

DINGING THE POEM

John Caddy

Given: The sound of a poem is part of what the poem communicates, and can be said to convey part of the meaning. Assonance (repeating vowel sounds), for example, is often used to set a mood, or tone.

Current American English usage is awash in the present participle, all those words that end in *-ing*. It is not an easy sound to ignore, but it is an easy sound and two-beat singing to help create an annoying singsong rhythm that is so regular it is stupefying.

Often the line will be stronger without the participle. Compare these two versions of the same lines.

The pines, resigned, are drooping white.	The pines, resigned, droop white.
The black shadow of a single crow is flapping slowly across the still dark winter sky.	The shadow of a single crow flaps across the still dark winter sky.

The rhythms of the first pair of lines are quite different. In the left version, the lines are almost a rhythmic mirror. Four syllables arranged weak-strong, weak-strong; ta-tum, ta-tum (two iambs)

In the right version, the line is tightened, cleaner, and has two strong beats (a spondee).

In the second example, cutting a few words that do no work*, and changing a participle to a simple present verb changes the lines markedly. They have a stronger impact. The first version contains the second, but is 'watery' in comparison. When you say them aloud the difference is striking—or shall I say, "the difference strikes"?

Don't worry about those names above—just think in beats.

**flapping* already says *slowly*, so cut '*slowly*'

**black shadow*—black adds nothing, cut it.

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