

# In the Poetry Laboratory, Doing Bernadette Mayer's "Experiments"

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*Set yourself the task of writing in a way you've never written before.*

We begin with a simple title, "Experiments," and an attribution, *by Bernadette Mayer & her St. Mark's Poetry Project Workshop, circa the mysterious year of 1988*. The particulars of that mysterious year's events may be withheld, but the list they created is a generous document that promises to delight, educate, and bear fruit—as much a poem in its own right as it is an instruction guide and an *ars poetica*.

*In a poem, list what you know.*

Bernadette Mayer's "Experiments" give us all permission to do just that—to liberate what we *do* know, test what we *think* we know, determine what we *don't* know, and challenge what we *thought* we knew about feeling, sensing, and translating the world into language and that language into poetry. Hers is a wacky laboratory full of sticky oddities and sparkling revelations.

*What is the poem of the future?*

What I love is that many of the "Experiments" are straightforward, easy-to-follow prompts that help new poets (or even non-poets) generate poetic material, while others venture into philosophical questioning, or are themselves intricate and playful explorations of what a poetry "prompt" looks like. They are funny. They are dead serious. They are short and simple, or long and involved, easy or seemingly impossible.

*Write a "perfect" poem.*

Write from dreams; write a poem about love and landlords; list ways of making love or titles for unwritten pieces; write with your voice or from dreams or memories; write in questions or in traditional forms; write from loss or anger; write science and geography; write systematically, freely, and everything in between.

*Attempt to write a poem or series of poems that will change the world.*

The fearlessness and unending permission granted by the "Experiments" rubs off. They command boldness, wildness, nonsense, and wholly (or holy) new kinds of sense. That's the beauty of working from the list: you absorb its energy and write what you didn't even know was there—and find yourself asking where poetry stops and the world begins. When experimenting with other poetry

scientists, you absorb each other's energy as well—steal, swap, build, collaborate, echo, harmonize, clash. And you can't be afraid of failure, because you get to embrace that, too.

*Study the worst poems ever written, then write a bad poem.*

The recently published book, *Please Add to This List*, from Tender Buttons Press (2015) presents the original list of experiments followed by poems written in response to the list. The “sample” poems, written by published poets as well as people who knew nothing about poetry (including the editor's own mother) serve as models, discussion pieces, and inspiration. We are invited to write poems in response to the list; write poems in response to the poems written in response to the list; write new list prompts and poems in response to those... The universe of the “Experiments” is an infinite and expanding one, and encompasses everything.

*Write what can't be written.*

The “Experiments” are also a powerful entreaty to abandon notions of “canon” and democratize the art form we call “poetry.” Write with the knowledge that language belongs to all of us—and so do poems, whether or not we tell ourselves they are “original.”

*Trade poems with others and do not consider them your own.*

Your contribution is valuable. Your contribution is essential. It gets piled on, but the size of the existing pile (or list) in no way diminishes the power and importance of adding another voice. Yours. Mine. Anyone's.

*Write on a piece of paper where something is already printed or written.*

Dipping my pen into the magic ink of the “Experiments” never fails to surprise and delight me. This is the act of poetry Bernadette Mayer and her students generously envision, enact, and demand: to respond, reinvent, amplify.

*Please add to this list.*

We end with a simple imperative. We begin (make that *continue*) the revolution.

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*Come into the (virtual) lab and “experiment” with other living poets! Join the online 4-week class “Please Add to This List” to do just that. Class begins February 1. Details and registration are [here](#).*