

The Container Poem

What we collect in the containers around us often reveal interesting things about our personalities, personal habits, or even the totality of our existence. The container poem lists the contents of whatever container is the subject of the poem and draws one or more conclusions about the owner(s) of the container. “Discarded Shopping Cart” illustrates this special type of list poem.*

Discarded Shopping Cart

A plastic jug of water
An extra pair of boots
A camouflage poncho to guard against the rain
A bundle of dirty blankets
A baseball bat for self-defense
A bag of dog-eared science fiction novels
A bottle of cheap wine in a brown, paper bag
A rubber mat for sleeping on hard surfaces
A half-eaten hamburger neatly wrapped in yesterday=s newspaper
A tattered snapshot of a man and his family in happier times
A portable home for a shattered life.

To write a container poem, choose some type of receptacle for your subject; go through its contents; and write down a noun phrase that briefly describes each item. If you choose a fanciful topic like the ones in the second list below, you will need to fire up your imagination and brainstorm what you might find if you could dig around in someone’s brain, heart, conscience, etc. Once you have listed in random order all of the items that you find in the container, study the list and ask yourself what these things, when considered together, tell you about the person who has collected them. This idea, which may be written as another noun phrase or as a complete sentence, becomes your interpretation of that person’s character or life or philosophy and provides a final line for the poem. It is the unifying idea that makes sense of what at first appears to be a meaningless collection of objects. Once you have written your closing line, arrange the contents of your topic above this in whatever order seems to illustrate most effectively the assumption contained in the final line of the poem.

Suggested containers, each of which may become the subject of a container poem:

my little brother’s pocket	my pastor’s Bible
my girlfriend’s purse	Grandpa’s tool box
my dad’s wallet	the glove compartment of my Ford Ranger
my best friend’s backpack	my brother’s closet
my sister’s diary	a child’s toy box
my teacher’s desk drawer	the attic of an old house
my mother’s junk room	a wall safe
my English notebook	Grandma’s sewing basket
a lawyer’s brief case	a student’s locker

a young girl's hope chest
a scrapbook
the back seat of a salesman's car
a prom queen's jewelry box

a photo album
a fisherman's tackle box
a beauty contestant's make-up kit
a recipe box

Container poem writers may also choose more fanciful subjects:

a rock star's brain
a senior's heart at graduation
an athlete's first aid kit
a shark's stomach
General Patton's foot locker
the principal's filing cabinet

Santa Claus' medicine cabinet
the hard drive on the President's computer
a teen idol's imagination
a monster's refrigerator
a man's memory as he proposes marriage
a pirate's treasure chest

* A list poem, sometimes called a catalogue poem, consists of a list of things in either rhymed or unrhymed form that, when taken as a whole, creates a general impression of the subject. It has no set length and is often based on the poet's personal experiences.