"Tell all the Truth but tell it slant / Success in Circuit lies" (1–2). So begins the Dickinson poem that has been taken by many as instruction on how to write poetry. Her biographer, Richard Sewall, finds "Tell all the Truth but tell it slant" to be a poem key to understanding Dickinson herself. Sewall writes of Dickinson: "She avoided specifics, dodged direct confrontations, reserved commitments. She told the truth, or an approximation of it, so metaphorically that nearly a hundred years after her death and after much painstaking research, scholars still grope for certainties" (3). An example of Dickinson's famous compression, this poem's eight lines touch on larger truths and have sent critics scrambling to point out the exact truth she might be disclosing. In language such as "the Truth must dazzle gradually / Or every man be blind" (7–8), some feel there is evidence that Dickinson is pointing at a particular religious truth. As you read the poem, you may wish to consider what truths are best approached obliquely. Did Dickinson likely have any one truth in mind? Is this poem a statement of poetic philosophy? How can one tell "all the Truth" while telling "it slant"?

### Topics and Strategies

This section of the chapter will suggest various approaches you might take in writing a paper about this poem. These ideas are by no means exhaustive and should be looked at as a starting point for your own investigation.

#### Themes

The idea of coming at a thing "slant" is a primary theme in poem #1129. The truth is important and should be known, but it is also so majestic as to be damaging if we come upon it abruptly. The poem begins with this statement and then essentially reiterates and expands upon the idea until the poem's conclusion.

"Tell all the Truth but tell it slant" also returns to a common theme of Dickinson's: the contrast between seeing and blindness. She uses this metaphor in line three, where she describes the truth as "too bright for our infirm Delight." The "Lightning" (5) that must be explained to children is another example. It is as if looking into the lightning directly, like staring too long at the Sun, will harm the children. At the poem's conclusion, she states that all are like children when faced with the truth, and if the truth does not come gradually then "every man be blind" (8).

The poem asks the reader to think about the nature of truth. Some students begin by believing that "Tell all the Truth but tell it slant" is a poem about "white" lies. Careful reading shows it to be about more than this. It is concerned with not only one truth but the truth, and all of it. So an even greater question arises. How does one tell all the truth?

**Circumference** is an important word in the Dickinson canon. In "Tell all the Truth but tell it slant," Dickinson writes that "Success in Circuit lies" (2), and circuit becomes synonymous with circumference. If circumference is defined as the boundary encompassing an area or object (or in this case, truth), then circuit is the course traveled around that boundary. In a letter to T. W. Higginson dated July 2, 1862, Dickinson famously wrote: "My Business is Circumference" (Letters 412). In a later letter, Dickinson states, "The Bible dealt with the Center, not with the Circumference" (Letters 850), and you get a better idea of how she uses the word. The Bible deals with an ultimate truth; Dickinson tries to come nearer to it by circling around it.

#### Sample Topics:

1. **Slantness**: What does it mean to tell something "slant"?

   An essay on this topic would seek to explain what Dickinson means by this word. One possible thesis is that when Dickinson uses the word slant, she lets us know the ultimate truth is unavailable to us; we can only attempt to approach it.
2. **Seeing and blindness:** In the context of this poem, what does it mean to "see"?

Dickinson is always concerned with seeing and not seeing. In this poem, the lightning that is the truth will blind if not got at gradually. You might say that Dickinson is using "seeing" here as a metaphor for understanding. Another possible thesis is that it is impossible for mortal eyes to "see" the truth. Perhaps you can only know it with the heart or on some other level of perception. Perhaps you can only know it after death.

3. **Truth:** What does Dickinson mean when she talks about truth? Are all truths equally dazzling?

An essay could be written attempting to explore the idea of truth in this poem. What does the poem have to say about honesty? A possible thesis on this topic could be that Dickinson's "Tell all the Truth but tell it slant" causes the reader to consider the nature of truth. Those things that are particularly "true," such as love, faith, and death, must be approached gradually and with great respect.

4. **Circumference:** What is Dickinson getting at when she writes, "Success in Circuit lies"?

An essay on this topic would look at Dickinson's diction and her choice of the word *circuit*. The essay would also discuss Dickinson's frequent references to *circumference*. As a thesis, you might say something to the effect that for Dickinson, any topic or pursuit that was worthwhile deserved to be approached with trepidation.

**Philosophy and Ideas**

An idea that seems to be at the heart of "Tell all the Truth but tell it slant" is the old idea that the truths of God, if experienced directly, would blind humankind. Here is a passage from Exodus on that subject: "And it came to pass on the third day in the morning, that there were thunders and lightenings [sic] and a thick cloud upon the mount…. And the Lord said unto Moses, Go down, charge the people, lest they break through unto the Lord to gaze, and many of them perish" (9:16–21). God says to Moses that he must keep the people at a distance, for if they see God, they will die. God and his wisdom are often synonymous with the truth.

Another biblical convention is that since humankind is not prepared to know the truth directly it must be taught in parables. As Jesus said to his disciples, who were special among men, "Unto you it is given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God: but unto them that are without, all these things are done in parables" (Mark 4:11). This would be similar to Dickinson's message, except she knows no one is prepared to learn the truth directly.

"Tell all the Truth but tell it slant" has been embraced by a number of communities outside the literary. It routinely finds a place on the syllabus of courses in psychology, philosophy, and medicine. Curiously, this poem has been taken by the medical community as a directive for how to communicate with patients. At one time, it was considered best to keep a negative diagnosis from the patient. Now it is recommended that the truth be told, if told "slant."

The community that has most taken this poem as gospel is the community of poetry writers. The message that has been taken away is that this poem is a prescription for how to write a poem. It would seem that Dickinson followed this course, whether she specifically wrote this poem about poetry writing or not. One common criticism of poetry by those who do not care for it is the difficulty it presents because it does not often state directly what it means.

**Sample Topics:**

1. **Religion:** How can "Tell all the Truth but tell it slant" be said to be about faith?

   The message of Dickinson's poem falls in line with Christian teaching. If you were to write about this in an essay you might bring in knowledge you have about the Bible or Christianity or other religions.

2. **Circuit/parables:** Why would the roundabout way be considered the best way for getting at the truth?

   One way to approach an essay on this topic would be to argue that Dickinson's poem is applicable in any discussion of truth. Other than the example of Jesus' teachings, what other parables or stories are used in an attempt to explain what may be unexplainable? You might think about stories that are told to children to explain natural phenomena or
the mythology of the Greeks. Without being factually true, these stories sometimes move people to a greater understanding of themselves and their world.

3. **Medicine:** In what other areas of thought or life would "Tell all the Truth but tell it slant" seem to apply?

   A paper on this topic might argue that "Tell all the Truth but tell it slant" has implications for people beyond those who are interested in poetry. If you wished to focus your essay on the medical community, you might conjecture about what it means to deliver the truth "slant" if you are a physician, and why this would be preferable to a more direct approach.

4. **Poetry:** Why has this poem been embraced by writers of poetry?

   One possible thesis is that Dickinson's poem is reflective of the practice of poetry. Poets believe that multiple meanings can be imparted by the same poem (or image or line, etc.). Rather like the example of Jesus and the parables, the reader's responsibility for discovering meaning, or learning it only slowly, is what gives the message personal importance.

**Language, Symbols, and Imagery**

This poem begins with a proverb: "Tell all the Truth but tell it slant / Success in Circuit lies." Dickinson often begins in this way, and the rest of a poem is an explication or amplification of the first two lines. The statement seems to admit no argument. And yet the poem is built on contradictions that begin in the first line. The reader is told to tell "all" the truth, but is then told to "tell it slant." The poem does not make clear how this is done (and by its own prescription, perhaps, should not). In line two, Dickinson writes that "Success in Circuit lies." Although the meaning of the word *lies* seems quite clear in context, its presence here may cause you to think about lying. Is to tell the truth slant akin to lying? Other images that are oddly paired are the "infirm Delight" and the idea that the truth "must dazzle gradually."

Dickinson was fascinated with the idea of seeing. In this poem, the images reflect that interest. Light is often synonymous with truth. Here, light becomes the principal image the poem is built upon. The word *slant* might be considered a part of this imagery, as *slant* is often used to describe a way of looking at something. Certainly, by line three, you notice the emphasis on words such as *bright, delight, lightning, dazzle,* and *blind.*

Part of the artistry in "Tell all the Truth but tell it slant" is in the use of alliteration. An essay could be made that traced the alliteration throughout the poem. The major repeated sounds are the "t" and the "s." Carefully tracing the repeated sounds can help you to understand how Dickinson created her poem.

**Sample Topics:**

1. **The proverb:** How does it affect your reading when a poem begins in this way?

   One reaction you might have to the proverb is a tendency to accept the authority of the poet right away. The poet seems certain of her message. How would you question her?

2. **Contradictions:** What are the contradictions in "Tell all the Truth but tell it slant" about?

   The poem begins with a contradictory idea. If you were to write an essay discussing this and the other contradictions, you might say that this poem does what it says. "Tell all the Truth but tell it slant" attempts to get at the truth, but the reader must first resolve its contradictions.

3. **Light:** How is the image of light used in "Tell all the Truth but tell it slant"?

   Consider the images of light in the poem. One possible thesis might be that Dickinson uses light as a synonym for truth. To write on this topic, you would use the images, already discussed above, as the basis for your discussion. Light can blind. Lightning can kill. And yet the connotations of light tend to be overwhelmingly positive.

4. **Alliteration:** How does Dickinson's use of alliteration in "Tell all the Truth but tell it slant" create a sense of coherence?
A little bit of alliteration can go a long way, but Dickinson repeats sounds to great effect in this poem. The repeated "s" and "t" sounds of the first stanza are less evident in the second. One possible thesis is that the words truth and circuit are the basis for the poem. All other words follow from these and in some way echo them.

**Compare and Contrast Essays**

Gary Lee Stonum in *The Dickinson Sublime* argues that "Tell all the Truth but tell it slant" is less about the poet than about her audience. Further, he argues that this is true of many of Dickinson's poems that have been taken up by poets as expressions of how to do their work or how to live (62–63). You might want to consider if this is true of such poems as #441—"This is my letter to the World," #448—"This was a Poet—It is That," or #569—"I reckon—when I count at all."

Dickinson's poem #365—"Dare you see a Soul at the White Heat?" is a curious poem that bears some resemblance to "Tell all the Truth but tell it slant." In both poems, there is the threat of looking too closely at what is real. "Dare you see a Soul at the White Heat?" creates a metaphor of the anvil and the forge to describe the soul that is on fire. It also dares its audience to look. As in #1129, light becomes a repeated image.

In #1651—"A Word made Flesh," Dickinson writes, "Each one of us has tasted / With ecstasies of stealth / The very food debated / To our specific strength" (5–8). The poem also says that when the "Word made Flesh" is taken, it is "Nor then perhaps reported" (3). Comparing this poem to "Tell all the Truth but tell it slant" would certainly bolster any reading of the latter as a religious poem. Like the truth in "Tell all the Truth but tell it slant," the "Word made Flesh" is best delivered by an intermediary. In this poem, the intermediary is specifically Jesus. As in other Dickinson poems, the connection between language and religion is explored.

Another poem that has light as a central image is #883—"The Poets light but Lamps," cited as follows in its entirety:

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The Poets light but Lamps
Themselves—go out—
The Wicks they stimulate—
If vital Light

Inhere as do the Suns—
Each Age a Lens
Disseminating their
Circumference—
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Here you see not only the idea that poets help to disseminate the light but also the idea of circumference. These two images, so central to "Tell all the Truth but tell it slant," are here aligned with the poet.

**Sample Topics:**

1. **Her audience:** Are Dickinson's poems about poetry really about her audience?

   A comparison of one or more of the poems discussed above with "Tell all the Truth but tell it slant" may lead you to a thesis such as although Dickinson declined to publish, her poems show a tremendous concern for her audience.

2. **Looking:** How does #365—"Dare you see a Soul at the White Heat?" share with "Tell all the Truth but tell it slant" a fascination with looking?

   A comparison of these two poems would likely yield some interesting observations. You could trace the image of light throughout both or discuss what it means to see. Why should the reader be afraid of the soul on fire? An answer to this question might lead you to discuss power in both of the poems, or religion, or something else that you see.

3. **Truth and the word:** Why does Dickinson place an intermediary between truth and the word?

   This topic would cause you to consider the conventional religious belief that an intermediary is needed between
humankind and God. You might be able to arrive at some interesting conclusions by also considering Dickinson's beliefs about language as gleaned from these two poems. One possible thesis might be that these show that Dickinson considered language the equivalent of religion.

4. **Circumference and light:** How do these images compare in "Tell all the Truth but tell it slant" and "The Poets light but Lamps"?

One possible thesis on this topic is that reading "The Poets light but Lamps" makes it clear that "Tell all the Truth but tell it slant" is a poem about poetry. The two poems seem closely aligned. For evidence, you might discuss the emphasis on light and circumference in both works. You might also want to look at "A Word made Flesh" to see how Dickinson considered the endurance of the word to be akin to transubstantiation. The poet may die, but the true word cannot.

**Further Information**


Gross, John J. "Tell All the Truth but—." *Ball State University Form* 10 (Winter 1969): 71–77.


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