How to Submit Poetry FAQs

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What are typical submission guidelines for poetry?
Guidelines usually indicate what kind of poetry the editor or publisher is looking for, how many poems to submit, the length of the poem, whether to submit by regular mail or e-mail, payment, response times, and similar information. In addition, especially where contests are involved, the magazine or publisher may outline exactly how the manuscript should be prepared (for instance, whether to include a cover sheet, or whether the poet’s name should appear on the manuscript pages). Submission guidelines may appear in the magazine or on a Web site, or may be available for a self-addressed stamped envelope (SASE).

I want to submit some poems to a magazine. How should I prepare my manuscript?
Set your word-processor margins to one inch. At the top of the sheet, type your name, address, phone number, e-mail address, and line count in the right corner. Drop down about six lines and type the title of your poem, either centered on the page or flush with the left margin. (Titles may be initial-capped or in all capital letters.) Drop down two more lines, and begin your poem flush with the left margin; never center the lines of your poem in the middle of the page.

Most editors prefer poems to be single spaced, with double-spacing between stanzas. Type only one poem per page, even if your poem is very short. For poems longer than one page, type your name in the upper left corner of subsequent pages; on the next line, type the poem title, the page number, and either “continue stanza” or “begin new stanza,” depending on how your poem breaks between the pages.

How do I prepare my poems if I want to submit them by e-mail?
First, make sure the publication accepts e-mail submissions. Check guidelines, market listings, or the magazine’s Web site to see how the editor wants electronic submissions formatted. Many editors forbid attachments, and they may automatically delete any e-mail that arrives with
an attachment. For those editors, paste your poems into the body of the e-mail. For editors who do not mind attachments, format your document the same as you would if you were submitting it by regular mail. If you’re including a cover letter, you can insert it at the beginning of your e-mail, whether you’re pasting poems into the body of your message or attaching a document.

Take note of any special requirements an editor may have regarding e-mail submissions, such as whether to paste only one poem at a time in a message, whether an attachment should be in Word or another format, and what to put in the subject line. (Editors use the subject line to screen for spam and to direct the submission to the appropriate departmental editor; they can be very picky about what appears there.)

A growing number of magazine Web sites provide online contact forms for electronic queries as well as submissions. Depending on the form, you can paste your poem(s) into a field or load your manuscript from your hard drive. Click a button and your work is submitted.

**How do I figure the number of lines in my poem? Do I count the title and the spaces between stanzas? Do I also include a word count for my poem?**

The standard method is to count only lines of text in a poem and to not include the title or the spaces between stanzas. Sometimes magazine guidelines state to include spaces between stanzas, but this doesn’t happen often. However, if magazine or contest guidelines mention it specifically, be sure to include spaces in your line count. You don’t need to provide a word count for your poem unless guidelines ask for it.

**How many poems should I submit to a magazine at one time?**

It’s best to follow a magazine’s guidelines, but an average number is three to five poems per submission. More than five poems overloads the editor, but less than three doesn’t really give the editor a sense of your abilities or a wide enough selection of poems from which to choose.

**Do I need to include a cover letter with the poems I submit to a magazine?**

There was a time when a cover letter wasn’t expected with a poetry submission. However, many modern editors appreciate the personal touch of a cover letter. Such a letter shouldn’t be long—it’s simply a polite introduction of yourself and your work. List the poems you’re submitting, and
briefly mention something about yourself (publishing credits are fine if you keep them short). It’s also nice to comment on the magazine in some way so the editor knows you’re familiar with the publication. Editors often indicate their preferences regarding cover letters in submission guidelines and market listings.

Is it OK to submit my poetry to more than one magazine or journal at the same time?
For some editors, simultaneous submissions are fine; for others, they’re taboo. Check submission guidelines or market listings. If you submit the same poems to more than one publication at a time, keep careful records to avoid confusion. If a poem is accepted by one publication, you must notify the other editors that the poem is no longer available for consideration. Failure to do so is unprofessional and discourteous and can be harmful to future poet/editor relationships.

When is a poem considered “previously published”? If I post one of my poems on a Web site, is that the same as publishing it? Is the poem considered published if I print it in a wedding program that’s distributed to a limited number of people?
If your poem has appeared in print for public viewing—in a magazine or journal, anthology, postcard, or broadside—it’s considered published. (A broadside is like a poster with a poem on it.) Your work is also considered published if it appears in a collection such as a chapbook, even if you self-publish the chapbook and distribute it only to friends and family.

In theory, publishing also includes printing your poem in a program for a private ceremony or event, such as a wedding, funeral, or anniversary. However, some editors may not be as strict about this type of publishing. If you want to submit a poem you’ve published in this way to a magazine, let the editor know in your cover letter so she can decide up front whether the previous publication matters. To be safe, don’t submit a poem you’ve printed in a program or similar publication to a contest when the guidelines stipulate you must send an unpublished entry.

Opinions differ as to whether posting a poem on a Web site constitutes publishing it. For instance, some experts say if you post your poem to a forum where others can offer criticism, it doesn’t count as publication, especially if the forum requires membership to participate. On the other hand, if you post your poem specifically to be read and enjoyed by an online audience (even on your own Web site), or if you have a poem
accepted by an online journal, you should consider the poem published.

My poem won a prize in a competition. I received a cash award, but the poem wasn’t published in any way. Is the poem still considered unpublished?
Yes, as long as your poem doesn’t appear in print, it remains unpublished. It wouldn’t hurt to mention the award in your cover letter if you submit the poem to a magazine, just to let the editor know the poem has already won some acknowledgment and might be worth extra attention.

When editors say they’ll consider traditional forms of poetry, what do they mean?
They mean they’ll consider poetry other than contemporary free verse, including poetry that rhymes or adheres to a fixed form. Traditional fixed forms include sonnets, villanelles, terza rima, Japanese haiku, ghazals, and American cinquain. The term traditional may mean different things to different editors, so it’s best to study a particular publication before submitting work.

In market listings, many editors say they don’t want greeting card poetry. What does this mean?
When editors speak of greeting card poetry, they’re referring to poetry that has more in common with greeting card verse than serious poetry. Some of the characteristics of greeting card poetry include cliché topics, high sentimentality, sing-song rhythms, and predictable rhyme words and patterns.