

tools for navigating your living universe

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American Sentences Workshop Handout

American Sentences as a poetic form was Ginsberg's effort to make American the haiku. If haiku is seventeen syllables going down in Japanese text, he would make American Sentences seventeen syllables going across, linear, like just about everything else in America. In *Cosmopolitan Greetings*, his 1994 book, he published two and a half pages of these nuggets, some of which had scene-setting preambles. For example:

Tompkins Square Lower East Side N.Y.

Four skinheads stand in the streetlight rain chatting under an umbrella.
1987

Rainy night on Union square, full moon. Want more poems? Wait till
I'm dead.
August 8, 1990, 3:30A.M.

In a 2001 interview with Anne Waldman and Andrew Schelling, Andrew said Allen's idea for *American Sentences*: *...was based on haiku. He was also very interested in Buddhism for the second half of his life, and probably the central mantra or wisdom phrase of Buddhism comes from the Heart Sutra. It runs, "Gate Gate Paragate, Para Sam Gate Bodhi Swaha." And Allen discovered that has seventeen syllables also. And so he felt that maybe seventeen syllables had a more universal (Anne chimes in: healing properties) ...a more universal application. It was not just located in Japan or old India, and so this is a way of him playing with that possibility.*

So, the qualities of such a sentence? Like most other good poetry it should be **Imagistic**, with that gap of meaning between the writer and the reader; ie: phenomenology. Some kind of **juxtaposition** helps create a tension. For example:

- 1.19 — *Get it in your mouth, not sure if you should swallow or not — oyster.*
- 1.24 — *The look on RR's dream face when the army crushes a piano.*
- 2.09 — *Steve's Civil Service motto: Why work for an asshole when you can be one?*
- 3.04 — *After I got her email, I pulled the extra pillow from my bed.*
- 4.05 — *They want a stool sample, what a load of crap! No Pop, it's just a smidge.*
- 4.05 — *The sign at dairy queen says: New Flamethrower Chicken Now Hiring.*
- 4.08 — *Tell Richard I'm laying off women — he says You gonna wear the patch?*
- 4.18 — *Each from our respective cars watching her tennis game, the ex- & I.*
- 5.16 — *Ma before the Wednesday pillbox — Cholesterol or Tranquilizer?*
- 7.03 — *Hour's wages shot up in three sparkly minutes — Happy Independence Day!*
- 7.04 — *Cat corpse on sidewalk, rabbit corpse on the bike trail — Happy Independence Day!*
- 7.26 — *I told you I don't have time on my phone, that's why I keep hangin' up on you!*
- 7.31 — *Sign of age? She puts on vanilla perfume, I wonder who's got cake.*

- 8.27 — *If you can crawl out your chair to get on her man, you can take a beatin'.*
 9.07 — *That's an experience I've never had* he says, nose full of menstrual blood.
 9.08 — Good thing I cleaned the kitchen floor shiny target on which the cat could urp.
 11.05 — Distracted, I can't get by the cat urp before it becomes a hot lunch.
 11.16 — Post Traumatic Stress Disorder at Lowe's — Rotorwash of ceiling fans.
 11.17 — This piece of free-range chicken may be live, would taste better w/ floor dirt.
 11.20 — On the beach he skidded to a stop & then someone sucked out his heart.
 11.27 — Yesterday doctors gave Dick Cheney shock treatment on the wrong organ.
 12.19 — His T-shirt said: *Vegetarian is Indian for Bad Hunter.*

These poems are all from 2007, and we can see several categories. There are cat poems on July 4, September 8, November 5 and on November 17, the poem was written from a cat's perspective. **Found poems** are entirely transcribed, or set up in the poem, from January 19, February 9, April 5, July 26, August 27 and December 19. Some poems are from **dreams** (my daughter Rebecca Rose is often called RR to save a syllable) and some are from **relationships**. (That has been a rich source of sentences over the past 8 years.)

The key comes from a Ginsberg notion, *poets are people who notice what they notice*. This is a **mindfulness** exercise and, the more aware you can be, the better the poems. They do reflect the play of the intellect, so a dull mind will create especially dull poems, but at least they'll be short! In seventeen syllables there is enough room for **rhythm** and word music. Dig that line, *rotor wash of ceiling fans*. Dactylic meter if you're scoring. You can find other examples above.

Avoiding some of the rules of grammar, such as the poem September 8, also add a nice effect and just enough **busted syntax** so not as to obscure meaning, but be another Ginsberg Mind Writing Slogan, *Maximum information, minimum number of syllables*. (**Condensing**.) Ginsberg also comes from the William Carlos Williams school of using **demotic speech**, so the found sentence of July 26 provides a good example of that, as does use of the word *urp*.

As in most good poetry, **commentary is implied through imagery** in the best of these poems. Surely the poem on November 27 is a **political** poem, but the subject is addressed with humor and subtext. Is the author calling for electro-shock therapy or electrodes on the genitals? We won't know, but it is left to the imagination. Herein is that aforementioned g a p. Jack Spicer said, *Muses are patient with truth and commentary as long as it doesn't get into the poem*.

Exercise: Go out and take 10 minutes to slow down, look around and get two American Sentences. It is not as easy as writing seventeen syllables, but having a notebook on you at all times, making a commitment to writing one a day, or two a week, or whatever, will keep your hand in it at times when you are not writing much else. You can also go back and have a short, imagistic journal that may serve as source material for other poems. Remember: Imagistic, Juxtaposition, Found Poems, Mindfulness, rhythm, busted syntax, condensed, demotic speech. Refrain from commentary. It's a bad habit. American Sentences, on the other hand... *Look! He says he has American Sentences on the other hand!*

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