WHY POETS NEED PLATFORMS

BY SAGE COHEN

If you want your poetry to be read, people need to know who you are, what you write, and where to find it. A viable platform can take you there. The good news is that anyone who wants to establish a poetry platform can take the necessary steps to build one over time. No matter what your level of writing, publishing and social media savvy, you can have more fun and enjoy more success as you take small steps over time to cultivate your poetry platform. This article will tell you how.

What a platform is
Platform is the turf you name and claim as your area of writing expertise, and it’s everything you do to make that expertise visible. Just as a thesis is the foundation of a term paper around which its argument is built, a platform is an organizing principle around which a poet’s many expressions of work revolve. A platform says to both the poet and the world, “I am an expert in [fill in the blanks with your specialty]!”

Platform is both the destination and the path. Think of your platform as your portfolio of accomplishments (publications, leadership roles, Web presence, public appearances, classes) that demonstrate your authority on a given topic. You build it as you go. It keeps you moving forward, tells you where forward is, and is the measure against which you decide if you’re getting there.

How a platform can help you
Every poet can benefit from having a platform—even you. Following are the primary advantages of platform consciousness:

• **POETIC PROWESS.** The more focused you are on taking your poetry forward, the more likely you will stay engaged in honing your craft, polishing drafts, completing poems and identifying organizing principles or themes in your growing collection of work.

• **PUBLISHING.** As you gain experience researching literary journals and sending out your work, your knowledge about the publications best suited (and most receptive) to your work will grow. Over time, you will
develop relationships, insight and a publishing track record that may significantly increase your chances of publishing (both individual poems and collections of poems).

- **FUNDRAISING.** Platform gives success an opportunity to snowball. With each publication, award, recognition or other notch on your belt, you’ll improve the odds of winning prizes and receiving grants and residencies if this is of interest to you.

- **AUTHORITY.** The more experience you have writing and publishing poetry (and potentially educating/exciting others about their own poetic process), the more you and others will trust in your authority.

- **OPPORTUNITY.** Once you have earned a reputable name among your poetic peers, requests for interviews, articles, speaking engagements, teaching, and more are likely to start rolling in. But more importantly, you will have paved the way to go after exactly what you want to create in your writing life, buoyed by the confidence that comes from proven expertise.

**Naming and claiming your platform**

Not sure what your platform is or what you want it to be? It may be as simple as “Poetry.” Or you could name what you believe your poetry is serving or striving for—if this is relevant to your work. Several years ago I named my platform “Writing the Life Poetic,” which quickly led to me authoring a nonfiction book by this name. One thing is certain: naming and claiming your area of expertise is going to give you a new sense of clarity and purpose. And you may be surprised at how quickly this clarity magnetizes new, relevant opportunities to you.

If you’d like to explore some of the possibilities for your poetic platform, the following exercise can help. I encourage you to map out your own Platform at a Glance using the example below as a starting place. It’s OK if you don’t have all the answers yet. Having a record of what you’re aspiring to today can help you learn about where you’re headed over time.

**Platform at a Glance**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PLATFORM BUILDING BLOCKS</th>
<th>INSIGHTS</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Theme, topic, genre, or area of expertise</td>
<td>Poetry for the people: with a goal of encouraging writers of all levels to write, read, and enjoy poetry.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
| Audience(s) you serve | • People who feel afraid, unwelcome, or unsure of how to start writing poetry.  
• People already writing poetry who want to write more, improve their craft, and have more fun.  
• Writers of all stripes wanting to invigorate their relationship with language.  
• People who love poetry and read poems. |
| --- | --- |
| Needs, desires, and preferences of your audience(s) | • People who feel afraid: Want to be invited in to poetry and assured that they are welcome/can do it.  
• People already writing poetry: Seeking tools, techniques, and tips to help improve their craft.  
• Writers of all stripes: Seeking a poetic lens through which to better appreciate and apply language in anything and everything they write.  
• People who love reading poems: Want to find poems that connect, move them, reveal something new. |
| Value you bring to each different type of reader | • People who feel afraid: Friendly encouragement and useful information.  
• People already writing poetry: Vast selection of tips, tools, strategies, and examples.  
• Writers of all stripes: A way into—and an enjoyable exploration of—the life poetic.  
• People who love reading poems: Poems I’ve written that they can embrace and enjoy. |
| PLATFORM NAME | WRITING THE LIFE POETIC |
| Why you are the ideal person to develop this platform over time | I have more than 20 years of experience cultivating a poetic way of life. I have an advanced degree in creative writing, a great deal of teaching experience, and a well-established career of writing and publishing poetry. |
Poetry matters—not just as a literary form, but as a way of life. I know from my own experience that a relationship with poetry can significantly expand a person’s sense of possibility, delight, and camaraderie with one’s self, universal human truths, and life itself. I want to make this gift available to anyone who’s interested in receiving it—as a teacher, author and poet.

Multiple paths to platform development
Publishing is certainly a significant way to establish and build your platform. But it is one of many. The good news is that while you’re waiting for your latest batch of poems to make a safe landing in just the right literary journal(s), there are many ways to grow your visibility as an expert in your field that are available to you right now. Let’s consider a few:

• **GO PUBLIC.** Read your work publicly as much as possible—either as a featured reader through a reading series or special event or at an open mic reading. (Open mics are far more widely accessible and encourage everyone to participate. They’re a good way to establish a community of writers if you attend and share work regularly. Over time, people will start to recognize you and your work. This will help you learn who your audience is and what it is about your poems that appeals to them.

• **TEACH WHAT YOU KNOW.** If you are passionate about poetry and have been schooling yourself in the craft (either through formal education or self-study), chances are good that you have something to offer other poets. From tenured academic positions to workshops you’ve organized and publicized yourself, you can choose the forum that fits your experience and temperament—then bring people together to learn about what’s possible in poetry.

• **GIVE SERVICE.** There are endless ways to give service to poets—both paid and volunteer. You could become active in an online community—or start your own—that writes or contemplates poetry. Depending on your level of expertise, you could offer coaching, consulting, or editing. If you enjoy working with people of certain ages or circumstances (such as students, prisoners, elders), you could find ways to share poetry in your community through religious, educational or civic organizations.
• **PUBLISH.** Most poets are likely to experience multiple types and stages of publishing throughout their career. Because publishing individual poems can be slow and full collections even slower, you may want to explore other ways of sharing your knowledge of poetry along the way by publishing how-to articles, interviews or essays about the life poetic. You can query print and online magazines, share free content with organizations or online communities that serve poets and writers and/or create Squidoo lenses on any number of craft or publishing issues. If self-publishing is of interest to you, you could write and sell instructional e-books or publish print-on-demand collections of your poems (only if you are not seeking “mainstream” publication for this work.)

• **GO SOCIAL.** Social media gives poets instantaneous access to a virtually limitless community that can help your poetry and your platform evolve over time. When you want to exchange ideas, inspiration, poems, encouragement, tips and resources, book reviews, links, or professional recommendations, you can do so using any number of social media outlets. Facebook, Twitter, GoodReads and LinkedIn are just a few of the most popular places to do so. Choose one or two online forums in which to start; spend some time investigating how others are using these; decide what kind of information exchange best reflects your platform; and then pace yourself as you become a relevant contributor to the online conversation.

• **BECOME YOUR OWN MEDIA CHANNEL.** With a wide range of simple and inexpensive interactive media available today, you have numerous options for getting your message out. First, consider your platform aspirations. Then, decide what kind of information you’d like to share—and whether your goal is to inspire, collaborate, teach, build community or some combination of these. Depending on your goals, you might consider employing interactive media such as: webinars, teleclasses, e-zines, podcasts, and specialized online communities such as Ning. Try one and commit to it for at least six months; then evaluate, refine and expand as you go.

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**Coherence and your poetic soul**

These days, readers expect to have a personal connection with the poets they enjoy through their websites, blogs, teaching and live appearances. Plus, with the widespread use of social media bridging the space between writer and reader, anyone who has admired your work can tap into your moment-by-moment publicized thinking through the social media
communities you frequent.

Therefore, who you are (or more accurately, how you present yourself publicly) and what you write are often one continuous experience for readers. A writing life that grows out of and reflects who you authentically are is going to be the most grounded and sustainable path to success.

My friend Dan Raphael is an example of someone who has built a writing empire on the foundation of his wildly entertaining and unusual command of language and life. On the back of one of Dan’s books is a quote that says:

She: Do you think he’s ever taken acid?
He: Taken it? I think he wears a patch.

Dan delivers on this very engaging and entertaining promise. He is a transcendent force of nature and engaging linguistic acrobatics on stage when delivering his poems and behind the scenes, when sending e-mail to friends.

I have another friend who is a widely sought photographer who has recently been recognized in several national magazines. This photographer has a parallel platform as a poet; and a good number of her poems explore the socioeconomic dynamics of being a person providing a service for the elite and the wealthy. This presents a bit of a platform pretzel, as she has no desire to alienate valued clients with her poetry. The expert photographer/poet is very delicately navigating how to hold these two parts of her life with integrity and authenticity as she quickly becomes more visible and respected in both chosen fields.

How is your life in alignment or out of whack with your platform(s) today? Is there anything you need to reconcile to create a greater coherence between what you write and how you live?

**Have platform, will prosper**

With a clear platform as the organizing principle in your life poetic, you can take the steps that will make your poems and your life poetic more visible in the communities and publications that matter to you. As you become increasingly effective at creating the writing results you want, over time you will attract more readers, expand your sphere of influence and generate far more opportunities to share your love of poetry.

*Sage Cohen* is the author of *Writing the Life Poetic: An Invitation to Read and Write Poetry* and *The Productive Writer: Tips & Tools to Help You Write More, Stress Less & Create Success*, both from Writer’s Digest Books, and the poetry collection
Like the Heart, the World. She holds an MFA from New York University and a BA from Brown University. A few notches in her platform belt include: winning first place in the Ghost Road Poetry contest, nomination for a Pushcart Prize and publication of multiple articles in *Writer’s Digest* magazine. She writes about the poetic and productive writing life at pathofpossibility.com where she also offers online classes ranging from poetry to productivity to business writing.