

FAQ

Q: Are visual poems inaccessible?

A: They are and they aren't.

Accessibility as a field of study is concerned with making more things usable by people with disabilities. There are resources for learning about methods for accessibility in poems that require seeing (or seeing colors)—from using larger font sizes, to creating alt text (assistive text that accompanies digital images for readers with visual impairments). An excellent resource on alt text is the [Alt Text as Poetry](#) project. Creating a version of your work that allows disabled people to experience it is an act of translation, with all the opportunities and challenges that come with *any* translation.

“Accessibility” can also refer to general comprehensibility by a large audience. Since visual poetry is a very diverse and a comparatively young tradition (compared to something like the *Epic of Gilgamesh* which is over 4000 years old!), many people will have trouble knowing where to start. That’s why this document exists! But what is inaccessible to one person is accessible to another—for some, poetry itself is difficult to understand, and visual poetry is a way in.

If you are interested in more people “getting” your work, the best strategy is to read widely (see how others approach the challenge), and to share your work with others and listen to what they understand and what they have trouble with. All forms of speaking are negotiations between what you mean to say and what you *do* say. You can’t close that gap without starting a conversation.

Q. What is the difference between visual poems, hybrid poems, and experimental poems?

A. The nature of definition always drifts into the prescriptive—telling people what they *should* call things. I resist this when I can. I mean to define a thing only to make talking about it easier. When a definition fails at that, I am happy to leave it behind. Here are some ways I think about each term:

Visual poems – As I mention in the introduction, I think of visual poems as containing visual elements that are especially important to the poem. Line breaks are visual elements. If a poem is terribly diminished by removing all the line breaks, I might call that a visual poem, even if it contains no pictures, diagrams, etc.

Experimental poems – To paraphrase Douglas Kearney, I think of experimental poetry as a practice, not a poem. Nothing can be experimental without pushing off of something that is NOT experimental, and what is experimental differs wildly from community to community and from culture to culture. It usually only feels worthwhile to me to consider what is experimental to my own practice—to my own sensibilities.

Hybrid poems – I think of hybrid work as encompassing more than one form or tradition. It's all very subjective!

If you are interested in these terms because you are hoping to send poetry to a journal looking for “hybrid work,” or want to buy a book on “experimental poetry,” you’ll have to investigate the community using those words to see what they mean.

Q. When I try to make my own visual poems, how do I choose a visual that isn’t literal?

A. There isn’t anything inherently wrong with the literal (or direct) use of images—concrete poems and poems that include direct illustrations are examples where the direct image might be appropriate (see: “hogtied” by José Felipe Alvergue

from *scenery*). But if you are interested in the lyric image as I describe in [Lyric Image I](#) and [Lyric Image II](#), here are some strategies:

The first is to choose or create an image that only represents one *quality* of an idea you want to write about. For instance, describing a race with a racetrack is very direct, but describing the love life of a runner using a racetrack gives you opportunities to surprise the reader and yourself. Another strategy is to write the poem first and try adapting it to images or drawings afterward. Again, you may surprise yourself with the connections you make. It might help, as well, to investigate resources and strategies from totally outside any field of writing. There are visual poets who have dedicated their lives to expression through movement, color, sound, light, and other nonverbal means. These can be fruitful spaces to investigate creating nonliteral work.