

3-Day Chapbook Competition—2021 Prompts

Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow

Feel free to use, adapt, or ignore these prompts. We can't wait to read what you write!

1. Write about a meal or dish you remember a grandparent, aunt, or uncle making. Describe it in a way that also describes the person making it.
2. “Yesterday / All my troubles seemed so far away / Now it looks as though they're here to stay...” –The Beatles

Write a poem about a moment or an event when everything changed in your life and was never the same again.

3. Read Joy Harjo's “Perhaps the World Ends Here.” Write a poem about something important happening at your kitchen table. Use hyperbole.
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/49622/perhaps-the-world-ends-here>
4. “Today is the greatest day I've ever known. Can't wait for tomorrow. I might not have that long.” –The Smashing Pumpkins

Write a poem about a day that you wish you could go back to and relive at any time.

5. Watch the video “Elephant” by Nancy Rodwan/poem by Judith Kerman. Write a definition poem for the word “yesterday” or “today” or “tomorrow.” Provide at least three definitions of the word, using details from your own life. (Variation: Write a definition poem for each of these words.)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gjE29VvcDqA>
6. In “Tomorrow, Tomorrow” the late Elliott Smith sang, “they took your life apart and called your failures art.”

Write a poem about a time when someone got the wrong idea about who you are and what you stand for.

7. Imagine meeting yourself 30 years from now. What do you want to say to your future self?
8. Write a poem about a chronic affliction you have suffered. By the end of the poem, find a moment of revelation or understanding.
9. Imagine meeting yourself as a six-year-old. What do you want to say to your six-year-old self?

10. Brainstorm people who you see regularly, near or afar, but have never spoken with. Choose one and write a poem that considers their experience. The speaker in your poem may observe or interact with the person, or you may choose to have the person be the speaker in your poem.
11. Write about a “black sheep” from your family tree. Try to understand why this person became a “black sheep.” (Variation: Write the poem in the voice of the “black sheep.”)
12. Brainstorm a list of unanswered questions that you have. Incorporate some of the questions into your poem. In the final stanza (or final lines if your poem is only one stanza), attempt to answer at least one of the questions or provide possible answers.
13. Make a list poem of things you want to do today. Let your imagination run wild with the list, accomplishing impossible things.
14. Brainstorm situations where you or someone you know has made a mountain of a molehill...in other words, made something worse by obsessing about it. Write a poem in the form of a letter. In the letter address a problem or concern that seems like an insurmountable mountain, and then provide a different way of looking at the situation by the end of the poem. Turn the mountain back into the molehill.
15. Describe a place you visited as a child. Try to capture in the poem *why* this place was so important.
16. Do a Google search of “old pictures.” Scroll through the images until you find something that makes you stop. Write a poem inspired by that image.
17. Imagine meeting the ghost of someone you lost. What do you want to say to the ghost? What does the ghost say to you?
18. Brainstorm things that you’ve seen or experienced recently that are out of the ordinary. Choose one that you would like to remember and write a poem about it.
19. Read “Minnesota Thanksgiving” by John Berryman. Write a prayer you would say at an important family gathering, like Thanksgiving or Christmas dinner, that praises past, present, and future generations.
<https://writersalmanac.publicradio.org/index.php%3Fdate=2004%252F10%252F25.html>

20. Imagine you were born 100 years from now. Write a poem about your 8th birthday.
21. Recount a story you heard from a parent, grandparent, or great grandparent.
22. Write a poem to someone you would like to speak with today, but you can't.
23. Write a poem about leaving one place behind and moving to another. Make it a meditation on loss or an ode to hope.
24. Imagine a day in the future that you are really looking forward to. Now, in your poem imagine that day—only everything goes wrong.
25. Write a wedding blessing for your parents on their wedding day. What do you want to tell them? What advice do you want to give them?
26. The film *Yesterday* imagines a world without the influence of The Beatles. Consider your favorite artist and write about how the world, or your life, would be different if you had never experienced their art.
27. Read “Ode to My 1977 Toyota” by Barbara Hanby. Write an ode to a car you once owned.
<https://writersalmanac.publicradio.org/index.php%3Fdate=2005%252F03%252F10.html>
28. Make a list poem about 10 things you wish had happened yesterday.
29. Read “My Cup” by Robert Friend. Write a three-line poem in which you give a piece of advice after learning you are about to die.
<https://ineedtoreadmorepoetry.tumblr.com/post/115004249669/my-cup-by-robert-friend>
30. Make a list poem about 10 things you hope happen today.
31. Write about your favorite toy you had as a child.
32. Make a list poem about 10 things you hope happen in the future.
33. Write about a birth you witnessed.
34. Imagine you could sell the days from your past. Write a poem that is a sales pitch for one of those days.
35. Write about a death you witnessed.

36. If you had to spend a week in silence with one person or animal in your life, who would it be? Write a poem tribute to this person or animal.
37. Read “Ordinary Life” by Barbara Crooker. Describe an ordinary day for you—but make that ordinary day seem miraculous somehow.
http://www.yourdaily-poem.com/listpoem.jsp?poem_id=2166
38. Brainstorm cultural events that are so shocking you remember where you were. Write a poem that tells the story of your day and concludes with the event.
39. Write about a family reunion you’ve attended, or, if you’ve never attended a family reunion, imagine organizing a family reunion (who you will invite, where you will meet, what you will do).
40. Write a poem about a goal that you failed to achieve and how it has impacted your life.
41. Describe a family tradition. If you can, include the origin of that tradition.
42. Brainstorm all the people, places, and things that you miss. Choose one person, place, or thing and write a poem that has three stanzas. Begin the first with “yesterday,” the second with “today,” and the third with “tomorrow.”
43. Write about a pet you had as a child.
44. Write a poem with a title that is longer than the actual poem.
45. Read “First Morning” by Joy Harjo. Write about the first morning after losing someone you love, or write about the first morning after the birth of someone you love. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mrrvhU39pMM>
46. Write a poem that is nine lines long. In those nine lines you must include both one of your earliest memories and one of your most recent experiences.
47. If the past were a person, what would past look like? Where would past live? What would past do for a living?
48. Write a poem that tells a linear story in five short stanzas. When you finish, scramble the order of the stanzas to create a different experience.
49. If the present were a person, what would present look like? Where would present live? What would present do for a living?

50. Choose a horrific event in history. Write a poem that sensitively explains the event to a child.
51. If the future were a person, what would future look like? Where would future live? What would future do for a living?
52. Write a poem that has two characters who interact through action and dialogue. By the end, one of the characters leaves.
53. Read “Afraid So” by Jeanne Marie Beaumont. Write a poem in which each line is a question about what could happen in the future.
<https://www.wenaus.com/poetry/afraid-so.html>
54. Write a poem in the form of a multiple choice question.
55. Read “Photograph for September 11” by Wislawa Szymborska. Write a poem about a significant historical event that happened during your lifetime. Make it personal, describing your response.
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/48799/photograph-from-september-11>
56. Write a poem where the speaker travels in time and interacts with their self on the last day of their life. What would you say to dying you?
57. Write about an encounter you had with a noteworthy person. Make the poem about you and your response to that person.
58. Brainstorm a list of serious problems in the world today. Write a poem where you invent and introduce an over-the-counter product that can solve one of the problems.
59. Walk through a cemetery, or imagine walking through a cemetery. Write down names and dates from the headstones. Imagine having a conversation with all the dead of the place. What do they say to you?
60. Brainstorm any fears you have about the future. Choose one, imagine it as a physical being, and write a poem that culminates in a confrontation with the fear.
61. Listen to the song “Yesterday” by Paul McCartney. Write a poem in response to that song—the poem’s title is “Today” or “Tomorrow.”
62. Write a 15-line or less poem that imagines your life if you would have married the first person you kissed. If you are married to that person, write a poem that imagines a life without them.

63. Read “Becoming Seventy” by Joy Harjo. Write about a significant birthday you’ve experienced. You could title the poem “Becoming Twenty,” “Becoming Fifty,” etc.
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/143935/becoming-seventy>
64. Brainstorm choices you’ve made in the past that you regret. Choose one and write a poem that imagines what would have happened if you had made a different choice.
65. Write about a place in nature that has drastically changed during your lifetime. Document that change.
66. Brainstorm a list of people in your life whom you love deeply. Choose one and write a poem in the form of an invitation that somehow conveys to the person how much they mean to you.
67. Describe an item of clothing you remember your mother, father, grandfather, or grandmother wearing frequently. Try to understand why it was so important to that person.
68. Imagine you are an all-powerful creator tasked with creating a new planet in our solar system. Write a poem that describes how you would begin your project and how you hope it would develop when you have completed your work.
69. Describe a photo of one of your ancestors. Write about the photo ekphrastically, entering into it in some way.
70. Write a poem that is 40 words or less and on a single page. Arrange the words on the page so that the poem visually echoes the content.
71. Write a “time capsule” poem in which you list and describe what you would include for someone 200 years in the future to uncover.
72. Write a 10-line poem that imagines something you do today changing the world.
73. Read “When Death Comes” by Mary Oliver. Write a poem about your own death. Make it comforting and peaceful.
http://www.phys.unm.edu/~tw/fas/yits/archive/oliver_whendeathcomes.html
74. Write a poem that is a response to a letter that you received from the president.

75. Write about the ending of something—a friendship, relationship, marriage, book, vacation, movie. Make it a meditation on what “ending” means.
76. Write a poem that travels a significant distance and ends where it began.
77. Imagine being a ghost when someone visits your grave 150 years from now. What questions do you want to ask that future person?
78. Write a poem where you are a witness to a scene in the Bible. Include some insight that is not in the text.
79. Read “At My Funeral” by Willis Barnstone. Write a poem in which you attend your own funeral.
<https://writersalmanac.publicradio.org/index.php%3Fdate=2005%252F01%252F28.html>
80. Write a title for every year that you’ve been alive. Choose your favorites and get rid of the rest. That’s your poem.