

Into the Poem: Have you ever watched a swim meet? Do you enjoy swimming? Can you relate to the wonderful onomatopoeia of the last word in the first line of “400-Meter Freestyle”? When Maxine Kumin writes, “The gun full swing the swimmer catapults and **cracks** . . .,” you can *hear* the swimmer’s body hit the water. The inner assonance and imagery of “that perfect **glass**” in the next line, heighten the intensity of that *crack*. If you have ever dived into a pool or a lake, you *know* the feeling of the slap of the water on your body.

Using single words, phrases, or sentences write what it feels like to be in the

Focus

Concrete poetry is typeset in a shape that suggests the subject of the poem. A concrete poem about a cat, for example, might typographically take the form of a cat. But why write the poem this way? For the poet, surely it is a challenge. For both poet and reader, there is something fun about typographic art. Concrete poetry makes us look at things in new ways. It captures our attention just through the sheer ingenuity of the poet. We read less self-consciously: It is easier for us to become involved in the poem, because we can appreciate it visually.

Notice

As you read the poem, what does Maxine Kumin do to involve you in the race? Your teacher may have already discussed the use of strings of single-syllable words. How many can you find in the poem? Write down your examples and try reading them aloud. Although we would normally think of a string as requiring at least four words, there are places in the poem where even three single-syllable words are very strong and effective.

Look also for metaphors, imagery, and unexpected combinations of words, for example, “astounding whites” in line 9.

400-Meter Freestyle

Maxine W. Kumin

The gun full swing the swimmer catapults¹ and cracks
s
i
x
feet away onto that perfect glass he catches at
a
n
d
throws behind him scoop after scoop cunningly² moving
t
h
e
water back to move him forward. Thrift is his wonderful
s
e
c
5 ret; he has schooled out all extravagance. No muscle
r
i
p
ples without compensation³ wrist cock⁴ to heel⁵ snap to
h
i
s
mobile⁶ mouth that siphons⁷ in the air that nurtures
h
i
m
at half an inch above sea level so to speak.

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1. **catapults** (KAT uh pultz): hurls or be hurled, to move quickly, suddenly, or forcibly.
 2. **cunningly** (KUN ing lee): shrewdly, slyly, craftily.
 3. **compensation** (KAHM pen SAY shun): reparation; restoration.
 4. **cock** (KAHK): to draw back in preparation for throwing or hitting.
 5. **heel** (HEE il): the rear of the palm, adjacent to the wrist.
 6. **mobile** (MO bill): capable of moving or being moved readily.
 7. **siphons** (SY finz): to convey, draw, or pass through.

—Studying the Selection—

First Impressions: Do you think the swimmer won the race? Give the reason for your conclusion.

Recalling

1. What signals the start of the race? How long does it take the swimmer to finish?
2. Name three actions the swimmer takes during the race.
3. What is the swimmer's secret?

Interpreting

4. Can we tell that the swimmer has the discipline that comes from experience and strenuous training? How so?

Concluding


5. How are the qualities of the swimmer in “400-Meter Freestyle” and the baseball player in “The Base Stealer” important for situations other than athletic competitions?

Examining Poetry

➔ **Concrete poetry** adds a visual element. The author uses the words themselves to help create a picture on the page. Although at times this makes scanning the page more difficult, the form is amusing and challenges our imagination.

1. What picture has Maxine Kumin created with the words on the page? What is the purpose of the words that are run vertically? What is the importance of the right-justified margin?
2. How does the absence of most punctuation contribute to the rhythm? (Note, especially, beginning with line fourteen there is no punctuation.) How does the absence of punctuation enable us to feel the action of the poem?
3. Does the visual quality of the poem add to your enjoyment of it? Did it help you feel like an observer or a participant in the race?

Creating and Writing

 Try your hand at a concrete poem.

- Choose a topic or theme that lends itself to making a shape with the words of the poem.
- It is helpful to begin by thinking of activities or objects that can be depicted simply. The sun, the

moon, a clock, a baseball diamond, a circle dance—the possibilities are virtually unlimited.

- Have fun!