

PUTTING A PAMPHLET TOGETHER

Putting together a pamphlet is as much a creative act as writing a poem. It requires time and craft, and there are many elements to think about. For the poetry pamphlet competition you'll be putting together 20-24 pages of poetry, so your first act should be to get out your pile of poems and find a space where you can lay them all out on the floor.

STAGE ONE – CHOOSING THE POEMS

Do you have too many? If so, you need to decide which poems to jettison for now. It's important not to think of them as abandoned forever – they may find their home in a full collection later. You're looking for 18-20 poems that really show you off at your best and give a taster of what you're about.

Think about how the poems dialogue with each-other. Are there any clear themes or threads that will unify the pamphlet? Single-theme pamphlets can work well, though it's also good to have texture – a variety of forms and tones. In a slim pamphlet it can also be very noticeable if you repeat the same verbs, images or devices too obviously – make sure no two poems cover the same ground.

If you don't have quite enough poems you're proud of, you may need to write some new ones. Ask – what does this collection need? It could be a different type of music, some light relief or a more substantial longer poem that will bring the central ideas together.

STAGE TWO – ORDERING

What kind of rhythm should your pamphlet have? What journey are you going to take the reader on? A pamphlet may have a natural narrative – chronological, geographical or emotional. Plath's original ordering of *Ariel* famously meant that, for all the darkness in between, it began with the word 'love' and ended with the word 'spring'.

A decision has to be made as to whether to group similar poems in a sequence or section (say, sonnets or poems about birds), or to space them throughout the pamphlet. I've done both – clustering odes in *Look, Clare! Look!*; spreading out ballads in *Changeling*. Philip Larkin famously preferred the latter, saying he

treated collections: "like a music-hall bill: you know, contrast, difference in length, the comic, the Irish tenor, bring on the girls."

It is important to think about poems in key positions. The first is vital – it needs to welcome the reader and grab their attention, and should be one of your best. The final couple of poems also need thought – they resonate in the memory after the reader has finished and should signal where the writer might go next, making us want to join them.

Spend an hour rearranging your poems on the floor – see how they respond to each-other and try to find your pamphlet's shape.

STAGE THREE – NAMING

The pamphlet title should be inviting. It should be your marketing 'hook', attracting the reader and giving them a flavour of the contents. Go through your bookshelves and list your favourite collection titles. Why do they grab you? Can you see any features they have in common?

Next look at your spread-out poems and note whether any word repeatedly occurs. This could be an apt pamphlet title. I've been told this is how Polly Clark named her first collection *Kiss*. Or is there an individual title or line that resonates with more than one poem?

Be aware that it's unlikely to resonate with every single poem though, and something too general can be boring. Specific titles are often more arresting.

With these three stages complete, your pamphlet should be starting to feel like something you can think about as a whole.

Good luck with your submissions...

The closing date for the Mslexia Pamphlet Competition is 18 June 2012. For more information, visit the website (www.mslexia.co.uk/pamphletcompetition), email us at poetry@mslexia.co.uk or call us on 0191 233 3860.