Of all of the creative arts, poetry is the most difficult to define. Indeed, for much of human history, poetry has accompanied humankind as our method of expressing feelings about and reactions to the world around us. It is, perhaps, more useful to define what poetry is not.

Poetry is not something available to only a select few. Poetry is not confined to dusty books in dark corners of large libraries on the campuses of major universities. Poetry is not the business solely of bearded and bespectacled professors encaved in their offices. Poetry is not worthless. Poetry is not beyond you, nor is it a waste of your time.

Poetry is humanity’s attempt to make a statement in such a way that the language used speaks to and connects with the core of a human’s emotional spirit. Poems move us, often in ways difficult to discern. But, as the annual thousands of rejection letters received by aspiring poets across the nation from poetry journals suggest, not everyone can be a poet. The realm of the professional poet is, perhaps, a space that is beyond most of us. Poetry, however, is not the exclusive purview of the poet. Anyone can write poetry. You can write poetry.

The first thing you should do is read good poetry. You do not need to do this in order to copy, recreate, or even emulate what you read. You need to read good poetry so you can determine for yourself what makes poetry good for you. Some folks like Emily Dickenson or Denise Levertov. Others prefer Nikki Giovanni or Robert Frost. Still others like Langston Hughes or Natasha Trethewey. I would recommend Billy Collins, Seamus Heaney, and Robert Penn Warren. Start with someone’s recommendations, and then see where those poets take you.

In the end, though, all one needs to write a good poem is the ability to see past the expectations held by most people as to what poems must be. Poems do not have to rhyme; I assure you, they do not have to rhyme. Poems do not have to follow a set pattern, but they can. Poems do not have to use the most flowery and artistic language. What poems must do is have something to say worthy of touching the readers’ souls. A good poem reaches its readers in such a way that an image, a sense, or a feeling lingers with that reader for minutes, moments, hours, days, and lifetimes. A reader’s mind returns to the idea time and time again that was found in a good poem.

A good poem persuades the reader that it is a good poem through its connection to that reader’s mind, body, and soul, not just the writer’s. Poetry can be personal and specific, but good poetry should be universally human. Good poetry is meaningful to more than the one person who wrote it.