

Writing a Riddle Poem

Choose the answer

-When writing a riddle poem, begin with the answer. Concrete objects, such as a desk or car, are easier to write poems about than abstract ideas such as happiness or peace.

-Think about how difficult the riddle will be and use that to determine the level of specificity you want with your answer. Very specific answers like “Tonya’s white cat” are likely to be very hard, even for those who know Tonya’s cat. Specific answers such as “blue cheese” aren’t as difficult as very specific ones, but they are still challenging. General answers such as “cars” are the easiest type of solution, but that doesn’t mean the riddle can’t be hard!

-For this riddle poem, let’s choose “water” as our answer.

Brainstorm

-Once you’ve chosen your answer, create a list of words and ideas related to and associated with your answer.

-For water: clouds, wet, liquid, rain, ice, fish, stream, river, lake, pool, pond, swimming, ocean, ice, glacier, steam, snow, snowman, boats, sailing

-Also think of words and ideas that are opposite or opposed to your answer:

-For water: earth, fire, dry, air

Use a thesaurus

-Choose some words you brainstormed above and look up their synonyms in a thesaurus. It’s also a good idea to look up your answer too.

-Water: bathe, damp, drench, drool, flood, soak, spray, wash

-Ice: chunk, crystal, dry ice, glacier, hail, hailstone, iceberg, icicle, sleet

-Stream (noun): branch, brook, creek, flood, rill, runnel, tide, watercourse

-Stream (verb): cascade, emit, flood, flow, gush, pour, spill

Point of view

-Once you’ve brainstormed your word, imagine you are the object. Try describing the world from its point of view. What do you see? What do you hear? What do you smell and feel? What do you do? What do you like?

-I run down hill. I make canyons. I fall from the sky as rain. People and animals drink me. I evaporate. I am used to put out fires. Fish live within me. Places without me are deserts. I make the crops grow. I cause erosion. I boil at 212 degrees and freeze at 32 degrees. I am used to clean things. I make canyons and valleys.

Describe using figurative language

-Using what you've come up with so far, think of ways to use figurative language to describe your answer and to give clues.

-Imagery: The river cut through the canyon before ambling along the plain.

-Metaphor: Streams are fish roads.

-Metonymy: The wetness splashed upon us.

-Onomatopoeia: Water laps the shore.

-Personification: The water cooked my egg.

-Simile: Pools of water reflect like mirrors.

-Synecdoche: The ship sank in the drink.

Choose elements and write a draft

-I like the idea of water cutting canyons and I like the idea of water reflecting like a mirror so I'll try starting with those. Still water reflects and moving water makes canyons, so maybe I can use that opposition.

I am like a mirror when I am still.

I am stronger than stone when I move.

-Hmm...I like the parallelism, but it seems bland. Let's try changing the word order.

Still, I am like a mirror.

Fast, I am stronger than stone.

I like that. It also helps emphasize that water only acts like a mirror when it is still, and that it only cuts through stone when it moves.

-Let's try adding more. Still. Fast. Medium? No. I need another pair of opposites. Hot? Cold? Sure. When we're wet we can get cold. Hot? Water can get hot, but that's wet too. When is water warm? When it's warm water... Wait! If you're lost out in the woods you can build a snow cave to keep from freezing. Snow can keep you warm. Snow is ice, it's solid, it's dry!

Still, I am like a mirror.

Fast, I am stronger than stone.

Wet, I can make you cold.

Dry, I can keep you warm.

And that makes a good clue because it's true but a trick too, because most people don't think of ice as warm.

-How about another pair? Hmm...water grows crops. Water brings life. Floods can kill. That's a pair I could use. How shall I do this? Life, I bring in the...desert? That's good. What's opposite of desert? A field? Riverbank?

Still, I am like a mirror.

Fast, I am stronger than stone.

Wet, I can burn you.

Cold, I can keep you warm.

Life, I can be in the desert.

Death, I can be on the riverbank.

Make it stylish

-Once you've written your basic poem, try to give it some style. We started giving this riddle style when we used parallelism and pairs of opposites (antithesis). We made it even more stylish when we decided to start each line with the words "still" and "fast." What else can I do? Alliteration maybe?

Still, I shine like a mirror.

Swift, I slice through stone.

That could work, but do I want to have each pair start with the same letter? That'd be hard. I could not worry about it and use swift and still or I could use a thesaurus and see if I can come up with a good word for fast that can alliterate with a word for water cutting through or moving through the earth. Hmm...active? agile? Any a-words for cutting or digging? No. Brisk. Any b-words? Burrow.

Still, I shine like a mirror.

Brisk, I burrow through stone.

What about the line Wet, I can burn you? Hmm...I can't find any alliterating pairs that I like so I won't worry about alliteration. To be honest, the parallelism, the antithesis, and the starting each line with the adjective are all good. It's pretty stylish as it is but there's one more thing we can do. Why end each line with a period? Why not emphasize the pairs of opposites by making them couplets?

Still, I am like a mirror,

Fast, I am stronger than stone.

Wet, I can burn you,

Cold, I can keep you warm.

Life, I can be in the desert,

Death, I can be on the riverbank.

What am I?

Note: When using rhetorical devices and poetic techniques such as alliteration, consider using them to emphasize the clues. Also consider using punctuation and visual clues (from placement to capitalization or bolding) to emphasize the clues within your riddle.