

The Highway Poem

Life is a journey (or more accurately, a collection of journeys), and where we go in life changes us. The highway poem catalogs the sights and experiences that we associate with specific trips we have taken or with specific stretches of asphalt that we travel each day. The title of the poem is usually the name of the street, highway, road, or interstate that forms the subject of the poem. “I-25 from Pueblo to Denver” illustrates this type of list poem.*

I-25 from Pueblo to Denver

Prairie to the east and mountains to the west.
Eighty miles per hour with sunshine overhead.
A flashing blue light in my rearview at Redwood Gulch.
Tumble weeds darting across the interstate.
Dark clouds rolling in from the Rockies.
A 20-minute delay at Cumberland as a wreck is cleared.
A blinding snow storm at Colorado Springs that slows traffic to a crawl.
Rush-hour congestion at Columbine with bumper to bumper intimacy.
A slow trip into the fast-paced city.
Much deserved rest in a quiet hotel room.
Dreams of Conestoga wagons and dirt roads.
Settlers headed west at a snail’s pace.
How far we’ve come in 150 years!

To write a highway poem, choose a public thoroughfare that has some special meaning to you and one that you have traveled enough to visualize its features with your eyes closed.

1. On a blank sheet of paper or on your computer screen, begin listing in random order the things you have seen and experienced on that street, highway, or country road. This list may include landmarks that anyone would notice while walking or driving such as a rickety bridge or a fast food restaurant shaped like a cowboy boot. However, you may also list less noticeable features such as a favorite place for state troopers to set up radar stations or a large rock that sits on the state line. You may also list things that have happened to you or others on that road, experiences that you automatically associate with it: running out of gas at midnight in a rain storm, finding a beloved pet injured by a passing car, or setting up a lemonade stand when you were a child.
2. Study your list, and look for relationships and patterns. For example, if you are interested in hunting and fishing, you probably notice wildlife and land features that attract wildlife wherever you travel. If many of the items on the list you have brainstormed relate to this general subject, you may wish to scratch off your list any items that do not relate to hunting and fishing. As you focus your list on a particular subject or motif, your emerging poem’s theme takes shape; this is what you want to say with your poem or the impression you wish to leave with readers. In the example above, the ironic theme of the poem is that even though modern technology makes traversing the vast reaches of the American West much easier than it used to be for the pioneers, the going can still be slow at times. This is the bigger idea behind the poem than just listing the physical features of a roadway.

3. State your point in the last line of the poem, and list above it the items you have selected from the original list. You may wish to arrange these roadside sights/sites in the order that a first-time traveler would see them or, if the emphasis is on personal experiences, in the order that they happened to you.

* 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.