

WRITER'S DIGEST

How to Draw Influence from Other Writers Without Plagiarizing: 6 Tips to Avoid an Ailey O'Toole Situation

Those who are in-the-know on poetry news most likely have heard about the latest high-profile case of plagiarism in poetry. The poem "Gun Metal," which was nominated for the 2018 Pushcart Prize, and many other poems written by Ailey O'Toole have been found to plagiarize at least 11 other poets. Here's how to avoid this problem when you're interested in borrowing influence from another writer.

CASSANDRA LIPP • DEC 14, 2018

Plagiarism in poetry is nothing new; [it's happened before](#). Those who are in-the-know on poetry news most likely have heard about the latest high-profile case of plagiarism in poetry. The poem "Gun Metal," which was nominated for the 2018 Pushcart Prize, and many other poems written by Ailey O'Toole [have been found to plagiarize](#) at least 11 other poets.

The news broke when a former colleague of the poet Rachel McKibbons found that "Gun Metal" too closely resembled McKibbons's poem "three strikes" from her 2017 book *blud*. Rhythm and Bones Press canceled the release of O'Toole's upcoming chapbook *Grief and What Comes After* once the plagiarism accusations were brought to their attention. Online literary journals that have previously published poems by O'Toole have taken them down.

"We are hurt, we feel the pain & anger of those who have had work stolen," the trauma-focused independent press said in a statement.

After the plagiarism accusations, McKibbons was granted access to the unpublished manuscript of *Grief and What Comes After*. She found that other poems in the manuscript plagiarize her work. At the time of writing this article, it has been found that Ailey O'Toole plagiarized at least 10 other poets in "Gun Metal" and other poems in her manuscript, including: Christina Stoddard, Wanda Deglane, Amber Tamblyn, Hieu Minh Nguyen, and Brenna Twohy.

Many of those whose lines were plagiarized by O'Toole are understandably hurt, especially because many of their lines describe trauma they endured. After having gone through harrowing experiences, how could O'Toole use their lines, and therefore their trauma, as a mask?

This isn't to say that it's not OK to be influenced by other writers and artists. In fact, it is arguably impossible to start writing verses of your own and know what good writing looks like without reading the work of others. Here are six tips on how to be influenced by and borrow from other writers without plagiarizing.

How to Draw Influence from Other Writers Without Plagiarizing

1. Don't make any attempt to pass off others' work as your own.

This tip is a bit of a no-brainer. You *will* get caught attempting to pass off someone else's work as your own. Search engines and other online tools that check for plagiarism make sure of this. Not to mention, a lie like this can ruin your reputation in the literary world. Editors who find out your work is plagiarized will not want to work with you again, and they likely have friends that are also editors who they can warn about you too. Just don't do it.

2. If you feel tempted to plagiarize, ask yourself *why* you feel so compelled to borrow in the first place.

[Christina Stoddard](http://christinastoddard.com) (christinastoddard.com), whose final poem in her 2015 book *Hive* was plagiarized by O'Toole, says to ask yourself what borrowed lines are adding to your work that you wouldn't be able to add otherwise. Why do you feel that you can't find another way to say what needs to be said?

"Consider the possibility that your poem just isn't fully formed yet. It might need a little more time in the oven," she said. "Writing a poem is, as Stephen Dobyns put it, an attempt to put the best words in the best order. But what that means will be different from person to person. Find your best words and your best order, and you will always be writing in your own voice."

Try using the words you feel compelled to borrow as an epigraph preceding the poem instead. This is an effective way to show that your work is in response to or inspired by certain words while showing where they came from (and avoiding plagiarism).

3. If you use inspiration from others, ensure that your work is original and transformative.

Many writers have heard the T.S. Eliot quote "Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal," from his 1920 essay collection *The Sacred Wood*. However, the second and perhaps lesser-known portion of this famous quote is "bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better, or at least something different."

This portion of Eliot's quote is also the rule of fair use. According to U.S. copyright law, the use of material that someone else owns the copyright to is permissible if the work is transformative. That is, any creative work that uses parts of another person's work must be significantly different from the original. This is why parodies and novels such as *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* are legal under copyright law.

In the case of O'Toole's work, some lines were copied verbatim from other poets, some paraphrased lines from others and some were facsimiles of others' lines with certain words replaced with synonyms. As this method of inspiration is not transformative, O'Toole's is guilty of plagiarism.

Take the Tarfia Faizullah poem "[Reading Willa Cather in Bangladesh](#)" from her 2014 book *Seam* as an example of transformative work. A note at the beginning states that the poem contains lines from Willa Cather's *Song of a Lark*. Roman numerals indicate which lines these are. Under the lines from Cather, Faizullah adds her own original—and beautiful—thoughts that are inspired by Cather's words. Reading *Song of a Lark* in Bangladesh and comparing it to this setting *reimagines* Cather's words.

Taking inspiration from another writer still means that *you* need to do most of the work to create an original poem. Your influencer should serve as a call to action to incite your work rather than write most of it for you. Simply lifting from others is plagiarism; however, lifting and reshaping and adding your own words to the work of others is OK.

4. If borrowing lines, indicate which lines are borrowed and where they came from.

It's common to find author's notes at the end of a poetry collection, where they attribute lines that were borrowed from and inspired by others. It is fine to publish writing that has been influenced by others, as long as those that took part in the creation of the work are attributed.

Always indicate borrowed lines with an author's note at the beginning or end of the poem. For a collection of poems, you can add this attribution to your author's notes at the end as well. It is also preferable to indicate which lines are borrowed if they are not widely recognizable lines such as "T'was the night before Christmas." You can offset these lines in your poem with italics, quotes, or a statement in your author's note.

For example, in her 2018 collection *If They Come For Us*, Fatimah Asghar states that her poem "A Starless Sky is a Joy Too" ends with a line from Nikki Giovanni in an epigraph at the beginning.

If borrowed words form the title of your work, indicate with an author's note the source of your title.

Stoddard says that it is also wise to ask permission from original poet you intend to borrow from if they are still alive and honor their answer. "You cannot predict how they'll feel about you using their work and your good intentions may not carry the day," she says.

She adds that it's also a good idea to be straightforward when submitting work to journal editors. "I've seen the idea floated around that when you submit a poem that invokes another work, you should offer to show the editors the original material you're invoking," she says. "Trying to behave ethically goes a long way."

5. Ensure that poems modeled "after" another writer do not copy them.

Many poems in Ailey O'Toole's manuscript state that they are "after" another poet. Yet these "after" poems paraphrase or plagiarize these poets. This is how to NOT write a poem after someone else.

When writing a poem after another writer's work, create something that reacts to their work or emulates (but doesn't copy) their style. You're aiming to create something that can continue a conversation about their work and make the writer feel honored rather than cheated.

Take the Danez Smith poem "[Litany With Blood All Over](#)" from their 2017 book *Don't Call Us Dead*, for example. At the end of the collection, Smith states that this poem is after Richard Siken's poem "[Litany in Which Certain Things Are Crossed Out](#)." As far as the content of the poems go, Smith's poem doesn't copy Siken's poem in any way except that they are both litanies. Smith's litany is unique to their own experience.

6. Try writing a cento, Golden Shovel, or found poem to honor other voices.

Many poetic forms borrow from others, such as the [cento](#), in which every line comes from another source. The title of a cento may also come from another source. As a result of the juxtaposition of the various lines and images, centos often create irony or humor. Had Ailey O'Toole titled her poem "Centos of Gun Metal" and tagged the list of people she borrowed from, her work would not be considered plagiarism.

Terrance Hayes [invented his own form of poetry](#) called the [Golden Shovel](#), in which the end words of each line are taken from [a Gwendolyn Brooks poem](#) and kept in order so that the original poem can still be read from the new poem. Try using this form for a poet you admire.

A popular form of poetry that also uses words from other sources is the found poem. Words from anywhere can be used to create this collage of words—newspaper and magazine clippings, billboards, bathroom stall graffiti, and more. The poet serves to curate these words and make sense of them together.

One type of found poem, the [erasure](#), is created when a poet deletes words from a text in order to create something different and original. This is commonly done with a newspaper and a black marker to create "blackout poems." When creating an erasure or blackout poem, remember to only retain half of the original text or less in order to avoid plagiarism.

As always, cite the original source of the words used. You may even use the name of the form in your poem's title to indicate that you are using borrowed words, such as "Erasure of Wuthering Heights" or "Langston Hughes Golden Shovel."

The bottom line is that you should always credit your sources and never try to pass off someone else's work as your own. Your work should still remain original and respectful of those that you borrow from. When in doubt, simply choose the best voice there is: your own.

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