

Building a Poetry Manuscript

First, it doesn't get any easier, not if you're doing it right. But assembling a manuscript is also one of the most exciting stages that your poems will go through. If the book is alive and breathing (which it should be – I can often tell when a book has grown stale for the poet; it almost always transmits this to the reader), the process is a generative one, sparking new poems and opening up older ones for revision.

1. Most of us start constructing a manuscript with a sheaf of poems that we think are finished and ready to be brought into the world as a book. Hopefully, however, that pile is far bigger than the book you will ultimately put together. Poems that work beautifully on their own do not automatically get a place in your book. This is heartbreaking, I know. If you can steel yourself to put aside the poems that don't contribute to the overall architecture of your project, much as you have learned to cut those favorite images and lines from individual poems, your book will be stronger for it. We have probably all had the experience of reading a great book of poetry only to come across a poem that just doesn't fit. Well, that's probably *that* poem, the one the author couldn't bring him/herself to cut.
2. It doesn't matter where, or whether, a poem has been published. Often the poems I am most drawn to in a book are ones that have never found a home. Many journals accept poems that the majority of readers/editors agree on; this too often lends itself to a preference for "safer" poems with more general appeal and leaves unpublished the most daring and exciting of your pieces.
3. When ordering your manuscript, spread your poems out on the floor. (This, by the way, is why I need you to not double-side your manuscripts for class – I usually end up doing the same thing when I am commenting on them.) What relationships develop when certain poems sit alongside others? You'll find that particular themes emerge more powerfully from a poem depending on what precedes and follows it. There is no "one way" to order your poems. Rather, you will end up working with the sequence that best fulfills your goals for the book.
4. Think about issues of pacing when you put your book together. Just as in a novel or short story, keep readers on their toes or you risk having them tune out. This is when you may start thinking about sections, whether to scatter throughout or cluster together poems that share very similar themes, etc.
5. The poems that open your book should be the strongest ones. You need to hook readers, and that means they need to be wowed by the first few pages. They should also establish the stylistic and thematic concerns of the book, as well as the tension or conflict that the manuscript as a whole will explore. Remember, too,

that these opening poems are the ones that “teach” your reader how to read the book. It is a contract of sorts with them.

6. “Good” poems: cut them – the merely good are taking up space that your “great” poems should be occupying. If you only have 50 pages of great poems, then your book is 50 pages long. Don’t add in a few pages of merely good or proficient poems to make it longer. Check out individual volumes of poetry that have won or been nominated for the Pulitzer Prize in past years; you may be surprised to see that they are short and tightly wrought without any filler poems. Also, weak poems have absolutely no place in a manuscript. Don’t try to bury them somewhere in the middle of the book.
7. You need to know what your book is “about.” It is also okay for you to change your mind.
8. The title should connect to the manuscript’s central concern. Just as the title for an individual poem should do more than sit above it like a hat, you want the title of your book to sit at a slant to the book, enriching the text. Titles can come from poem titles (be careful that the poem lives up to this pressure – readers will expect *a lot* from that poem), phrases within poems (I especially love titles that are transformed when you encounter them in the poem itself), or be invented whole-cloth. When another (famous) writer used the title I had grown attached to as the title for her collected poems, I actually crowd-sourced five alternate titles. It helped me eliminate a couple dreadful ideas (“Blood Root” – what was I thinking?!?)
9. Be careful with how much scaffolding you use. Scaffolding includes epigraphs, section numbers and/or titles, proems, notes, etc. Unnecessary framing can weigh down a manuscript. Some editors dislike proems. I think the rule of thumb is just that they better be good, though the same can be said for the first poem in general.
10. To quote Jeffrey Levine, editor of Tupelo Press: “Less is more. Keep your manuscript in the area of 48-64 pages – show your reader that you’ve done the important work of weeding and pruning.” Enough said.
11. When you think you have a working draft, let it sit for a week and then read it *out loud* from start to finish in one sitting. Since you’ve kept your book to a reasonable length, this is doable. It is best if you can find a loyal friend to sit and listen; I find that that makes me more aware of how an audience would receive it. I can be indulgent with myself when I am the only listener. This will also help you find typos or grammatically incorrect/awkward constructions.

12. After letting it sit and reading it aloud, go back to the beginning of these suggestions and work your way through them again.
13. Continue to revise your poems, even if they once seemed “finished.” I am of the opinion that there is no such thing as “finished.” Ever. There is only the point at which we do not possess the skill to continue to improve them. Because we are constantly learning, you hopefully know more now than you did a year ago when you stopped working on a certain poem. Don’t let yourself feel that a published poem is therefore finished, either – I respect the opinions of editors, but a lot of factors go into accepting a poem, and some of these have little to do with the quality of a given piece.
14. Along these lines, once you look at a group of your poems, you will probably notice that you tend to repeat yourself a bit. This is okay – but you’ll need to be aware that you can’t use the word “humus” ten times in one book unless it is super important and grows in resonance each time. Likewise, look out for words like dark, light, soft, warm, etc. I like to use wordle for this. (If you cut and paste in the entire text of your manuscript, it creates a word cloud for you. The words that show up biggest are the ones you use most (too?) often.) There is good repetition and bad repetition, and you want to avoid the latter.
15. A book should have two-and-a-half to three themes that braid it together. These themes can be stylistic, thematic, imagistic, whatever. But one theme relentlessly hit is boring; more than three can get confusing.
16. Avoid publishing trends. Lately there has been an onslaught of “project books.” And yes, I wrote one, too. (In my own defense, I didn’t know that this trend was picking up speed when I wrote it. Unfortunately it was in full flower by the time my book was published a couple years after acceptance.) Not every book should be a three-section project book. If your book needs to be in three sections, and happens to pursue a focused project, then go for it. But feel free to find your book’s natural form.