

O:JA&L Free Presses
GUIDES & RUBRICS

An analytical rubric for
COWBOY POETRY

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Publishing since 2017 as *OPEN: Journal of Arts & Letters* (O:JA&L) and its imprints Buttonhook Press, HOT BUTTON PRESS *Contemporary Issues*, HIGH BUTTON PRESS *Contemporary Art*, Dally Post Press: *Cowboy Poetry*, HAL: *Heuristic Algorithmic Library* and FIREFIGHT PRESS: *Trench Art*
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Made available online and/or printed in the USA and elsewhere as a novelty and commemorative document celebrating the publication of O:JA&L's PDF pamphlet.

This project was made possible, in part, through support from
[Grayling and Wraith](#), a growth marketing company.



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OPEN: Journal of Arts & Letters (O:JA&L)

Written Cowboy Poetry Analysis and Evaluation Rubric

This rubric supports consistent, evidence-based evaluation of written Cowboy Poetry, including traditional rhymed and metered work rooted in ranching, trail, rodeo, and rural Western life, as well as contemporary poems practiced across the trans-Mississippi West. Evaluators should consider both the poem as a written literary artifact and its connection to Cowboy Poetry's oral, communal, occupational, and regional traditions: narrative accessibility, memorable sound, vernacular authority, humor or pathos, relationship to land and animals, and respect for lived Western experience.

Scoring note: Evaluate conventions, dialect, occupational vocabulary, Spanish, Indigenous, African American, immigrant, and regional language influences, spelling choices, and grammatical variation in relation to purpose, audience, genre, and voice. Do not penalize nonstandard usage when it is purposeful, controlled, respectful, and effective. Cowboy Poetry may be plainspoken without being simplistic; accessibility should be judged alongside craft, precision, and artistic depth.

Scoring note: This rubric uses a threshold scale rather than a continuous five-point scale. A score of **3** represents the minimum acceptable performance for a category. A score of **1** indicates performance below minimum expectations, while scores of **4** and **5** indicate increasing levels of proficiency and mastery. Because **3** is the threshold for acceptable performance, no score of **2** is used. To calculate weighted points, divide the category score by 5 and multiply by that category's maximum value. The six weighted values total **100 points**.

Category	Weight	Score 1 / 3 / 4 / 5	Weighted score	Quick note
Language, dialect, and conventions	10	___ / 5	___ / 10	_____
Form, narrative structure, and tradition	15	___ / 5	___ / 15	_____
Sound, rhythm, rhyme, and oral presence	15	___ / 5	___ / 15	_____
Diction, voice, and Western vernacular	15	___ / 5	___ / 15	_____
Subject, theme, imagery, and place	15	___ / 5	___ / 15	_____
Authenticity and genuineness	15	___ / 5	___ / 15	_____
Unity of impression and audience effect	15	___ / 5	___ / 15	_____
Total weighted score			___ / 100	Percentage: ___ %

	1 Point	3 Points	4 Points	5 Points
LANGUAGE, DIALECT, AND CONVENTIONS	Grammar, punctuation, spelling, capitalization, or usage frequently interfere with meaning, and dialect or regional language appears accidental, stereotyped, or uncontrolled.	Language is generally controlled enough to support meaning. Dialect, idiom, or ranch vocabulary may appear, though consistency and purpose may be uneven.	Conventions and departures from convention are deliberate. Dialect, occupational terms, and regional phrasing strengthen voice, rhythm, tone, and cultural setting.	Language use is precise, respectful, and artistically necessary. Regional speech, code-switching, humor, and plainspoken phrasing feel fully controlled and integral to meaning.
Evaluator remarks for Language conventions: _____				

	1 Point	3 Points	4 Points	5 Points
FORM, NARRATIVE STRUCTURE, AND TRADITION	Structure appears arbitrary, incomplete, or confusing. Narrative movement, stanza pattern, lineation, or relation to Cowboy Poetry tradition is weak or unclear.	The poem uses an identifiable structure, often narrative or anecdotal, that generally supports meaning. Traditional forms or contemporary variations are present but may be uneven.	Form is deliberate and effective. Line breaks, stanzas, pacing, story arc, turn, and ending reinforce Cowboy Poetry's oral/narrative inheritance and the poem's written shape.	Form is highly controlled and integral to interpretation. The poem honors, extends, or knowingly revises tradition through memorable structure, momentum, and closure.
Evaluator remarks for Form: _____				

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SOUND, RHYTHM, RHYME, AND ORAL PRESENCE	1 Point Sound choices are minimal, accidental, or distracting. Meter, rhyme, repetition, cadence, or phrasing do not clearly support meaning or read-aloud effectiveness.	3 Points The poem uses some purposeful rhythm, rhyme, repetition, or cadence. It can be read aloud with a generally clear beat, though effects may be inconsistent.	4 Points Sound is controlled and expressive. Meter, rhyme, internal echo, repetition, pauses, and plainspoken music reinforce voice, humor, emotion, and memorability.	5 Points Sonic design is memorable and integral. The poem carries strongly on the page and in the mouth, with cadence suited to recitation and rooted in Cowboy Poetry's oral tradition.
Evaluator remarks for Sound: _____				

DICTION, VOICE, AND WESTERN VERNACULAR	1 Point Word choices are vague, generic, romanticized, or clichéd. Western terms may feel pasted on, inaccurate, or unsupported by voice and situation.	3 Points Diction is generally appropriate to subject, speaker, and audience. Some words, idioms, or occupational details are vivid, though precision and freshness may vary.	4 Points Word choice is specific, economical, and engaging. Vernacular, humor, technical terms, understatement, and figurative language deepen voice and credibility.	5 Points Diction is striking, exact, and memorable. The poem's voice feels earned; each word contributes to character, place, emotional resonance, and artistic authority.
Evaluator remarks for Diction: _____				

SUBJECT, THEME, IMAGERY, AND PLACE	1 Point Subject or theme is unclear, overly general, or dependent on stock Western imagery. Details of land, work, animals, community, or history are thin or disconnected.	3 Points Theme is identifiable and supported by some concrete images. The poem engages ranch, rodeo, trail, rural, or Western life, though development may be familiar or uneven.	4 Points Theme is thoughtfully developed through vivid images of place, labor, animals, weather, travel, memory, community, humor, loss, endurance, or change across the West.	5 Points Theme and imagery are richly integrated. The poem reveals layered significance in Western experience without flattening culture into nostalgia, caricature, or scenery.
Evaluator remarks for Theme / Imagery: _____				

AUTHENTICITY AND GENUINENESS	1 Point The poem feels derivative, performative, or based on clichés rather than observed knowledge. It may appropriate, sentimentalize, or stereotype Western people, labor, or cultures.	3 Points The poem shows some credible relation to Western experience, tradition, or research. Sincerity is evident, though details, perspective, or emotional authority may be uneven.	4 Points The poem feels genuine, respectful, and grounded in lived experience, close listening, documented knowledge, or responsible imaginative entry. It avoids easy mythmaking.	5 Points Authenticity is deeply earned. The poem speaks with humility, specificity, and moral clarity, honoring Cowboy Poetry's communities while allowing complexity, contradiction, and change.
Evaluator remarks for Authenticity and Genuineness: _____				

UNITY OF IMPRESSION AND AUDIENCE EFFECT	1 Point The poem lacks a clear overall effect. Craft elements, subject, voice, and tradition feel disconnected or unintentionally inconsistent.	3 Points The poem creates a generally coherent impression for readers familiar or unfamiliar with Cowboy Poetry, though some choices may feel underdeveloped.	4 Points The poem demonstrates a strong unified effect. Structure, sound, voice, imagery, authenticity, and theme work together to engage a broad audience.	5 Points The poem achieves a compelling total impression: readable, speakable, memorable, culturally grounded, emotionally resonant, and artistically complete.
Evaluator remarks for Unity of Impression and Audience Effect: _____				

This rubric is intended as a guiding instrument rather than a substitute for informed critical judgment. Apply it consistently and transparently while recognizing that Cowboy Poetry includes old-time and contemporary forms; written and performed traditions; ranch, rodeo, farming, reservation, borderlands, plains, mountain, desert, and small-town perspectives; and diverse communities across the trans-Mississippi West. Final scores and remarks should be based on observable evidence in the work, the writer's apparent intentions, the poem's relation to Cowboy Poetry traditions, and the degree to which its choices create a coherent, genuine, and meaningful artistic effect.