

Creating A Poetry Chapbook

By *Elizabeth Simson*

What Is A Chapbook?

The dictionary definition of a chapbook is “a small book or pamphlet containing poems, ballads, stories, or religious tracts”. A chapbook of poetry is generally 20 to 30 pages, stapled or saddle-bound, with a cardstock or plain paper cover. A chapbook typically includes a cover, table of contents, acknowledgement page and poems on numbered pages.

Many poets produce their own chapbooks as a way to share a collection of their poetry with family, friends and other poets. Chapbooks are also a way to collect your poetry for a community audience as a way of representing yourself and your best work. Chapbooks typically sell for \$5 to \$10 a copy. A number of literary journals and small presses also offer chapbook contests or read unsolicited manuscripts for publication. Even when published by a small press, however, poets must actively participate with the publisher in the marketing and sale of the chapbook.

Selection

Which poems should you select to include in your chapbook? In general, at least 20% poems (this is just a rough number) of poems in a chapbook have usually been previously published individually in literary journals. Some chapbooks may contain entirely unpublished material, however. There is no set guideline.

Some chapbooks may tell a story or focus on a certain theme (the death of a loved one, an illness, a journey, parenting, etc.) Other chapbooks may contain poems on a variety of topics. In any case, the poems in a chapbook should always be cohesive and work together as a whole. Because of the short length of a chapbook, it is more likely to be perused in a single sitting rather than read from at random.

When selecting which of your poems to include in a chapbook, focus on both the quality of your work and how the poem relates to the other ones you've selected. Don't include a poem in your chapbook merely because it has been published or uses a certain form. Consider rhythm, mood and the overall unity of the book that you are creating.

Organization

How you organize your poems is very important. The sequence in which the poems appear can make the chapbook more or less appealing to the reader. Experiment with using separate segments, or consider sequencing the poems in a unique format to help create a rhythm or a sense of anticipation. For example, you could use pieces of one long poem scattered throughout the chapbook to tie it together. Another technique would be to group poems by theme, time period, or style.

After I select which poems to include in a chapbook manuscript, I spend a few hours organizing them into different sequences. I let the chapbook sit for a few days (or even weeks) and then pick it up again. I read it through from start to finish and note which poems seem to jar when set against one another, or which poems seem to work well together.

Preparing Your Chapbook Manuscript

I have culled the following recommendations from various sources. Be sure to carefully read the specific submission guidelines for each publisher, however, as guidelines may vary.

- Type your poems using a typewriter or computer.
- Use standard-weight (20 to 24 lb) white copy or printer paper.
- Print on one side of the paper.
- Print no more than one poem per page.
- Use a readable font (Times Roman, Arial, Verdana) in a readable size (at least 12pt).
- Use consistent poem titles and spacing between the title and body of the poem. (My own standard is to put the poem title in all capitalization and space down 3 lines from the title to the body of the poem.)
- Number the pages of the manuscript. Make sure that the Table of Contents matches the page numbering! In word processing software like Microsoft Word, you can use a “generate table of contents” feature to keep track of this for you. Unless the guidelines state otherwise, the page number should appear centered on the bottom of the page, in a 10pt to 12pt font.

- Use 1 inch margins. Remember that most chapbooks are between 5.5 and 7 inches wide, which means between you have between 4.25 and 5.75 inches of printable space.
- Make sure your manuscript is clean. Avoid white-out or ink marks.
- Do not use binders, staples, manila folders, or paper clips. Always mail your manuscript flat in a plain, 9 x 11 envelope.
- Pay special attention to any guidelines concerning identification. If you are entering a contest that uses anonymous judging, double-check and make sure that your name doesn't appear anywhere in the manuscript except on the title/biographical page and cover letter.
- Spell-check, proofread, and have others proofread for you!

Additional Suggestions

- Start with a small contest with a modest reading fee. Look for contests that publish runners-up, offer a subscription for the reading fee, or a copy of the winning chapbook.
- Send your manuscript early. The more manuscripts have to be read, the more attention yours will receive if it arrives before the flood of those that show up at the last minute.
- Don't worry about meeting the maximum page requirements. If a contest accepts manuscripts from 16 to 24 pages, send your best poems, even if you only have 18 of them.
- Consider self-publishing your chapbook if you are an active part of a poetry community. Remember that a chapbook is not a money-making venture as much as a way to showcase and promote yourself and the best of your poetry.
- If you don't already have one, write up a short biographical statement and have a friend help you take a good quality photograph of yourself. If you produce your own chapbook, include this on the back cover. (Do not include this when submitting to a contest or publisher, they will request this from you after they accept your manuscript for publication.)

- Don't forget to include an "Acknowledgements" page if any of your poems have been previously published. This page should state the name of the poem and where it first appeared. Although with most literary journals, the rights to print the poem revert back to you after publication, many journals require you to mention that the poem first appeared in their publication. When in doubt, double-check!

