, and finished off with an independent clause that sums up the description.

My Girlfriend's Eyes

Blue-green orbs full of mischief and mirth
Squinting in the light of my admiration
Needlessly decorated with mascara and eye shadow
Beautiful without makeup, captivating without care
She hears my compliments and modestly rolls her eyes.

Suicide on the Sidewalk

A string of shiny, brown flesh,
Writhing in the heat of a July day,
Undulating on the concrete griddle,
Brittle and desiccated in only a few minutes,
He dies just inches from the moist soil of his earthworm home.

A Pride of Kittens

A box full of fur with five sets of eyes, (noun phrase)
Crying plaintively from under the porch, (verb phrase)
Seeking their supper with mouths open wide, (verb phrase)
Black and white and black with white stockings (adjective phrase)
Grandma's tabby sets the table and purrs proudly. (independent clause)

For a more detailed "picture" of the subject, add more modifying phrases. The following example doubles the number of each type of modifier: two noun phrases, two verb phrases, and two adjective phrases.

A Pride of Kittens (Expanded Version)

A box full of fur with five sets of eyes, (noun phrase)
The whole kit'n caboodle of tiny felines, (noun phrase)
Crying plaintively from under the porch, (verb phrase)
Seeking their supper with mouths open wide, (verb phrase)
Black and white and black with white stockings, (adjective phrase)
Cute and cuddly but bristling with sharp teeth and claws, (adjective phrase)
Grandma's tabby sets the table and purrs proudly. (independent clause)

Topics for Snapshot Poems

a hungry mockingbird perched nearby as I mow the lawn
my boyfriend's/girlfriend's smile
the ceramic nativity scene on Grandma's fireplace mantle at Christmas
a football uniform at the end of a rough game
insect carnage on the windshield of my car
a child's face on the first day of school
the headstone of a Civil War soldier in a rustic cemetery
a backyard garden
a pile of rubbish left behind by campers who don't care
a stained-glass window lit by the morning sun
an ant on the slippery slope of an ant lion's lair ("Doodle Bug, Doodle Bug")
a jack-o-lantern two weeks after Halloween
my grandfather's hands
an old photo album
a curious hummingbird hovering at the window
my sister's wedding dress
the view from my bedroom window
tattoo on a stranger's biceps
my dad's work boots
a spider web in the rose bush
my pickup truck after a ride in the mud
Mom's jewelry box
an open Bible on the communion table at church
Dad's old Lazy Boy recliner
my horse looking at me from the stable window
the pond on a cold January morning
a steak sizzling on the grill
bumper stickers on a 1980 Chevy
a Razorback fan's mailbox
my English teacher's desk
graffitti on the side of a freight train
the first signs of spring in my neighborhood
the gym after a pep rally
a glass of ice tea on a hot summer day
an old couch abandoned on the curb
my little brother's birthday cake
a squirrel raiding the bird feeder
the front yard during a yard sale
fog rising from the river on a crisp autumn morning
the hallway between classes
a shelf in Grandma's pantry with canned vegetables, jams and jellies, etc.
a swimming pool on a hot day
the fans at a soccer game
a vacation memory
my first car
a strange object
the table set for Thanksgiving dinner