

# OLD FAMILY MOVIES: POETRY VIDEO <sup>TM</sup>©

## QUICK-START HOW-TO GUIDE

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[www.olderfamilymovies.com](http://www.olderfamilymovies.com)



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### Definition.

OLD FAMILY MOVIES: POETRY VIDEO consists of a book of poems plus a 40-minute DVD, with ten videos of poems from the book. The **videos are digital movies** of the poet performing his poems, with the central dramatic focus being on slideshows,

old movie footage from the 1930s and 1950s, photographs dating from the 1920s through the 90s, and animated text.

Poetry video constitutes a **new form of personal memory**, produced by **mixing** the traditional genre of nostalgic, **performed lyric** with 21st Century, **visual technology**.

The DVD includes the following videos, ranging from 3 to 12 minutes: "Morgan Park, 1889," "My Mother's Kindergarten Classroom," "Mother, Rhea Kirschten," "Mickleberry's Log Cabin Restaurant," "Old Family Movies," "My Father's Tie Rack," "Unwrapping Christmas Ornaments," "Hudson Avenue," "My Father's Death Certificate," and "Minnie Minoso" [Chicago White Sox].

"My Mother's Kindergarten Classroom" is a joyous look at the details of an old kindergarten classroom, where the poet's mother taught on the South Side of Chicago for 40 years.

"My Father's Death Certificate" is a 12-minute, grieving ritual, in which the poet recalls his love for a father, still missed and loved many years after death. "Minnie Minoso" is a tribute to the nostalgic memory of baseball, centering on the left fielder who played for the Chicago White Sox in the 1950s.

## Purpose.

A **new-media genre**, poetry video began in the 1980s. As a hybrid combination of music video and digital scrapbooking, it is now becoming widely popular **for memory-keeping**.

It is also valuable as **an instructional technology for sparking student-interest in poetry and for educational and corporate presentations**.

I have used poetry video in creative writing and literature classes at Prairie View A&M University, and the students respond uniformly with enthusiasm and interest both for the final product and the process of production for their own projects.

Because it is often short and because of its **intense emotional and personal focus**—a sort of **verbal photograph**-- poetry is especially useful as the foundational sound-bite for bringing visual memories of past and people into view. In short, the **poem is the screenplay for the video**.

**More animated than photos** and any kind of scrapbook but less aggressive and more wieldy than documentary and feature films, poetry video is especially valuable for giving memory-keeping a **more concise** form **than** longer **narrative**.

Its animating properties provide a joyous bounce to happy memories and assist us, literally, in moving through grief and personal pain when recalling lost loved ones. When I think of deceased family members, I always have a movie-memory of them running in my head and heart.

**Poetry video externalizes this personal internal recollection** for all to share

and feel.

## “Old Family Movies” as Instructional Example

Just as I do with students, I urge the reader to use OLD FAMILY MOVIES as a model or example—not a xerox copy--from which you may take what you need for making your own projects.

I learn best from examples, especially visual examples. For instance, when building your own poem-video, you need to think about how much of the video track will be composed of talking head, i.e., the poet on camera directly addressing the audience while reading the poem.

Sometimes that direct intimacy is necessary. On the other hand, you--the speaker and writer--may not want to appear on screen at all.

In “My Father’s Death Certificate,” I use a considerable amount of visual address to the deceased who is the subject of the poem; however, in “My Mother’s Kindergarten Classroom,” an image of the speaker-poet does not need to be present.

## Video Editing Experience.

I **assume** on the part of the reader some **experience in using video editing software** and other hardware components such as camcorders and audio equipment. These programs and devices are pervasive nowadays in schools and at home.

In this Guide, I **focus only on the application of these programs and hardware**, not how to learn to use them. Consequently, you may wish to supplement my outlines with technology manuals or info from various “help” menus.

My own software background is with Apple Suites: iMovie 06 (which I vastly prefer to 08) and Final Cut Pro. However, the **structural steps** I discuss here are **valid for most editing programs, ranging from PowerPoint to Adobe Premiere**.

Let me add that even when contemporary students have no background in video editing, they are often so familiar with computers that they pick up basic editing skills in little time with just a few instructions. I hope this Guide will make this process even quicker.

## This Guide.

The Quick-Start Study Guide accompanies this book and the DVD as an outline of the major steps that facilitated the building of my own project. The sequence of this process consists of **4 parts: writing the poem, recording the audio track, building the video, polishing** the resultant combination of video and audio.

After **defining poetry video**, I offer **two lists**: a **“short” outline of steps** to jump-start your project, **then a second, more detailed “long” list** based on my practical experience.

These steps are not only useful at school but also in family and corporate work groups. Let’s assume we are working on family video . . .

### **Short List: Quick Steps for Building Poetry Video**

1. Read and analyze sample poems from other poets about family.
2. Write your own poems and read/discuss them in class or with family.
3. Decide which relevant visual materials students possess: photos, old movie footage, scrapbook memorabilia, birthday cards, sports awards, music, etc. Scan/import them into computer.
4. Students use poem—line by line-- as storyboard and diagram for initial video track:
  - where the speaking-poet appear, if at all?
  - which photos/movie footage go where? Most likely, one or two visuals will be central.
  - circle image groups in text and mark with names of visuals so students can see a sequence (storyboard) developing
  - share storyboard with groups in class/at home
  - students may need additional visuals; search digital sources such as iStockphoto for cheap or free photos and animated clips; add these to your storyboard-text.
  - not all images from the poem will be used. There are usually too many and your video will be too busy. Decide which are really key in representing the mood of the project; remember: a few leaves can represent a forest just as a few petals can suggest a bouquet.
  - decide what needs to be shot with a camcorder—whatever is left over after other visuals have been selected. Note on storyboard.
5. Before shooting and video-building, students should record an initial audio track of the poem to see how long the video will be, where they will place their visuals, and how to use the microphone.
6. On top of audio track--put imported video and visuals in video track.
7. Shoot whatever video you need with camcorder, i.e., what fills in gaps

in video timeline after other visuals are imported. If you save this step for last, you minimize time for camcorder shooting.

**Similar Substitution:** in video, you don't always have to shoot the real thing in the real location. A cemetery in Houston can substitute for a cemetery in Chicago; third-party video of glowing globes can represent fireflies; an alley in Detroit can represent an alley in another city, and so on. Save yourself time and travel.

8. Instruct students in basic editing—panning, transitions, titles, video fx; students will most likely learn most of it by themselves. Add music?
9. Rerecord the poem on a final audio track to fine-tune emotion and to sync the reading with visuals.
10. Burn video to DVD; publish to website, YouTube . . . Give to Grandma.

## Long List: Detailed Steps for Building Poetry Video

### I. Poetry

1. Take time to read poems centering on the subject you wish to treat.

There are thousands of anthologies to look at, or better, do an internet search for related lyrics. If you are thinking about writing on family, take a look at my own text.

2. Before and during writing, consider these **basic elements**:

**length**—how long do you want your video to run. A 1 ½ page poem, with long lines running all across the page, with title and introductory music, will run from 2 to 4 ½ minutes. My own longest poem-video, about my Dad, runs more than five full pages and takes almost fourteen minutes to perform.

In general, poem-videos are best at between 3 to 7 minutes. Length, of course, is up to you and what you want to show about your subject. Intense feeling is difficult to sustain for long.

**page architecture**—what do you want the poem to look like on the page? Do you want short or long lines, rhymed couplets or free verse, dropped first word in each line be capitalized? Do you want to use mechanics—commas, colons, dashes—conventionally or as personal signs for separation or emphasis? Take a look at several styles and take what you need. Poet e.e.cummings is the pioneer of creative mechanical invention.

While the viewer of the poem-video will not, of course, see your whole text, your use of page elements such as white space will be important in pacing the

reading of the lyric.

**subject**—pick something or someone you really care about, then try to focus on a representative event, moment, emotion, object that summarizes that subject in your life. For instance, if you want to know what my mother was like, her kindergarten classroom at the Esmond School concisely represents her dedication to teaching and her love for children.

**dramatize the subject**—poetic argument and narrative involve an unfulfilled, driving need on the part of the speaker engaged in conflict that delays satisfaction of that need and cries out for resolution. An opponent, internal or external, keeps things going. The opponent could be another person, time, age, forgetfulness, delusion, loss of family, mistakes—whatever provides powerful obstacles for the speaker to deal with.

**speaker**—who is speaking? You, the poet? Another person? Is the speaker living or dead, involved or uninvolved in the issue at hand, happy or sad, mad, or glad? Will someone be addressed: the speaker himself, another person, living or dead, etc.?

**who, what, why, when, where, how**—even in a short, literary space, these basic journalistic elements will enter into the lyric situation, often in tightly described detail and narrative. Such detail may need to be vivid and presented in fresh analogies. Try to let your viewer/reader know what is going on in the current or past life of your speaker, especially with respect to motivational, personal background.

On the other hand, an expository element may be left unclear for interesting reasons. Too much ambiguity, however, and the viewer-reader will simply be confused.

3. **Writing Process**—getting the poem going is tough; finishing is easier. To begin, I use a legal pad and write down a page or two of notes about what I want to include in the poem, who my speaker is, and what my central emotional thesis will be.

Then I start trying to write the poem, maybe with a phrase or line or two that just pops into my head. Often at the end of the poem, I cut the opening line that got everything started. Write out the poem in prose first, then begin to space the lines into poetry.

I like to begin the day with a freshly printed (and dated) draft of the poem so I can get a fresh view. Date your drafts so you can tell where you've been and what you want to go back to or not.

It is easy to get too close to your writing. If so, put it down for awhile. Often, I spend 10% of my time writing, 20% editing, and 70% waiting for something to happen!

Be patient. Lines and words will spring out of your mind—which is always working, whether you are physically writing or not. You may very well discover that you have said something you never thought you could say.

When you can't think of any further revision, you're done. Though, you're never really done; you abandon the poem!

4. **Audience**—write your poem first for yourself. If anyone else likes it, fine. If they don't, too bad for them.

## II. AUDIO

1. Before working on the video track for your project, **record an initial audio track** of your reading the poem. This audio track will give you a **visual foundation** for understanding how long your poem-video will be and where to begin to place your digital visual materials (photos, movies, etc.).

This may not be the final vocal recording; but I suggest using this track as your orienting ground.

2. Several Notes **about Recording**:

In iMovie 06, the recording will be monaural—the music will be stereo--and will burn through iDVD as such. If you export your iMovie project to Garageband and re-record the audio, the audio track will become stereo only when burned on a disc. Check your own audio system for unique traits.

Practice: you will need to **practice with the microphone placement**. If working with a stand up (not lapel) mic, try to keep your mouth no more than six inches from the mic and no closer than two.

Too far and your voice will fade from the recording, too close and the mic will pick up sounds such as sibilant s-s-s-s's and breathing that you don't want in the audio.

There is a kind of **imaginary "box" of space** that you have to keep your mouth in. Problem: while emotion animates your body, you have to keep your mouth inside that imaginary box; don't move outside it or you will alter the sound you are looking for.

Try to **add 25-50 % to your emotional performance**. Be a bit over-the-top regarding intensity because the technology, in my experience, mutes about 25% of the feeling from the words.

If you don't like the performance, go back and do it as many times as you need. Sometimes, you get it in one take, or it may take ten or more. So you may wish to do a few lines at a time. You can always cut and paste.

3. Basically, you are making a voice over-narrative throughout, except for those moments when the **speaker is on the screen**. In these moments, you will address either the audience or the subject of the poem.

The audio and video are fused in these clips; thus, the basic vocal audio won't be redone, though you can add extra effects or voices.

4. **After the video track is complete, go back and re-record** your poem—unless, of course, you are completely happy with the initial audio.

In this second recording, you can **polish** the **emotion** in the performance, try new interpretations, and **sync** the **visual elements** with the timing of the reading.

I place the written text of the poem right under the moving video track and pace my reading to the pace of the video. Do this as often as you need to until you get it right.

5. Regarding **music**, I prefer to have no music accompanying my reading of the poem, though I do like to begin and end each poem-video with music to introduce the tone of the poem and to add closure. In many documentaries, an audio track of music will play quietly as the voice-over narrator speaks.

I believe that the "music" and rhythm of your poetic voice is less distinct when music plays. This choice is, of course, up to you.

### III. VIDEO

1. **Choose relevant visual memorabilia** you wish to highlight in your video.

Families often have boxes of materials. Usually, there will be several you think most important; these may in fact be the photos or movies that sparked your poem in the first place.

The great opportunity for the videographer is to take words and turn them into visual images that otherwise may have remained private.

2. I use the text of the poem as my **storyboard**. Using lines, circles, arrows, I draw lines to connect word groups to a noted visual. Begin with the most important visual, then add the rest

You will probably spend between 3 and 8 seconds on each visual, so place them appropriately next to the word groups on the printed page.

You don't need to storyboard everything all at once. Begin with the most important, see how it plays, then add the rest. Solid early choices will determine later ones.

3. **Convert visuals into digital files** and import them into your software program's library.
4. Begin to **place visuals on the video time line**, most important first. Then build the rest of the video track around these.
5. **FX (special effects)**. At this point, you will probably begin to **edit** your photos and other clips. Before being placed in the video track, these units may need adjustment—cropping, sharpness, contrast, etc.--in iPhoto or Photoshop.

Once they've been edited and imported, two operations are used most often.

**First: animating the photo**, or what in iMovie is called "The Ken Burns Effect" (named after the documentary filmmaker).

This consists of **zooming** in or out, and **panning** across or from top to bottom.

You may wish pulling out from a small detail to reveal the full image, for instance, your grandmother's face. Or you may wish to close in on a scene to focus on the image mentioned in the poem such as a front door to a house. Both these techniques are used in "2121 Hudson Avenue."

Insofar as every moment is a revelation scene in movies, another consideration is **when to show the photo in relation to its corresponding word** in the reading of the poem.

For example, should the viewer hear the word "sandbox" before, after, or while an image of a sandbox appears in the video?

In "My Mother's Kindergarten Classroom," I pan down past a photo of my mother teaching, then focus on her sandbox while the word "sandbox" concludes a poetic line.

Just about every moment in poetry video will consist a **progressive revelation between word and image**, and the attention of the viewer will be altered by this movement. Experiment with each image as you proceed.

**Second: visual effects.** Photos and clips can be altered in many ways: speed, clarity, color, fog, snow, rain, lightning, and so on. Take your pick. To mention but four, I use:

**fog** to look like smoke from city chimneys in "Hudson Avenue"

**n-square** (screen divides into 4 smaller squares of the central image) to make one wagon-wheel chandelier look like many in "Mickleberry's"

**fairy dust** (like sparklers) to simulate shooting stars over Bethlehem in "Old Family Movies"

**softness, contrast, and adjust colors** to blur outlines, darken scene, and increase green to make an oak tree in Texas look like a magnolia tree in Chicago from the past in “Death Certificate”

How you edit depends on the emotional texture of the project. For OLD FAMILY MOVIES, I wanted an historical or documentary look with minimal visual frills to give the visual narrative a nostalgic and “natural” look—as if all these things really happened in the temporal sequence that is shown. Thus, I minimized fancy or artificial edits.

On the other hand, my next poetry video projects will be about Chicago (my hometown) and will involve more comedy and a jauntier mood. So software like Photoshop may be useful to give the video track a bouncier look.

6. Third-party resources. One of the most helpful resources for digital video is the **availability of external media** from sites which offer photos, vector illustrations, and video clips. Most of the images in OLD FAMILY MOVIES are from outside sources.

These resources provide an amazing range and quality of choices of visual images that the individual filmmaker could never hope to capture for himself. Not only do you no have to travel to capture footage or images for your poem, you can obtain images of places which are difficult to access.

For example, while planning the kindergarten poem, I called local schools to ask if I could see their kindergarten classrooms. They were extremely reluctant to let me into their classrooms and were most emphatic about not filming the children.

Consequently, a site like iStockphoto solves this problem easily and economically. You can license images of kindergarten kids for a reasonable fee (c. \$4/photo) and you have a wide selection. iStockphoto has more than a million images to chose from.

7. **Transitions** provide visual connections between separated images. They announce beginnings and endings, and soften jarring jump-cuts.

Experiment with them. They turn each image into a kind of 3-act unit: beginning, middle, and end, with the middle constituting the longest focal moment. They are often codes. I have used (to name a few) . . .

#### **cross dissolves**

to shift from one section of a document to another without leaving the documents or from one part of scene to another without leaving that scene in “My Father’s Death Certificate”

to incorporate in this video different images from different magnolia trees into one flowing view of the magnolia in the poem

to combine unrelated images of baseball players into my own visual version of White Sox player Minnie Minoso in the video about him

to create my own special effect—a visual simile--of a dandelion sprouting out of a child's baseball mitt in the same video

to show time passing from one scene of "Morgan Park" to a later photo of its developing history

### **fade outs**

not only to gently announce the end of a whole video but to separate sections which correspond to separate sections in the poem "Death Certificate" to dissolve a concluding title or any image into darkness

**radial** (like a sweep second hand on a watch)

reversed to signal time shutting closed a restaurant and happy memory in "Mickleberry's"

**disintegrate** (like film melting)

to imitate the rough texture of the screws that held up my father's tie rack as I focus on them

- 8. Lighting. Outdoor.** I use a Canon ZR 800 to shoot video and have had no problems with lighting outdoors. What I see in the viewfinder is what I end up with on my video track. You can always use filters from your editing program to change the clip's color or focus.

**Indoor.** Much more complicated. What I see in my viewfinder is not what the camera records or what ends up on my computer. Try different combinations of light then see how each combination looks on your editing track.

In general, you need as much light as possible. Indoors, I only shoot only the talking head--against a beige background while the head (me) sits at a right angle to a picture window. I use a professional halogen light as well as a chandelier and even desk lamps. Don't shoot someone in front of a window (they will disappear into the light) and be careful not to let the light reflect off the subject's glasses.

Shadows are cool. If the source-light is below the talking head, interesting shadows appear behind the subject. If the light comes from above, shadows appear under the person's eyes and he looks like a gangster.

- 9. Talking Head.** Be sure to look directly into the camera lens --as if you were talking to another person. Try not to move your head or shoulders. In close-up video, emotion is conveyed through the eyes. TV newscasters are

good at this. Occasional use of hands is ok.

Very few people have teleprompters for reading text. I simply print out sections from poems and tape them right below the lens. **Use talking head sparingly.**

- 10. Text/Titles.** When I began working on OLD FAMILY MOVIES, I thought I would be using text from the poems in many ways—scrolling, imposing over visuals, animating words like cartoons, floating words off into the sunset, and so on. I discovered that in general I use text minimally. In “My Mother’s Kindergarten Classroom,” I scroll text at the end and animate several lines from the poem in the middle of the video.

I prefer most of the time not to use it, and most of the poetry video text I have seen in other projects ends up looking like a TV commercial. One of my students scrolled his entire poem down over his old family movies, and the viewers couldn’t read the text or see the people in the clip. So, beware animating fonts.

Titles, on the other hand, are often word groups isolated against black backgrounds; in this case, animation or font movement is attractive and can set the mood for the following video.

**11. Final Points.**

**Keep track of your megabytes.** Video uses lots of space on your computer. You may need more memory on your primary, internal hard drive. I have 2 GB. If you keep various versions of your project, the situation can grow worse.

Check with your computer help-service for advice. When memory grows short, strange things begin to appear --and disappear.

**Over-all length.** I think about 40 minutes is about the maximum length for a single poetry video project. Poetry Video an intense medium, and a little goes a long way.

**Chapter markers.** Be sure to insert them between separate, creative units on your video track before burning to DVD.

**Back up.** If you don’t have one, think about buying an external storage drive to save back-up versions. I have two: a 2 TB Desk Top and a portable 250 GB., which I can use on other computers.

**About the Author**

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