Poets pay attention to music of language and have a keen awareness of audience that includes their physical, emotional, and intellectual experience.

For many people, poetry brings back the memory of being in seventh grade English when they were taught to try to solve the riddle of a poem: the meaning was hidden within the strange and complex syntax of a poem and you had to figure it out in order to get an A on the test.

Poetry may still feel like a secret code that’s tough to break, but contemporary poets will tell you that what you learned in your English class was the wrong approach. Poetry was never meant to be a riddle, but an experience. An experience that cuts through the noise and gets to the heart of the matter. Poetry moves and connects people with few words, distilled imagery, and thoughtful language.

Poet Audre Lorde famously defended the utility of poetry as the first step in changing the status quo, a goal of leaders from any sector. In order to create change, she argues, new ideas have to be formed in language before they can be put into action. She wrote, “Poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence... Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought.”
Poetry utilizes key communication strategies to create powerful experiences through words for the reader or listener. Learning to pay attention to the strategies used by poets, executives can apply them in their own leadership communications. There are three main strategies:

- **Power of Imagery**
- **Music of Language**
- **Audience Awareness**

**The Power of Imagery**

Poets teach us awareness of audience experience by using concrete details like this blue raincoat to help convey meaning through story and image.

A key currency in poetry is the image. A concise image can help the audience experience an emotion or an idea more profoundly than a vague abstraction. Poet Elizabeth Hoover explains, “When you describe something in precise and concrete detail, the reader is invited to build the image in their imagination and is invited to enter the space of the story.”

For example, if you were to say: “I realized today how much my mother sacrificed for me” you are relying on the abstraction “sacrificed.” In an audience of 100 people, this word could conjure 100 different ideas and associations. People might react to this idea blandly, thinking, “Oh, that’s nice that she had the realization,” but they won’t necessarily experience this idea on an emotional level.
A poet takes an abstract idea like “sacrifice” and turns it into an image using concrete detail. But which detail? When people can be overwhelmed by details (hence the saying, death by powerpoints), choosing the salient details is an art.

In the poem The Raincoat by Ada Limón, the poet demonstrates her awareness of the audience experience as she draws picture to replace the abstraction “sacrifice.” She locates her audience in her childhood remembering how her mother drove her to so many doctor appointments for her scoliosis. Then the poem moves to the present moment where she is driving to yet another doctor’s appointment as an adult, when she sees:

...a mom take her raincoat off

and give it to her young daughter when

a storm took over the afternoon. My god,

I thought, my whole life I’ve been under her

raincoat thinking it was somehow a marvel

that I never got wet.

The image of a mother giving her raincoat to her daughter carries with it so much more than the abstract word “sacrifice.” The audience is transported through Limón’s layered storytelling. They are able to imagine how a mother can protectively shelter her child with a raincoat, and they are able to make the connection that Limón’s mother acted as a shelter for her throughout her life. They also experience the speaker’s own surprise at this sudden realization. The audience’s emotions are engaged through the act of imagining the precise details and descriptions in her poem.

It is important that her image is precise, unique and activates the reader’s imagination. For example, if she had written, “She gave her raincoat to her daughter when it started raining cats and dogs” the cliche deflates the power of the image. It pulls you out of the immediacy of the poem. On the other hand, the fresh language of a storm “taking over an afternoon” invites the reader into the moment. Because most poems contain few words, there is no room to waste on tired or cliched language.

In a business context, powerful, concise images can be shared through storytelling. In business and in fundraising there are many abstractions that need to be communicated to different audiences. For Feeding America, for example, food insecurity is the problem they are trying to solve, but talking about food insecurity without concrete images makes it challenging for anyone to connect with the subject. On their Hunger Blog, they use the idea of concrete images to paint a picture of food insecurity.

In one particular story, they are trying to illustrate how desperate people can be when they are hungry. To do so they tell the story of a specific person who once faced hunger and include a poignant detail: “At one point, he sold a gold ring so that he could buy something to eat.” The gold ring is a detail that an audience can connect to. Many people can look down at their own finger and imagine how it would feel to pawn their own jewelry for a meal. Taking it to the next level, a storyteller might include more precise language about the food he bought with the ring money: “At one point, he sold a gold ring so that he could buy a loaf of bread and jar of peanut butter.”
The next time you have an abstract idea you need to help your audience engage with, ask yourself what concrete image you should describe precisely to help your audience feel and connect with this idea. The image should be able to convey the complexity of the idea you are trying to describe without all the jargon.

As discussed in my recent Forbes article, poets use impactful communication strategies that can be adopted by business leaders looking to connect with their audiences in meaningful ways. Beyond paying attention to the power of the image, poets also pay attention to music of language and have a keen awareness of their audience that includes the physical, emotional, and intellectual experience of reading a poem. In this article, I will explore that latter two.

**Music of Language**

Words have a music of their own. The staccato of consonants, the power of pow, the delight of weeeeee! On an intuitive level many people understand the emotional and musical values of certain words, but poets and the greatest orators make it their business to pay attention to this music.

In his celebratory poem “Catalog of Unabashed Gratitude,” award winning poet Ross Gay writes about the joy of planting an orchard. In this section, he makes an unexpected subject matter sing,

Hear ye! hear ye! I am here
to holler that I have hauled tons—by which I don’t mean lots,
I mean tons — of cowshit
and stood ankle deep in swales of maggots
swirling the spent beer grains

It starts with repetition of the soft and lulling h’s, which is brought to a halt with the hard c and t of “cowshit.” This dramatic change in sounds emphasize the unexpected subject matter. Next, the poet repeats “s” compound consonants, “st” “sw” “sp” making a dance out of the act of turning compost. All of these words together, highlight the innate music of language and take the reader on a joyful journey with the poet through the compost pile and into the orchard.

For business leaders, a great way to enter into the music of language is with repetition. Anaphora is when the first part of a sentence is repeated. Many great (and memorable speeches) employ anaphora, such as MLK’s often quoted I Have a Dream speech or JFK’s famous phrasing: “And so, my fellow
Americans: ask not what your country can do for you — ask what you can do for your country. My fellow citizens of the world: ask not what America will do for you, but what together we can do for the freedom of man.”

The repetition of similar or exact phrases builds a rhythm and piques your audience’s attention. Repetition also makes your language more memorable. As you begin to pay attention to anaphora, you will notice how often it is employed in everyday speech from television commercials to your neighbor’s storytelling on the front porch.

You can have fun with this. Flip-flopping words and ideas can create punchy, memorable sayings. At a recent session with a client, business leaders created these quotable sayings using playful repetition such as: “Numbers don’t lie, but you can lie with numbers.” This phrase will be remembered by audiences and is a great introduction for a story.

**Audience Awareness**

Although all forms of communication should pay attention to the experience of their audience, poetry gets a special prize because a poet pays to the physical experience of their audience as well as their emotional and intellectual experience.

What a poem is like to read, where you take breaths, how the words feel in your mouth, how easily the words spill across your tongue (or don’t) are all part of the experience that the poet cares about when they are writing a poem.

Let us explore a [haiku written by Issa](https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/haiku-written-by-iss-a/) translated by Robert Hass to understand the power of the breath and line breaks.
The snow is melting
and the village is flooded
with children.

In this poem, the poet starts with the image of melting snow. He gives you a moment to rest there, before he pulls in the wider view of the village, flooding. The next line break provides a pause before turning to a delightful surprise — children! In your mind, you’ve already created a scene of a wet, flooded village, and then it is populated by children. The surprise turn of the poem is the key strategy of this poem. Had the poet ended the poem with “with puddles” the haiku would be forgettable. The reader would have not experienced any delight or surprise. Equally so, if the poet had written “The village is flooded with children,” without a line break, the reader would not have had time to breath, pause, and make conjectures about what was coming next.

In business storytelling, this kind of audience awareness can be considered in more than one way. Questions you can ask yourself to help you build up your audience awareness include:

- What kind of story does my audience need to hear right now?
- Do I need to ask my audience to get up and stretch before I continue?
- Do I need to add more pauses and breaths to my story to build up anticipation or leave time for my audience to imagine what I’m describing?
• Is there a movement in the story that my audience needs to act out in order to better understand my story?
• How will my pitch and pace influence my story?

Personal introductions at business conferences or company-wide gatherings can be a great place to engage with some of these ideas about audience awareness. Going around the room to do introductions often includes a standard and monotonous form that most people followed: name, job title, a recent project, and ending with a personal fact.

Our client created an introduction that would break the normal pacing and format of these introductions. Instead of starting with, “I’m Jim, the Vice President of Sales at ABC Marketing,” he starts with this: “The need for speed and the great adventure has always been part of my nature. I am ‘the one’ in the family that threw caution to the wind to fulfill that dream inside, to explore and create. Early on I did not realize that my quest for speed would also be a great teacher of balance within.” By starting with an exciting and personal story, Jim broke with the expectation of the audience and made them more alert and ready to listen. It also highlights Jim’s values rather than his job title, which is not as important to Jim as his desire to help his team learn how to find balance.

Conclusion

Poetry often helps us find beauty and meaning and connect with our emotions in unexpected ways. With a call for an effective use of language, poetry asks that we pay attention to imagery, concision, music in language, and the experience of the audience.
Poet **Ezra Pound** instructed writers of his day, “To go in fear of abstractions.” Today’s business leaders could do well by the same advice. We best not to rely too much on ideas and abstractions to carry meaning to audiences. Poetry reminds us to trust specific, concrete images and the music of language to provoke the imagination. It asks us to step outside the humdrum of everyday life, to pause and to re-engage with the world with our five senses.

The next time you are preparing for a presentation, what poetic strategies will you employ?