

How To Make A Poetry Machine

Project Background

In the summer of 2022, artist Erin Dorney and the Adirondack Center for Writing were selected to be part of the Creatives Rebuild New York (CRNY) Artist Employment Program. CRNY, a project of the Tides Center, is a three-year, \$125 million investment in the financial stability of New York State artists and the organizations that employ them.

To apply for the grant, the artist and collaborating organization had to propose a series of collaborations to be completed over a period of two years. One of the projects we proposed was the creation of a poetry machine that would travel throughout the rural Adirondack region of New York state.

We created two poetry machines—one that traveled around to different locations on a monthly basis, and one that stayed at the Adirondack Center for Writing to be used for programs like workshops, event tabling (Pride Fest, street fairs, etc), and for our local community members to interact with.



[Photos: ACW's Poetry Machine & a gif of getting a poem out of the machine]

Original Machine Description

Using grant-funding, ACW Visiting Writer Erin Dorney is repurposing a capsule vending machine to distribute pocket-sized poems. These machines, typically found in grocery stores, gas

stations, and other shops, normally distribute small toys or tchotchkes in exchange for 1-3 quarters. Instead, the ACW Poetry Machine will distribute one of ten different types of poems. The machine will have a bypass so that no coins are necessary (poems are free). The machine is self standing with a weighted base.

Original Machine Goals

The goal of this project is to bring poetry to people in the Adirondacks in a unique and unexpected way, lower barriers to access to the arts, and expand ACW's programmatic reach. Depending on how the first pilot poetry machine is received, ACW may make more machines.

By The Numbers

- 15 - Locations that hosted the machine, including a diner, a movie theater, a farm store/deli, a hardware store, an ice cream shop, a convenience store, a courthouse/dmv, a coffee shop, a pharmacy, a library, and a greenhouse/produce market.
- \$1,000 - Amount spent on the machines and supplies (does not include mileage reimbursement or staff time/payroll)
- 3,500 - Poems, prompts & community writing distributed during the 2-year grant period
- 4,174 - Miles driven to move the machine to different locations in the Adirondack Park

About Erin Dorney

Erin Dorney is the author of "Yes I Am Human I Know You Were Wondering" (forthcoming from Autofocus Books in March 2025), "Grating, Darling, Full of Dirt," (Common Meter Press) and "I Am Not Famous Anymore: Poems After Shia LaBeouf," (Mason Jar Press). She has been published in *Autofocus*, *Tolka*, *HAD*, and other journals. Her literary artwork and installations have been featured at the Center for Maine Contemporary Art, Hennepin Theatre Trust, the Minnesota Center for Book Arts, and Susquehanna Art Museum. Erin is the co-founder of Fear No Lit and currently lives in upstate New York. Learn more at www.erindorney.com.

Erin is the artist who created the ACW Poetry Machines and is the one authoring this how-to-guide.

About the Adirondack Center for Writing

The Adirondack Center for Writing is a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization based in the 6-million-acre Adirondack Park in New York State. Our mission is to inspire the love of writing, reading, and storytelling. ACW has been serving communities throughout the Adirondacks for 25 years. Learn more at www.adirondackcenterforwriting.org.

Inspiration

The original idea for the poetry machine came from Erin's work with Libby Modern and Jo Davis at Modern Art, a gallery and studio based in Lancaster, PA. The Space Machine Found On The Moon was a repurposed menstrual products machine that delivered small, handmade works of art:





[Photos: Space Machine Found On The Moon, created by Modern Art in Lancaster, PA]

During the course of creating our own machines, ACW learned that there was once an old cigarette machine in Saranac Lake that was repurposed to distribute small works of art. Although attempts were made to learn more about this machine and where it ended up, it was never found:



[Photos: Saranac Lake, NY cigarette art machine circa 2008]

We also discovered a number of other similar machines, including:

- Yvonne Zipter's poetry bubblegum machine in Chicago - <https://thirdcoastreview.com/2018/04/25/poet-spreads-love-poetry-bubble-gum-machine/>
- Marianne Hales Harding's poemball project for Provo Poetry - <https://www.heraldextra.com/news/2016/nov/03/poemball-machine-provides-pops-of-poetry-to-provo/>
- The poetry gumball machine at Brandman University - <https://bulibraryservicesandresources.wordpress.com/2015/04/06/library-happenings-poetry-gumball-machine/>
- The poetry gumball machine at Books Are Magic - <https://www.instagram.com/p/BW-IWDoFZ8L/?taken-by=booksaremagicbk>
- The Memory Vending Machine at University of Arizona - <https://www.memoryvending.supply/home>

We are grateful for the inspiration of all of these projects, and strongly encourage the sharing of poetry in creative ways.

The Machines

I made one machine, and then a few months later made a second version that is virtually identical.

Both of ACW's machines, including the standing bases, machines themselves, and plastic capsules were purchased from www.gumballstuff.com. I had a great contact there (thanks Steve Bare! steve@gumballstuff.com) who helped me with questions via email. Seriously, if you have questions about a specific machine, reach out to them because they are experts in this stuff. You can find a wide variety of machine styles and sizes. We picked one that is easy to source because we knew from the beginning we might want to make two of the exact same model.

We asked Steve to set the coin mechanism (mech) to "bypass" which means that it will turn freely and a capsule will come down the chute after one full turn. Different machines have different coin requirements, and some of them can be set to bypass if that's how you'd like it to work. Just speak with a rep at Gumballstuff.com and they will help you figure this out. Sometimes people still put coins in the machine, which is fine - it doesn't hurt the machine, and you can get them out the next time you open it up.

What We Bought

- Machines: [Black Northwestern 80](#)
- Bases: [Original Antique Ford Gumball Stand Battleship Grey](#)
- Capsules: [Empty 2" Capsules](#)

One of the biggest costs for the machines is shipping. **TIP: Buy the plastic capsules in bulk, since shipping is really going to cost you a lot.**

Cleaning & Painting

After purchasing the machine, I took it apart. This wasn't hard using regular screwdrivers and some WD40 on sticky spots. **TIP: Take photos at each stage so you remember how it was put together.** Then, I washed and dried all of the pieces and spray painted them. I used a metal primer and then regular spray paint for metal. The original machine came with some stickers on the plexiglass which took me a while to get off with a razor scraper and then Goo Gone for the sticky residue. **TIP: Before you take the machine apart, think about what parts you want to be different colors - it may not make sense after you take the pieces apart.** I made a bunch of sketches to try out different colors, and ended up picking a simple palette of teal and black.

I spray painted everything on the lawn, then let it dry. Then I put the machine back together. There's some paint peeling in spots, because I am not an expert, but overall it looks pretty good. If you want a more flawless look, you may want to consider buffing/sanding some of the metal so that the paint sticks better. You might also be able to find a machine that already comes in

the color you want so you don't have to paint it. Just be aware that these are mostly vintage machines, and they can be kind of scuzzy.

Be careful when you have everything taken apart. One of our coin mechanisms broke and I had to replace it (which was simple through Gumballstuff.com and cost about \$50).



[Photos: Original machine when it arrived]



[Photos: Washing the machine & all of the parts laid out to dry before priming]



[Photos: Machine parts with white primer and blue spray paint]



[Photos: Machine put together after painting & machine with final signage and capsules]

Setup, Moving & Jams

When moving the machines, I have found it easiest to unscrew the machine (rectangle part) from the base and pole, leaving those two connected. Then I lay it down in the back seat of my car and put the base and pole on the floor or in the trunk. It is possible to move the machines when they are erect, but it's not easy. **TIP: Always make sure the machine is fastened securely so it doesn't fall over.** With the combination we selected, the machine would never just fall over with regular use. Someone would have to be hanging on it, or actively pushing it over in order for it to tip over. When I go to different locations to move the machine, I bring a small ratchet set with me to make sure everything is tight underneath before I leave.

You can also set the machine on a table-top, which we have done a few times for different events. With the model we have, it's a little harder to use because the chute where the capsules fall out is close to the table top. You also have to remove the base socket from beneath the machine for it to sit flat, which isn't difficult but takes time. So it's not easy to just go from having the machine on the pole and base and have it sitting flat on the table top in a few minutes. You need tools and some space and time to make the switch.

Your machine comes with one key. DON'T LOSE IT. We never let any of the host locations hold the key because if it's gone, it's gone, which meant that if refills were needed or the machine got stuck, we had to go back to that location and fix it. Worth it, to keep the key safe!

The machines have only become jammed a few times. This will happen if someone (usually a child) is playing with the machine and turning the coin mechanism around a bunch of times while playing with the door over the chute. Capsules get stuck behind it, then it won't close, then the whole thing is jammed and you have to open it up to clear it out. It's never been a huge issue, and has happened about 3 or 4 times in the two years we have had these machines out and about. Just make sure to let the host location know that it shouldn't be played with roughly because this could happen.

The machine model we selected will hold about 140 capsules at a time. We stored the capsules in paper bags from the grocery store which made it easy to lift and pour directly into the machine when we took the top off.

Signage

We originally wanted to use vinyl on the plexiglass, but couldn't find a way to do such a small amount affordably. Instead, I made a sign using Adobe Illustrator, printed it on cardstock, had it laminated, and then installed it **on the inside** of the machine. The sign is affixed inside with clear packing tape, which peels off easily if we need to change the sign out. It has stayed in really good shape throughout all of the machine's moves and refills. This solution cost us a lot less than we originally anticipated, and looks just as nice. Plus, we can make updates to the sign if we want to instead of being locked into the original design.

GIVE POEMS A CHANCE

No coins needed—just turn for a free poem. Contact us if this machine is empty, malfunctions, or becomes sentient: info@adirondackcenterforwriting.org



Tag us: @adkctr4writing

www.adirondackcenterforwriting.org/machines



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[Photo: Screenshot of the ACW Poetry Machine sign]

The Poems

Selecting the poems

Inside the ACW Poetry Machine are 10 different poems. Each one features a unique style of poetry, including haiku, cento, epistolary, list, ode, ekphrasis, prose poem, how-to, erasure, and cut-up. We're excited to feature work by the following writers:

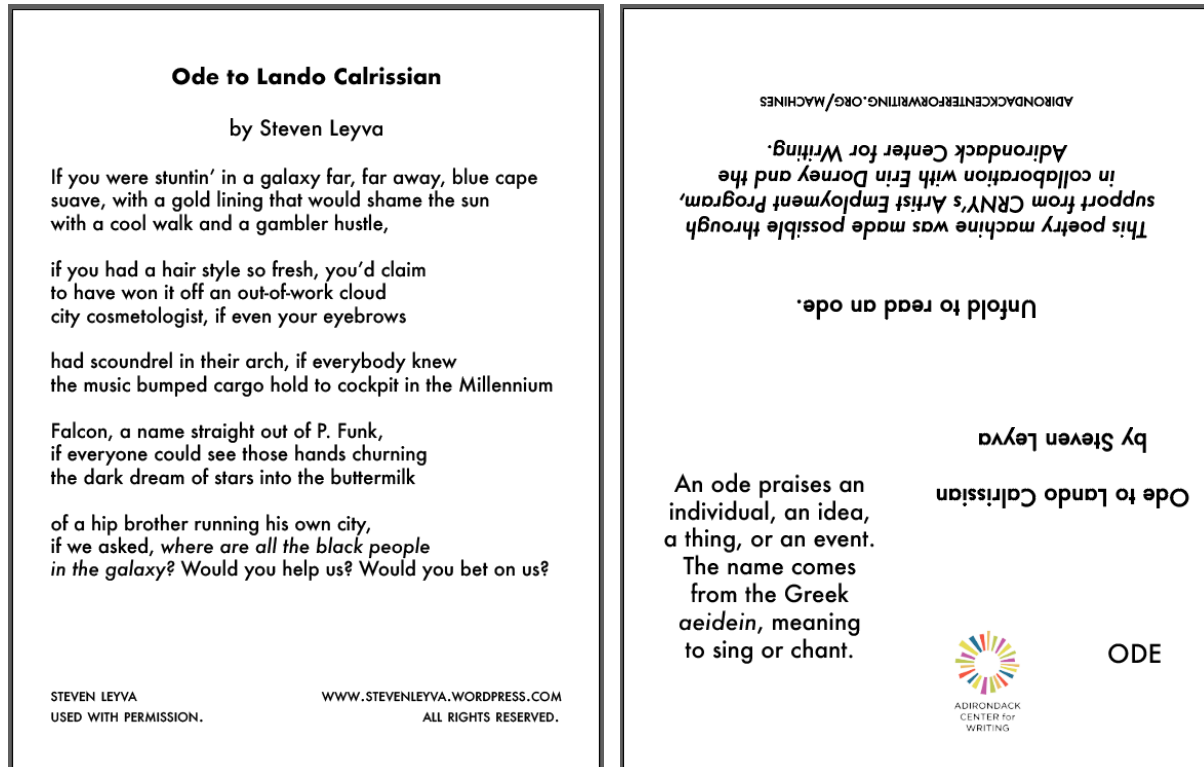
- [Julia Bloch](#) – “Dear Kelly [p.43]”
- [Erin Dorney](#) – Erasure and cut-up poems
- [Camille T. Dungy](#) – “this beginning may have always meant this end”
- [Ashley M. Jones](#) – “Summer Vacation in the Subjunctive”
- [Lillian Klein](#) – “Quarantine Haiku”
- [Laurie Kolp](#) – “Carry Me”
- [Steven Leyva](#) – “Ode to Lando Calrissian”
- [Kathleen Lynch](#) – “How To Build An Owl”
- [Sasha Pimentel](#) – “The Kiss”

I contacted all of the writers to ask for their permission to use the poems for the machine. They were all thrilled, and gave us permission right away. We did have to speak to one press, since the poem was included in a book, but they were also happy to have us feature the piece. A few poets requested specific citation information, which we did. Each poem includes the author's name, and where the poem was previously published (along with any other information the authors or press requested we include). We sent each poet a capsule with their poem inside, and most of them shared about the project on social media, which increased our reach and visibility about the project. One poet requested a letter to be included with their tenure/promotion application about the reach of this project and the impact of their poem, which I was happy to provide.

It was somewhat difficult to find poems of an appropriate length for this project. Because everything has to fit on a quarter sheet of paper, the poems must be short. I ended up writing some new poems specifically for the poetry machine (specifically erasure and cut-up poems) in order to find something that worked for the size we needed.

Designing, Printing, and Folding

I wanted each poem to open up like a book, which required a certain layout and lots of testing. I created all of the files using Adobe Illustrator, then saved them as PDFs. I printed in-house at ACW on a black and white printer on standard weight white copy paper. Because each poem is a quarter-size, I could fit 4/page (double-sided printing).

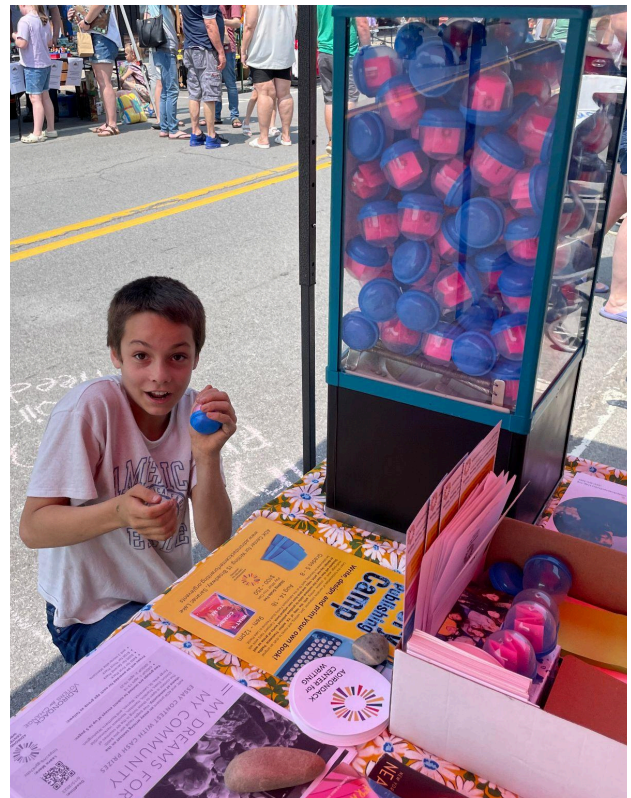


[Photos: Screenshot of a quarter sheet featuring the poem “Ode to Lando Calrissian” by Steven Leyva (side 1) and a screenshot of side 2, featuring the type of poem, a definition, and project information]

Then I cut them with a paper cutter, and folded them to fit inside the capsules. This was a monotonous part of the project, but it was easy enough to do while watching television or listening to a podcast. Just remember, with each machine holding 150 capsules, which is 150 small sheets of paper you have to print, cut, and fold. This takes a lot of time, particularly if you want the poems to be folded in a certain way (attention to detail). I worked in big batches, preparing hundreds of poems at a time to get us through a few months.



[Photos: Writing prompts folded & in capsules]



[Photos: Prompt machine fully assembled & a kid getting a prompt out of the machine]

Locations

One of our goals was to bring the machine to each of the 12 counties that are part of the Adirondack Park. We wanted to place the machine in unexpected, everyday locations so that folks who might not encounter poetry would have a chance to interact with it.

Each time we moved the machine to a new location, we reached out to local media/other arts organizations and let them know that the machine was in their region that month. We also had a Google Form available on our website where anyone could request that the machine come to a specific location in their community.



[Photos: [Chef Darrell's Mountain Diner](#), Blue Mountain Lake & [Indian Lake Theater](#), Indian Lake]



[Photos: [J.F. Farm Store & Cafe](#), Northville & [Old Forge Hardware](#), Old Forge]



[Photos: [Good Ol' Wishy's](#), Croghan & [Otto's Abode](#), Wanakena]



[Photos: Franklin County Courthouse, Malone & [Lakeside Coffee Roasters](#), Rouses Point]



[Photos: [Keeseville Pharmacy](#), Keeseville & [Tupper Lake Public Library](#), Tupper Lake]



[Photos: [Origin Coffee Co.](#), Lake Placid & [Community Bank](#), Whitehall]



[Photos: [Broadway Coffee Co.](#), Saratoga Springs & [Richards Library](#), Warrensburg, NY]



[Photo: [Matteson's Market](#), Woodgate, NY]

Press Coverage

We sent out a number of press releases to the media about the ACW Poetry Machines. I also worked with staff at the Public Art Archive™, a free, continually growing, online and mobile database of completed public artworks throughout the U.S. and abroad, to have the project [included in their database](#).

- [“Adirondack Center for Writing poetry machine arrives in Tri-Lakes this winter”](#) in Adirondack Daily Enterprise, October 24, 2023
- [The Public Art Archive™ Instagram Post](#), October 4, 2023
- [“Big ol’ gumball machine brings poetry to Good Ol’ Wishy’s”](#) in NNY 360, June 26, 2023
- [“Poetry in the ADKs: ACW’s new poetry machine. Poem Village 2023”](#) in the Adirondack Almanack, March 25, 2023
- [“Poetry machine makes it’s way around the Adirondacks”](#) in Mountain Lake PBS, March 24, 2023
- [“Gumball machine serves up free poetry in the Adirondacks”](#) in North Country Public Radio, February 28, 2023

FAQs

What do I do if the machine is jammed?

You have to unlock the machine, take all of the capsules out, remove the top pieces, and then remove the stuck capsules from the chute. Be very careful when you take the top piece off, because the silver coin mechanism can fall forward and may break. I usually removed the silver piece whenever I took the top off and set it on the table next to me in order to be safe. Once you unstick the capsules, you put the machine back together, refill it, and lock the top.

What about the plastic capsules?

The decision to put a few thousand small pieces of plastic into a world already saturated with plastics was not taken lightly. In some locations, hosts put a box or basket near the Poetry Machine to collect capsules and/or poems that folks did not want to take with them. We did repurpose those capsules if they were in good condition at the end of the month. At the time of this project, we could not locate any kind of compostable or sustainable capsules that would work with the machine. If you find something, please let us know!

If you have a specific question about the ACW Poetry Machine, please email erin@erindorney.com so I can add it to this guide.

Contact

Erin Dorney: erin@erindorney.com

More about the ACW Poetry Machines: <https://adirondackcenterforwriting.org/machines/>

As of July 1, 2024, I (Erin) will no longer be the Visiting Writer at ACW (a grant-funded position which is planned to end). I would love to create more/similar machines - please contact me to discuss potential commissions, collaborations, and consulting. Of course, you can also use this guide to make your own.