1. **Poetry is mimetic.**
Poetry imitates, copies, or reflects something. The thing can be real (an actual thing, such as the poet’s love for someone), an ideal (a representation or copy of a universal, such as a conversation with Truth), or an imagined thing or an experience or feeling (such as a description of the loss of a loved one). But whether or not physical nature is involved, the poem must convey or recreate something true--it must deal with real feeling, thought, or truth. We must say, "Yes, this is a mirror of possibility or actuality in some sense," even if we are reading about dragons and talking trees.

Thus, the following example is not a poem:

*The doorknob barked past the razor blade's spring
While the rocks afloat coughed up the string.*

because, even though it contains meter, rhyme and metaphors, it does not reflect something true or real. On the other hand, this example is a poem:

*His brain was running on stolen retreads
So when the ruts attacked,
The flats arrived early.*

because, even though it lacks meter and rhyme (which, by the way, would make it a better poem), it conveys an image of truth in poetic form: people who rely on others' thinking (stolen retreads) often find themselves at an intellectual loss (flats) when their ideas are challenged (ruts attacking).

**2. Poetry is emotional as well as rational.**
Like all literature, poetry exploits connotation, multiple meaning, emotive language, and penetrating images. Its language is constructed deliberately to add feeling to thought--or better, to create the fusion of thought and feeling (a phrase applied to the metaphysical poets), or as C. S. Lewis puts it, to create "emotion impregnated with intelligence." By bringing emotion into the argument, poetry allows the reader to feel a truth. As Edwin Arlington Robinson says, poetry “tells us through an emotional reaction something that cannot be said.”

Thus, one measure of good poetry is the emotional as well as the intellectual effect of the idea: does it move the intellect with its brilliance, persuade the heart with feeling, and touch the soul with its truth, beauty, and immediate recognition of kinship? Compare these synonymous expressions:
2. Me:
*A guy can tell what his love is thinking by looking at the expression on her face.*
Shakespeare:
*To hear with eyes belongs to love's fine wit.*

Isn’t Shakespeare’s version just stunningly beautiful and powerfully effective, and true? People in love can exchange looks that communicate more than words might express, and a poetic expression of that truth communicates more beautifully than a mere prose description.

Unlike history, the sciences, and scholarship, all of which shun the use of feeling or emotion, poetry welcomes it, not as a substitute for thought, but as an ally. Some of the latest work in neuroscience tells us that emotions represent a huge amount of subconscious thinking and analysis. So the fusion of thought and feeling can produce a genuinely better understanding of life or reality than thought alone.

**3. Poetry recreates, not merely recounts.**
Readers of a poem should not just recognize or understand the feeling or idea the poet is treating; they should experience it. They should participate in the intellectual, spiritual, or emotional message. The poet excites in the reader "a tone of feeling similar to that which existed in his own bosom," says Sir Walter Scott. To do this, the poet must not merely describe or tell, but find words and images that produce an effect--that reproduce a feeling or insight. Edgar Allan Poe calls poetry the “rhythmical creation of beauty.” In nonfiction you learn about a feeling; in fiction you understand a feeling; in poetry you share the feeling.

For example, a biographer might write, “When he left her, she was sad.” But a poet would write,

*That time he stayed, the days were hot and bold,
But then he took the sun and she was cold.*

Poetry, then, calls on not only your previous knowledge but also your previous emotional experience as you understand and resonate with what’s being expressed.

**4. Poetry is a "speaking picture."**
The phrase belongs to Sir Philip Sidney. He means that poetry uses imagery, pictures, concrete visions to convey its message and feeling; it shows, and not just tells. The speaking picture is created by association, and ***association is the key to poetry***, because the devices of association (metaphor, simile, personification, and so forth—see below for more) provide the flash of understanding, recognition, wit, and perception, the greatness of expression and art that presents and clarifies truth and feeling.

Another measure of good poetry, then, is the freshness of the associations it offers: the use of new or unusual comparisons, thoughts, tracks, or perspectives. And, of course, not only novelty is important, but the quality, aptness, and worth of the association. Petrarchan conceits (eyes like stars, roses in cheeks, hair like golden thread) got old quickly. On the other hand, how marvelous yet how unusual and fresh are Herrick's lines:

She by the river sat, and sitting there,
She wept, and made it deeper by a tear.

Note how effectively this image captures the imagination, how beautiful and moving it is.

Good imagistic creativity produces striking, fresh, and vivid images, consonant with the mood and thought, such as a full, rapidly changing, tour of life or a multifaceted examination of the subject. A good poet has the ability to reduce abstract thoughts and ideas to pictorial form, either by comparison, special imagery, or otherwise. Consider these lines from "The Pulley" by George Herbert. God is speaking, and commands all the blessings of the world to enter a drinking glass, which he grasps (a span is the distance from the thumb to the tip of the little finger):

Let the world’s riches, which dispersed lie,
Contract into a span.

Now God has

... a glass of blessings standing by

**5. Devices of Association**
We noted earlier and will again for emphasis that association is the key to poetry. Associating one thing with another through a rhetorical device or other method serves to clarify, add beauty, or provide understanding about the object of the association. The type of association can take any of several forms, including comparing, contrasting, exemplifying, equating—and any of these either seriously or ironically—and even through merely serendipitous juxtaposition. Accidental pairings are foundational to creativity.

Because association is the critical key to poetry, there are many methods for employing it. Here are some of them.

**Rhetorical devices.**
These devices of figurative language include simile, metaphor, catachresis, synecdoche, metonymy, personification, allusion, oxymoron, transferred epithet, and antithesis. The [Handbook of Rhetorical Devices](http://www.virtualsalt.com/rhetoric.htm) covers all of these.

**Abstract through concrete.**
Poets often describe, define, or explain abstract ideas employing concrete images or examples. Poetry pushes always toward the image, picture, and vision; it will associate a tangible thing with an idea, to bring the idea out of the air and plant it visually before the reader in the ground. Symbols are used frequently for this (an albatross for guilt, a sword for power or authority), as is personification (“Does not wisdom call, and understanding lift up her voice?” –Proverbs 8:1)

**Sensuousness.**
Poets love to appeal to the senses, bringing your taste buds into the argument, allowing you to touch an idea. Virtue in the clouds seems inaccessible, but Virtue as a living woman can be touched, endangered, protected, ignored, or honored.

For example, an ordinary writer would say, "Men say they want to be virtuous but they are not." But a poet would say, "Men say they love virtue, but they leave her standing in the rain." The image of a woman getting drenched in the rain appeals to the sense of sight (seeing the wet woman), taste (we’ve all been in the rain as the water ran down our faces, where we licked it off our lips), hearing (the sound of the rain hitting various objects such as plants, roofs, the street) and smell (the aroma of the air, the soil, wet objects like clothing).

**Surprising Connection.**
What makes some poets so good is their ability to set our imaginations on fire by using unusual yet appropriate juxtaposition, yoking, metaphor or other connection. Unexpected associations, including paradoxes and oxymorons, can seize the imagination and lead it to a new vision or understanding of the subject. Alexander Pope refers to

*The bookful blockhead, ignorantly read,
With loads of learned lumber in his head.*

and we immediately gain new insight into pedantry.

It’s the fresh, unusual, even surprising associations that draw our admiration and enjoyment. “My love is a rose” has been done, while I’ve not seen this elsewhere:

*My love is a tide pool of beautiful creatures
Where crabs seldom enter to show off their features.*

The goal of all these associations is the goal of poetry--*to tell the truth through art*. Associations strive to clarify, explain, make real, reify, make vivid the idea being mirrored forth--not to obscure it. A poem does not mean "whatever you want it to mean" and poetry is not normally obscurantist; it is sometimes (or even often) purposefully ambiguous or suggestive, but usually within identifiable boundaries.

For example, when Simon and Garfunkel write, “I am a rock; I am an island,” we understand that the speaker feels isolated from humanity (island) and is putting on a hard shell to avoid emotional pain (rock). But what is the writer telling us who says,

*I’m a slice of pizza at noon in June.
Don’t give me draft beer—I like a can.*

On the other hand, we can understand the following associations because they are drawn from our own experience or knowledge:

*To win her I became a butterfly
And one spring night I flew into her den.
Appalled, she called an entomologist
Who stuck me on a pin.*

**6. Poetry unifies or pulls together disparate materials.**
It assimilates a wide range of qualities--even (or especially) opposites or differences. It can use irony, paradox, oxymoron, metaphor, antithesis, or even drama of situation or other devices to crash opposites together. It can reveal a "balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities," says Samuel Taylor Coleridge, to show an overriding unity or harmony or wholeness. It examines the furthest extent or range of possibility of feeling and image in the search for wholeness of meaning. It might be said that poetry strives for a communicative holism, reaching every channel—thought, feeling, facts, imagination, words, images—and plays them like a musical instrument.

**7. Poetry concentrates and intensifies its message.**
The intensification is designed so that the experience--the impact on the reader--will be fuller, brighter, more powerful, more vivid. Thus we find economy of language, one word carrying several meanings, as with a pun.
One measure of a good poem is its depth of meaning, its richness of overlaid meanings. Does the poet say several things at once? Metaphors (with tenor and vehicle), repercussions of significance, and the use of pun are some ways to do this. For example, look at George Herbert's line from "Life":

*I made a posie, while the day ran by:*

Posie here means three things—it is a triple pun. A posie is a floral bouquet, a poem, and a motto. There is discussion in the poem of a floral bouquet; the poem forms a poem; and there is a motto expressed in the second line of the poem. See also Herbert's "Redemption" and "The Sonne" for additional use of the pun.

The great poets strive for compression, for concision of expression. (A metaphor has been described as a highly imaginative analogy compressed into an identity.) This often contributes to sublimity. Consider these lines from George Herbert's "Marie Magdalene":

*She being stained herself, why did she strive
To make him clean, who could not be defiled?*

The double irony whips our brains around and into a new realization of the relationship between Mary Magdalene and Jesus.

And compare these two versions of the creation of light from the book of Genesis:

First Version
*And then the mighty and creating God in his great power thundered forth the awesome command that all the rays and particles that should make up light and illumination should be immediately created, and such light was in fact brought into full existence just as soon as God spoke for it to be so.*

Second Version
*And God said, “Let light be.” And light was.*
The dramatic impact of the second version helps us understand the concept of the sublime, the powerful, emotional response created by the sudden apprehension of greatness in a short space (See Loginus, *On the Sublime*). “Let light be, and light was” is very powerful and moving.

**8. Poetry conveys meaning beyond the particular.**
Since it recreates an experience or feeling the reader can also have, and since it relies on recognizable association, and since it communicates, it must deal with general truth: "The poet does not number the streaks of the tulip" (Samuel Johnson, *Rasselas*). Though particulars are used, they speak of something beyond themselves. This is true even for poets in the romantic mold, who, though self-styled individualists, still partake of human experience and emotion and thus speak to us. If all they had to offer was solipsistic autobiography with which no one could imaginatively share or sympathize, it’s doubtful they would have the avid readers they do.

The quality of the idea expressed is related to its greatness. For true greatness the idea must partake of truth—it must resonate with us in our common humanity. That makes it worth sharing beyond one’s personal notebook. The thought must be of human universal significance, noble thought of lasting and significant value.
For example, which epic poem opening attracts your noble feelings more:

A. *I like paper towels; I feel happy at the pleasant sound when I tear them from the roll.*

B. *Of man’s first disobedience and the fruit of that forbidden tree, whose mortal taste brought death into the world and all our woe*… (John Milton, *Paradise Lost*).

**9. Poetry is musical.**
A poet pays careful attention to the sound of words, in themselves and in the context of the poem. Most poetry is intended to be read aloud, so that the sound of the language, the flavor of the spoken words, is crucially important. Music is given to poetry through rhythm, meter, syntactical crafting (like inversion), diction, alliteration, assonance, consonance, onomatopoeia, and so on. See the [Handbook of Rhetorical Devices](http://www.virtualsalt.com/rhetoric.htm) for more information.

Among the constituents of the musicality of poetry are these:

**Aural quality and verbal essence.**
Readability aloud; harmony of mood and words; richness; the flavor of the poem in your mouth. This quality is more difficult to describe than it is to experience. Once you “get it,” you’ll enjoy poetry at a deeper level for the rest of your life. The fact is, words have a taste to them or a feel to them as you speak.

Note how Alexander Pope, working within the confines of iambic pentameter couplets, skillfully matches the lines to the subject:

*Leave such to tune their own dull rhymes, and know
  What's roundly smooth or languishingly slow;
  And praise the easy vigor of a line,
  Where Denham's strength, and Waller's sweetness join.
  True ease in writing comes from art, not chance,
  As those move easiest who have learned to dance
  'Tis not enough no harshness gives offense,
  The sound must seem an echo to the sense.
  Soft is the strain when Zephyr gently blows,
  And the smooth stream in smoother numbers flows,
  But when loud surges lash the sounding shore,
  The hoarse, rough verse should like the torrent roar,
  When Ajax strives some rock's vast weight to throw,
  The line too labors, and the words move slow;
  Not so, when swift Camilla scours the plain,
  Flies o'er the unbending corn, and skims along the main.*

**9. Poetry is Musical, continued.**
The sound of the words must harmonize with the idea, mood, or feeling in the poem. For example, notice the softness created by the s sounds in these lines by Robert Herrick:

*So soft streams meet, so springs with gladder smiles
Meet after long divorcement by the Isles:*

And consider Shakespeare's Sonnet 30, with its moaning and sorrowful sound and feel:

*When to the sessions of sweet silent thought
I summon up remembrance of things past,
I sigh the lack of many a thing I sought,
And with old woes new wail my dear time's waste:
Then can I drown an eye, unused to flow,
For precious friends hid in death's dateless night,
And weep afresh love's long since cancell'd woe,
And moan the expense of many a vanish'd sight:
Then can I grieve at grievances foregone,
And heavily from woe to woe tell o'er
The sad account of fore-bemoaned moan,
Which I new pay as if not paid before.
  But if the while I think on thee, dear friend,
  All losses are restored and sorrows end.*

**Rhetoric of expression or quality of presentation.**
This may be stretching the concept of musical a bit, but the effect of the words that clothe the ideas should not be minimized. Looking for "just the right word" is an essential task of the poet.

As Alexander Pope put it,

*True art is nature to advantage dressed,
What oft was thought but ne'er so well expressed.*

Memorable lines are those with ideas worth remembering *as expressed in that particular way*. In their expression of thought, great poems depart from the stale and common or in some other way convey a sense of surpassing, of sublimity, of rising above the ordinary. In this sense we may say that poetry should surpass reality in expression. Even poetry written in a conversational manner is not conversation. Compare Henry Vaughan's "The Lampe":

*'Tis dead night round about: Horror doth creep
And move on with the shades, stars nod, and sleep,
And through the dark air spin a firey thread
Such as doth gild the lazy glow-worm’s bed.*
Compare this with the ordinary statement, "It was totally dark and fearfully quiet; nothing could be seen but blinking stars."

**Metrical persuasiveness.**
Meter aids the rhetoric of expression in power, creating a sense of inevitability. Words and phrases lock in as the meter drives forward, with correspondence between stressed syllables of the poetic foot and stresses words or syllables of meaning. Consider Alexander Pope:

*Here thou, great Anna, whom three realms obey,
Dost sometimes counsel take, and sometimes tea.*

Or Shakespeare:

*For thy sweet love remembered such wealth brings
That then I scorn to change my state with kings.*

In these two examples, tea and kings get heavy stress as the couplets conclude because they are both positioned in the second syllable of the iambic foot, which is the stressed syllable.

**10. Final Thoughts**
As I have said before, the way to learn to write poetry (or prose, for that matter) is to read a lot of it. When you find a paticular poem or poet you really like--or really dislike--ask yourself why. What is it about the poem that resonates with you? The meaning? The way the meaning is encapsulated within the lines? The images? The metaphors? Spend time with the poems you love. Read them over and over and recite them aloud. Memorize them so you can enjoy them aloud while you drive and enjoy them silently when you are in a place where you have to keep silent.

Then, write some poems and revise and revise and work on them, until you have some work of your own that you want to add to your memorized or often repeated poems.