
# Best Practices in the Teaching of Poetry

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Overall Goals

(a concrete poem)

To convert the classroom to a student-centered environment
To emphasize the role of teacher as facilitator of knowledge
To demonstrate different approaches to the study of poetry
To make literature and reading come alive
To accommodate multiple learning styles
To utilize cooperative learning groups
To utilize multiple modes of learning
To build self esteem
To write poetry
To read poetry
To present poetry
To experience poetry

## About Allan Wolf

I received my BA and MA in English from Virginia Tech, and I taught freshman composition there for three years before joining a company called Poetry Alive!, a national touring troupe which presents poetry as theatre. I was with Poetry Alive! for fourteen years before pursuing writing full-time. I am a member of The Dead Poets, a three-person band that transforms classic and popular poetry into toe-tapping tunes. I am 43 with three kids (9,7, and 4) and I live in Asheville, North Carolina.

## Books by Allan Wolf

**Something Is Going To Happen: Poem Performance in the Classroom* (Poetry Alive!)
Do it yourself poem performance for the upper grades.

*It's Show Time: Poetry from the Page to the Stage* (Poetry Alive!)
Do it yourself poem performance for the lower grades.

*The Blood-Hungry Spleen and Other Poems About Our Parts* (Candlewick Press)
An illustrated collection of ana*comically* correct poems for kids.

*New Found Land: Lewis and Clark's Voyage of Discovery* (Candlewick Press)
A YA verse novel written in 14 voices, all different members of Lewis and Clark's famous expedition. A *School Library Journal* Best Book of 2004; An ALA 2005 Best Book for Young Adults; An IRA Children's Book Award Notable.

*Immersed in Verse: An Essential Guide to Living a Poet's Life* (Lark/Sterling)
A straight-talking guide for aspiring young poets that goes beyond matters of technique and form, to the heart of what it means to be a poet.

*Zane's Trace* (Candlewick Press) Due Fall, 2007
A YA verse novel, part modern/part historical, that takes the reader on a 24-hour ride with a troubled teenager in a stolen 1969 Plymouth Barracuda on his way to kill himself at his mother's grave.

All books are available through any bookstore or on-line except for * which can only be purchased through the publisher at http://www.poetryalive.com.

## Musical Recordings by The Dead Poets

*The Dead Poets* (12 songs including *Emily Dee* and *Tyger, Tyger*)
*Bootlegs from the Barn* (5-song EP including *Poet Cows* and *Red, Red, Rose*)

You can download samples of the music at http://www.thedeadpoets.com or purchase whole CDs at http://www.cdbaby.com.

# Why Poetry?

Poetry encourages the word play that builds vocabulary and fluency.


Writing poetry helps writers find their individual voices.

Reading and writing poetry teaches precise word choice.

Poetry is fun—and involves students with language.

Poetry offers concentrated, language-rich, quick-read texts that can augment any existing content lesson.

Poetry is part of most learning standards and assessment testing in Communication Arts.

Poetry builds students phonemic awareness and sense of rhythm in language.

Mastery of language devices commonly found in poetry (repetition, internal rhyme, assonance, consonance, refrain, pattern, sequencing, active word choice, etc) empower students with the widest possible range of writing tools to execute all writing tasks.

# Why Performance Poetry?


Performance poetry encourages repetition and memorization which enables even the most reluctant students to internalize language.

Performance poetry allows students to move through progressively deeper levels of understanding, as they make meaning through direct authentic experience with the text.

Through ensemble work and performer/audience interaction, performance poetry provides natural opportunities for collaboration, community building, and purposeful, student-centered learning.

Performance poetry accommodates (and celebrates) multiple learning styles as defined by Howard Gardner's theory of Multiple Intelligences.

Performance poetry can be used as an alternative assessment tool to determine students' competency and understanding (of vocabulary, meaning, context, or other specified concepts).

Performance poetry allows even non-readers and emergent readers to successfully demonstrate a mastery of language and understanding of meaning.

# Performing Poems

## Transforming Your Students into Poetry S.T.A.R.S.

### Introduction: Personal Meaning versus Thematic Meaning

Simply put, poem performance has been the key to my love and understanding of poetry. I earned a Master's Degree by reading, studying, and writing all kinds of poetry. When I began memorizing poetry and performing it I began to see a different side of poetry —the Inside. Suddenly poetry was something not simply to be studied, but to be experienced, celebrated, and lived.

I do NOT think that poem performance is a subsitute for the more traditional approaches of reading (silently and aloud), discussion, and analysis. I DO think that poem performance can be a great way to hook young people who so often think that poetry is inaccessible and dull with nothing to offer them. Too often young people (and adults) see poetry as something that is "done to them," like a 6-month dental cleaning. Poem performance activities place students at the center of authentic learning and allow young people to discuss poetry using terminology that is already familiar to them.

Only when students are engaged with the poetry will they truly care about matters of form and meaning. I routinely advise teachers not to ask young people what a poem means. I've found that most of us, young *or* grown, don't really *care* what a poem means. But we do want to know what a poem means *to us*. The difference is not so subtle. The first question regards "thematic meaning" and implies that there is a definite, authoritative answer that lives within the pages of the "teacher's manual." The second question regards "personal meaning" and implies that the reader and the poem are somehow connected.

Most often when adults claim to know what a poem means, they are really saying that their life experiences have allowed them to find "personal meaning" in the poem. More than likely any "thematic meaning" has been derived through their extant knowledge of literature (and sometimes their extant knowledge of what the Teacher's Manual says the poem means). But young people don't have this pre-existing knowledge base. At best their knowledge of "thematic meaning" is not fully formed; at worst it is nonexistent.

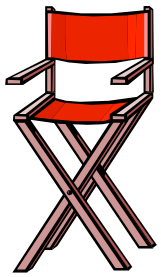
Performance Poetry allows students to make meaning (personal meaning) on their own terms through their experience of transforming the poem's text into a presentation piece. After making this personal connection the academic matters of theme, symbolism, form, and poetic devices suddenly matter.

# Poem Performance 101

PERF-PO 101

Poem performance encompasses a wide variety of presentation models. Students can work separately, in pairs, or in teams up to four. (In my experience teams of four kids make for the best collaborative learning experience, and the most interesting performances.) From a collection of poems assigned by the teacher, or found on a "poetry search" through classroom and library resources, students choose one poem. The goal for the students is to memorize the lines of the poem and stage it for presentation to the rest of the class. Performance teams of two or more, can divide the lines into speaking parts to create a script. Poems can be delivered "straight up" in the manner of a storyteller sharing a tale or "theatrically" with gestures, movements, blocking, and characters. Participants are urged to match the mood of their presentation with the mood of their chosen poem. No scenery or props are necessary—except what can be "suggested" by use of a couple chairs. Your stage area can be the front of the classroom. A simple show can be "thrown together" within a 50 minute class period. An elaborate show can be staged and polished with a week or more of preparation and practice.

# Poetry Performance S.T.A.R.S



This is a simple way of linking your students' presentations so they flow efficiently from one poem to the next to create a seamless poetry extravaganza.

**S**et the stage. After being announced, the presenting team quickly enters the stage area to place any necessary chairs in their starting positions.

**T**itle and Author. Standing in a neat line, the performers say the poem's title and author, then pause for a count of two, before quickly getting into starting positions.

**A**ction! The team performs the poem.

**R**eceive Applause. After the presentation is complete, performers line back up and bow, respectfully and in unison.

**S**trike the set. Any remaining chairs or props should be quickly cleared away. Performers then take their seats as the next group is called forward.

# C.A.S.T: From Poem to Play in Four Easy Steps

Taking poems from the page to the stage is all in the C.A.S.T. This is a series of four steps you can take to begin speaking about a particular poem in theatrical terms. These terms (i.e., character, action, setting) tend to be more familiar and less intimidating than our traditional poetic terms (i.e., theme, mood, symbolism).

**C**haracter. Make a list of all the specific characters within the poem. Start with the "major" characters—those that are mentioned directly. They may be human, animal, or even non-living things. Then find the "minor" characters—nouns within the poem that may not be directly important to the story.

**A**ction: Make a list of all the action in the poem. Look carefully for the verbs, the action words. Be sure to make your list in the order (sequence) that it happens in the poem. This list will come in handy as you decide what actions to use to stage the poem. Some poems have a lot of physical action. Other poems contain only thoughts, or "mental" action.

**S**etting: Where does the poem take place? If the setting is not specified, look for clues in the text that might help you to invent something appropriate.

**T**ransform the text into a script: Determine what characters are the most important and then assign those characters speaking parts. The line of the poem must be appropriate to the character who says it. Lines may be spoken simultaneously by two or more different characters. You can even split a line in half, assigning each half to a different character. Play with the sound of the poem. Use your imagination.

Some poems work better than others when using this approach. I've included a few famous examples on the next page.

There is no standard way to present a poem. The students' aesthetic choices should be based on the needs of the poem and the comfort level and ability of the performers. Sometimes simplicity works best. Sometimes a poem is best left to speak for itself. I've seen performers stand motionless as they recite a poem to good dramatic effect. Ultimately what makes a poem performance effective is the amount of heart the presenter puts into it.

# Now You Try It!


In groups of four, try acting out the poems on this page.

- Read them aloud and clarify any confusing words.
- Pick which poem you will perform.
- CAST: List **C**haracters, **A**ction, and possible **S**ettings. **T**ransform the poem into a script by assigning speaking parts.
- Come up with staging ideas and practice. Memorize the lines if you can.
- Use S.T.A.R.S to present your poem to the rest of the class.
- As a class discuss what you observed from this activity.

**Poem** by Langston Hughes

I loved my friend.
He went away from me.
There's nothing more to say.
The poem ends,
soft as it began.
I loved my friend.

**Sammy** by Elizabeth Ripley

There was a young hopeful named Sam.
Who loved diving into the jam.
When his mother said, "Sammy!
Don't make yourself jammy."
He said, "You're too late ma, I am."

**The Termite** by Ogden Nash

The termite knocked upon the wood.
Tasted it and found it good.
And that is why your Auntie May.
Fell through the parlor floor today.

**We Real Cool: Pool Players, Seven at the Golden Shovel**
by Gwendolyn Brooks

We real cool. We
left school. We
lurk late. We
strike straight. We
sing sin. We
Thin gin. We
jazz June. We
die soon.

**Fire and Ice** by Robert Frost

Some say the world will end in fire.
Some say in ice.
From what I've tasted of desire
I hold with those who favor fire.
But if it had to perish twice,
I think I know enough of hate
to say that for destruction ice
is also great, and would suffice.

# Assorted Top-Secret Tips for Memorizing Poetry

from *Immersed in Verse: An Informative, Slightly Irreverent & Totally Tremendous Guide to Living the Poet's Life* (Lark, 2006) by Allan Wolf

Here are a few tips that may help you on the road to memorization:

- **Relax.** Don't worry, be happy. Memorization is a lot easier when you are relaxed.

- **No Background Noise.** I hope by now this should go without saying, but if not, I'll say it now for the record. DO NOT memorize while the television is on! Or the computer. Or loud music.

- **Experience the Poem.** Have a variety of experiences with the poem. Write it down. Read it out loud. Recite it in the bathtub. Recite it on the way to lunch. Discuss it with your friends. Divide the poem into speaking parts. Record it into a tape player and listen to it over and over.

- **Combine Techniques.** Each of us travel the memorization trail riding atop a different pony. Use a combination of memorization techniques—listening to the poem, saying the poem, writing the poem, reading the poem, acting it out, setting it to music, dancing to it, etc.

- **Memorize a Poem You Like.** This may come as no surprise. It's typically easier to memorize a poem that you really like from the start. On the other hand, if you are required to memorize a poem you don't initially like, you may grow to appreciate it more as you memorize it.

- **A Poem in Rhyme, Saves Time.** Poems that rhyme are usually easier to memorize because the rhyming words continually give you clues as to what line follows. Poems with a very consistent rhythm can be easier because of their predictable beat. Not surprisingly rhythmic poems that also rhyme can be easiest of all.

- **Memorize While Standing Up.** Typically you won't be reciting poetry while seated, so why memorize it that way? It is always best to involve your whole body in memorization if possible.

- **Create Memorization Movements.** For each word or cluster of words in the poem, create a body movement that will help you remember what comes next. Many people can remember movements more easily than words.

- **Speak Out.** Speak your poems out loud as you repeat the lines. This gives you experience listening to your own voice and, again, gets your body involved.

- **Memorize Multiple Poems Together.** If your goal is to memorize more than one poem, you are best off dividing your time between them each day. Don't wait until you've finished one before starting on the next.

- **Use A Tape Recorder.** If possible record your poem onto a hand-held tape recorder. Listen to it repeatedly. Gradually begin to recite along. Think how many songs you've memorized like this already, simply by hearing them on the radio or in your earphones.

- **Memorize The Last Part First.** For especially long poems, try memorizing the last half first. We tend to repeat the first part of the poem more when memorizing it and thus, learn the first part better. It is best to know both halves of a long poem equally well, but if you have to choose, it's better to start shaky and finish smooth. Also, for some reason memorizing the first half always seems easier when you've already got the second half down. That way all you have to do is meet yourself in the middle!

- **Carry Your Poem With You At All Times.** Think of all the snippets of time you spend simply waiting for something to happen or someone to show up. Pass that extra time by looking at your poem.

- **Create Your Own Personal Mnemonics.** Conjure up your own pictures, initials, phrases, associations, and movements—anything to help you remember what word comes next. The idea is to hang the strange new words onto well-known old "hooks" which already exist in your head, like hanging your keys on a hook just inside the front door so you never have to go searching for them.

- **Speed-Through Rehearsing.** If you have successfully memorized your poem, but your recitation is still tentative and halting, try "speed-through rehearsing." Say the words as quickly as you can with little to no expression. The idea is to learn the transitions from line to line and from stanza to stanza so you don't stop the flow of your reading. Place 10 dimes on the table before you, removing one every time you complete your poem. Or line up ten M&Ms and eat your way through them as you complete each recitation. If you can complete ten "speed throughs" of your poem, you are probably ready to recite it in front of a live audience.

# FRANKEN-POEM

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This is a fun community building activity that also allows students to cut loose a little bit. In teams of 4, 5, or 6, their task is to demolish their own individual poems and put the pieces together in some way to create a new text that combines at least some of each poem. Then the "monsters" are brought to life through an impromptu performance. This is a fun end of year activity to unwind and have fun with.

- In group. Each person reads their poem aloud and proud.
- Build the poem: by **word/image association**—images, words, phrases, ideas in common; **word/image juxtaposition**—images, words, phrases, ideas in conflict; **linear connection**—combine parts of your poems to tell a story, or explore a theme; **montage**—images, words, phrases, ideas in a jumble, not immediately related in any way; if possible, find a **"refrain"** among the poem parts which you can repeat throughout the presentation; think of an appropriate **conclusion**—the refrain, or words (or action) of summation.
- Build the script: (who says what and when?), determine any characters. Play with the voices. Consider saying certain words in unison, especially the final line of the poem.
- Stage the poem: Figure out how to create the setting (if there is one). How will you use your performance space? What movements are appropriate to the poem (and comfortable to the presenters)?
- Create a title for the new poem and decide on a special name for your group.
- Present/perform the poem: Remember that you must gather together, before the presentation, to introduce the poem title and group name. After the presentation is over be sure to take a group bow.

The winning poem/presentation will be chosen by "applause-o-meter."

# MAD ABOUT MOTHER GOOSE

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Give teams of four or so students each one index card with some emotion (or other descriptive adjective) written on it (mad, sad, furious, frightened, nervous, excited, happy, tired, in love). In secret each group should generate a list of vocabulary words related to the word on their card. Then they are to write down a list of mannerisms that are associated with the word (movements, stances, vocalizations, facial expressions, etc.). Next they must come to consensus over how to present a recitation of Mary Had a Little Lamb by Sara Josepha Hale or some other popular Mother Goose rhyme. (Little Miss Muffet works well.) Their object is to communicate the word on their card but only speaking the words of the poem. The rest of the class attempts to guess and discusses afterward what was effective and what was not clear.

# WRITING POEMS

## Introduction: Of Blooms & Booms & Secret Rooms

from *Immersed In Verse: An Informative, Slightly Irreverent & Totally Tremendous Guide to Living the Poet's Life* by Allan Wolf. (Lark Books, 2006)

There are three essential elements of a poet's life: a bloom, a boom, and a secret room. The bloom is what catches the poet's eye. The boom is what explodes in the poet's mind. The secret room, with its magnificent views, exists in the poet's heart.

BLOOMS

Poems are everywhere. They lurk at your elbow, waiting for you to discover them. The poet's job is to spot them—to see them for what they are. The poet watches for poetic moments like a bee seeks out a bloom. In fact, the bee and the poet have a lot in common. The bee seeks out a bloom and transforms it into honey; the poet seeks out a moment and transforms it into a poem.

BOOMS

Author Barry Lane urges young writers to "explode the moment" in order to transform it into the stuff of poetry. No, he's not suggesting that poets should exchange their pencils for dynamite. This is Lane's way of urging poets to focus their attention on a single event (the bloom) and then expand on it in a detailed way (the boom). You might say that most poems are simply blooms transformed by booms. The result is always poetry.

SECRET ROOMS

What, then, of the secret room? What, then, of the heart? The heart is where the magic really happens, after all. Every poet's heart has a room with a view, an unobstrcted view of the world. Some call it wisdom. Some call it intuition or empathy. I call it a room because it's a place that feels safe. I call it a secret room, because no one can see it. It's something you feel inside. Call it whatever you want, but rest assured, if you're a poet, then you've got it. And that's good, because although the art of poetry can be taught, the heart of poetry cannot.

How about you? Do you want to be a poet? A poet with a bloom in your eye? A poet with a boom in your mind? A poet watching the world from a secret room held inside your heart?

Well, then, let's start!

# THE 9 HABITS OF HIGHLY SUCCESSFUL POETS

(From *Immersed in Verse* by Allan Wolf, from Lark Books, 2006)

## Habit #1: Don't Be a Naked Fashion Designer.

Poetry is a lot like sports. There's more to being a well-rounded athlete than playing the game. To play it better, you might do some weight training. You study the plays and the strategies. You work on your techniques, and maybe even subscribe to a magazine that focuses on your sport. Same with poetry.

Just writing poetry is fine, but if you don't take an interest in poetry in general, then you are in danger of getting stuck on one of the low rungs of the poetry ladder. The more you learn about poetry, the more you memorize poetry, the more you experience poetry, the higher up the poetry ladder you'll climb.

You can simply write poetry if you wish. Many people do and they do just fine. But, writing poetry without experiencing all the poetry around you is a bit like being a fashion designer who doesn't wear clothes. The act of writing is only part of the overall process of poetry. Begin to balance your writing with other poetry experiences. Get to know poetry. Read it. Go to a poetry reading or two. Talk to poetry lovers about poetry.

## Habit #2: Get Gonzo Over Words.

A painter loves her paints. A sculptor loves his clay. Skateboarders love their skateboards. And poets love their words. Try these three things.

A) Read.
B) Get a dictionary and use it. Make a mark in the margin next to each word you look up. You may end up with multiple marks next to the same word. You live. You learn. You forget. You learn again.
C) Carry a notebook and pen with you at all times to write down any good words you come across, scenes you experience, or images you see. Become a collector of words, phrases, sayings, clever ideas, and verbal pictures.

## Habit #3: Live Life as If Only Two Things Matter.

**You:**
Enter into a relationship with your Self. We are all works in progress. Be sure to reflect on who you are. Don't become complacent. Socrates said the unexamined life is not worth living, but I really think author Geneen Roth put it best when she said that awareness is learning to keep yourself company. Choosing to spend an evening at home reading a book or working on a poem will NOT make you an instant geek. Of course if you *are* a geek, then by all means, embrace your geekness. Write your own Geek Manifesto! Whoever you are, get to know yourself.

**The World:**
Enter into a relationship with the world. Read the newspaper. Find out what's going on, and do your best to form an opinion about it. Get out of the house and get involved. Experience something daily, and then take out your pen and get writing! There is no such thing as a bored poet.

## Habit #4: Eat Your Words!

Be sure that your reading diet is well balanced. Little chocolate doughnuts may be an essential part of my personal diet, but I always add variety—chips, beef jerky, goldfish crackers. It's the same with reading. Most of us live within easy reach of an all-you-can-eat buffet of words. Newspapers, novels, non-fiction, *Teen People*, X-Men comics, cereal boxes, and of course, poetry of all sorts.

## Habit #5: Do More. Watch Less.

Know the difference between doing and watching. Unlike watching, doing resonates in your soul, sticks to your ribs, and satisfies you longer once you're done doing it. Most TV and movies are a waste of your valuable poet time. Because I think television is evil, I don't watch it or even have one in my home. But I am also super weird. Just be sure to balance your doing and your watching in healthy proportions.

## Habit #6: Realize Poetry Ain't Always Pretty.

Show me a picturesque pond with regal swimming swans, and I'll show you a muddy bank full of swan poop. Without ugly, there would be no beautiful. Likewise, the subjects of your poetry need not be huge and important (divorce, death, world hunger). Don't forget that there are worlds of wonder within a robin's egg, a cast-off shoe, or the contents of your pockets. So train yourself to be a hunter of the small and insignificant. And while you're observing the "good," don't forget the "bad" and the "ugly." They come as a set. The rainbow and the rain go hand in hand. The mighty oak was once an acorn. Note the *grace* of the swan on the water as well as the *trace* of the swan on the land—the poop.

## Habit #7: Learn to Love Your Gorilla Words.

I guarantee that nearly *every* professional writer has looked back at his or her first draft and winced in pain. "Ugghh! Did I write *that?* I must have been writing in my sleep! It looks like a four-year old wrote that—a four-year-old gorilla—a *stupid* four-year-old gorilla who is one banana shy of a bunch." In fact I said it myself—just now.

The point is that's how it's done. You need to get the gorilla words down first. Most "writer's block" is created by unreasonable expectations. If you sit down and decide that you're going to write an award-winning, perfect, awesome poem, you'll likely fail. Writers who approach the blank page (or computer screen) this way are being unfair to themselves as well as to their poor unborn poems. Don't be afraid to generate a lot of gorilla words on your way to creating a top-banana poem. So write a little bit at a time. Take baby steps. Two lines here. Two lines there. And don't concern yourself with the quality of these early attempts.

## Habit #8: Read and Write Every Day.

I'm not saying you need to squander the ever-fleeting moments of your youth hunkered over your desk, ruining your eyes and developing a callused, leathery bump on your finger. But write every day. Read every day. Even just a little. Even just a couple words. Find a good sturdy notebook and set yourself a reasonable goal: two sentences every day. Be sure to date each entry. It doesn't matter what you write. And you're more than welcome to go over two lines. But set it up so you're not allowed to write FEWER than two.

"But what will I write about?" you cry. Write about your day. You don't have to get deep (although you can). The object is to write automatically. It's enough to simply jot down an outline of how you passed your day. After a month you'll be surprised by how much life there is in a simple accounting of your normal routines. Your journal will become an honest and beautiful display of boring little miracles. You'll also begin to understand that your writing and your life are works in progress.

## Habit #9: Play!

Unlike your food, it's perfectly okay to play with your words. Spell them wrong on purpose. Turn them upside down. Read them backward. Rhyme, don't rhyme, repeat. It's good to know the rules. Why? Because it's fun to break them. Whether the poems you like to write are serious, playful, mournful, or silly, playing and experimenting with your words will help fill your poem with life and vitality.

# You Can't Write a Poem About THAT!

## Finding Significance Within the Mundane

**Mundane**: from the Latin *mundus* (world) thus *mundanus* (of the world)

**WELL-KNOWN POEMS THAT CELEBRATE THE MUNDANE:**
*Miracles* by Walt Whitman
*Fog* by Carl Sandburg
*The Road Not Taken*; *Dust of Snow* by Robert Frost
*The Red Wheelbarrow*; *This Is Just to Say* by William Carlos Williams
*Something Is Going to Happen* (from *Delight*) by Robert Penn Warren

## Phases of Mundane Observation

Confining your field of focus to only what exists within a ten-foot circle around you, choose a suitable mundane subject, such as a pencil, ceiling fan, book, (Note: If you really must look beyond a ten-foot circle, then confine your observation to the space of the room.) Writing continually, move through these phases of observation in order to generate descriptions and brainstorm ideas for further writing.

### Describe

Describe, in detail, the subject's appearance, various parts, materials, size, weight, etc. Describe what it does. How does it move? What is its energy source? What does it sound like? Can you hold it? How does it feel?

### Evaluate

What is its purpose? How does its existence make the world better? How does its existence make the world worse? Describe the subject's positive impact as well as its negative impact. Does it have a personality?

### Radiate

Look around your ten-foot circle. Are there others? Now look as far as your eyes can see. Are there others there? Use your imagination. Are there others outside of your field of vision? Within the building where you are? Beyond the block? Across the city where you reside? The country? The world?

### Connect

What other kinds exist? What other objects are related to it? What things have a similar look, function, movement? What other objects, mundane or otherwise, have a similar effect? Imagine if the subject of your study should disappear. What would happen? How would the world be changed? Why is the subject important to your own life? To the world?

# Writing Prompts that Exercise Observation Powers

## Snapshot Safari

In your notebook collect a variety of images from an "outing" around your house or school. Include sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and textures. Be sure to keep each entry short (a single phrase will usually do), and don't dwell on the significance of the image. Your object is simply to collect the images as a sensory record of your experience. Remember that poetry is not always confined by matters of narrative or logical continuity; seemingly disjointed images and sensations can sometimes provide a clarity and illumination which linear thoughts cannot.

## Sound Safari

Like the Snapshot Safari but with sounds alone. Just walk, listen, and write. The most challenging part of this exercise is to figure out how to spell the sounds.

## Treasure Box of Priceless Things

The teacher places a variety of "everyday objects" in a box (eraser, paper clip, wash cloth, shoe lace, chicken bone, button, house key, etc.) As the box is passed around, students are asked to reach into the box and feel around until they feel an object they want to write about.

## Walk a Mile in Something Else's Shoes

Imagine what it would be like to be some mundane object, like a shoe or a coffee cup.

## Thirteen Ways of Looking at Your Elbow

Come up with thirteen different ways of looking at a mundane subject. You may slow down by way # seven, but don't give up (See *Thirteen Ways of Looking at Your Knees and Elbows* by Allan Wolf).

## Treasure Hunts and Riddles

The teacher hides an object somewhere in the room and then describes its location in the form of a riddle. Students can also simply play a form of I-Spy by creating riddle poems about the everyday objects in the room. The emphasis should be more on choice of details rather than literary quality.

## Everyday Object As Self Portrait

Generate a list of characteristics of yourself. Include internal and external characteristics. (Be honest, this list is just for brainstorming, and you won't be required to share it unless you want to.) After your list is complete, choose an everyday object that you feel shares a common characteristic(s) with you. Make a list of other characteristics of the object. Now write a poem that illustrates your comparison. You may start by simply saying, "I am like . . . "

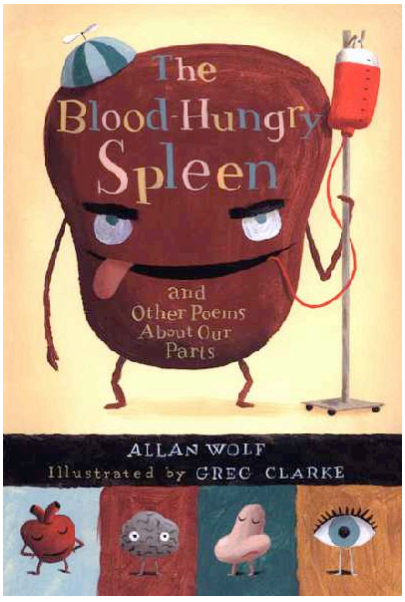
## Inquisition

Write down a list of questions to ask of some mundane subject. You can speak directly to the subject or else ask the questions generally. This list of questions might prove to be a poem in itself, or it may trigger a poem that provides an answer to one or more of the questions.

## Multi-Voice Dialogue Poem

Similar to Inquisition, except this time your object actually answers back! Write a dialogue poem in which you conduct an interview or carry on a conversation with a mundane object. Your two (or more) voices can speak simultaneously or alternate, passing the lines back and forth.

*The Blood-Hungry Spleen* by Allan Wolf, illustrated by Greg Clarke (Candlewick Press)



# Helpful "Mundane" Forms

## Acrostic

An acrostic (pronounced uh-CRAW-stick) poem is an easy way for students to summarize what they know about a topic by gathering together thoughts, facts, ideas, and details into a poem in which the first letters of each line spell out the topic at hand. Add an extra degree of difficulty to this form by also arranging the last letters of each line so that they spell out a word or phrase that is appropriate to the topic.

## Cinquain

A cinquain (pronounced SING-cane) is a five-line unrhymed poem. It is easy to write and can be used in a variety of subject areas. Cinquains can be useful in helping students to gain new insights into a topic being studied. There are many variations. Here's one that's pretty popular:

Line One: *One noun* that introduces the poem's subject.
Line Two: *Two adjectives* that describe the subject.
Line Three: *Three verbs* (or verbals) related to the subject.
Line Four: *Four-word phrase* telling feelings of the writer or describing the subject.
Line Five: *One noun* (different from line one) that sums up the previous four lines.

## Diamante

The diamante (pronounced DIE-uh-MON-tay) is a perfect poem form to illustrate the contrast between two different subjects. The seven lines of this poem are in the shape of a diamond, with the different subjects acting as the top and bottom points of the diamond.

Line One: Noun "A."
Line Two: Two adjectives describing the noun "A."
Line Three: Three "ing" or "ed" words describing noun "A."
Line Four: Four nouns. Two describing the noun "A". Two describing noun "B."
Line Five: Three "ing" or "ed" words describing noun "B."
Line Six: Two adjectives describing the noun "B."
Line Seven: Noun "B"

Note that immediately after writing Noun "A" in line one, the writer may want to go to line seven and enter the contrasting noun "B" there. Then the writer can go back and fill in the rest of the poem.

## Limerick

A limerick is a five-line poem, usually humorous in nature, arranged in a A-A-B-B-A rhyme pattern. Lines one and two consist of eight or nine syllables. Lines three and four consist of five or six syllables. The last line (which rhymes with the first two) consists of from eight to ten syllables. Limericks can be used to tell brief stories or to describe the characteristics of something being studied in class.

# INQUISITION

Write down a list of questions to ask of someone (or something) you encounter on your outing. You can speak directly to the subject or else ask the questions generally. This list of questions might prove to be a poem in itself, or it may trigger a poem which provides an answer to one or more of the questions.

Examples

**White Goat**

White Goat, is your name Billie?
What are you thinking as you
Twist your head around the feeding bin?
Do you miss your kids?
Are they crying for you?
Will you be with them ever again?

*Cheryl Bromley Jones, teacher*

**Skyscrapers**

Do skyscrapers ever grow tired
of holding themselves up high?

Do they ever shiver on frosty nights
with their tops against the sky?

Do they get lonely sometimes
because they have grown so tall?

Do they ever wish they could lie right down
and never get up at all?

*Rose Fyleman*

# LETTER POEM

Write a letter as a poem, addressing someone or some*thing* you encounter on your outing.

**Malcolm, My Man**

Malcolm (my man!)
You don't know me.
But I know you.
I dream of you.
In your blackness I see myself.
I long to be the man you once were.
What you are.
Who you are.
That is all that matters to you.
You're like no one I've ever known.
I see all in your eyes.
Malcolm (my man!)
Man with no fear,
No boundaries.
show me the way.
Damn!
Malcolm, you had so far to go.
Death, so bloody.
Still it was a gift.
The end was inevitable and so was your memory.
True men live forever.
That is the way it will always be. Forever.
Never forgotten.
That is what I want to be.

*Duane Shorter, student.*

# *Where I'm From* Writing Prompt

This student-centered writing activity also builds community by allowing students to share who they are with one another in a strikingly poetic way.

**Step One:**

Students write "Where I'm From" at the top of their paper. Tell them they will be writing about where they are from, either now or in the past.

**Step Two:**

Have students generate lists of the following:

- Familiar sights, sounds, and smells of their home and neighborhood.
- Familiar foods, especially those associated with holidays, birthdays, and other celebrations.
- Familiar sayings and expressions overheard in and around the place where they grew up.
- Other details: Relatives' names, Church experiences, common objects, street names, hiding places, plants growing in the yard, etc.

**Step Three:**

Share "Where I'm From" by George Ella Lyon with the students. For this activity I like to place the poem's text on an overhead so we're all looking at the same copy. Have two or three students take turns reading the poem aloud.

**Step Four:**

If there's time, I like to discuss with students why George Ella Lyon's words are so recognizable as a poem. If possible, divide students into discussion groups before sharing as a whole class. Notice that this type of student-centered discussion allows the young poets to begin to define poetry using their own terminology and based upon whatever prior knowledge they happen to bring with them to class.

What makes "Where I'm From" a poem?

- repetition (of the "I am from" phrase).
- Unexpected substitution of a location with sensory images. We typically think of ourselves as being from a place, not objects (clothes pins), sayings (perk up and pipe down), or food (fried corn and strong coffee).
- Creating a montage of images that combine to create an impression that no linear narrative can match.
- Language that appeals to the senses. The reader can taste the beet-flavored dirt, see grandfathers missing finger, and hear the bible verses.
- She uses the proper names of things: forsythia, Dutch elm, Imogene and Alafar, and carbon-tetrachloride. Poets recognize and celebrate the natural music created by a thing's proper name.
- Musical language in phrases such as "sift of lost faces," "long gone limbs," "Clorox and carbon-tetrachloride."
- The lines turn intentionally whether "end stopped" or "run on," and the words that hang along the poem's right margin are all very strong and visual.

**Step Five:**

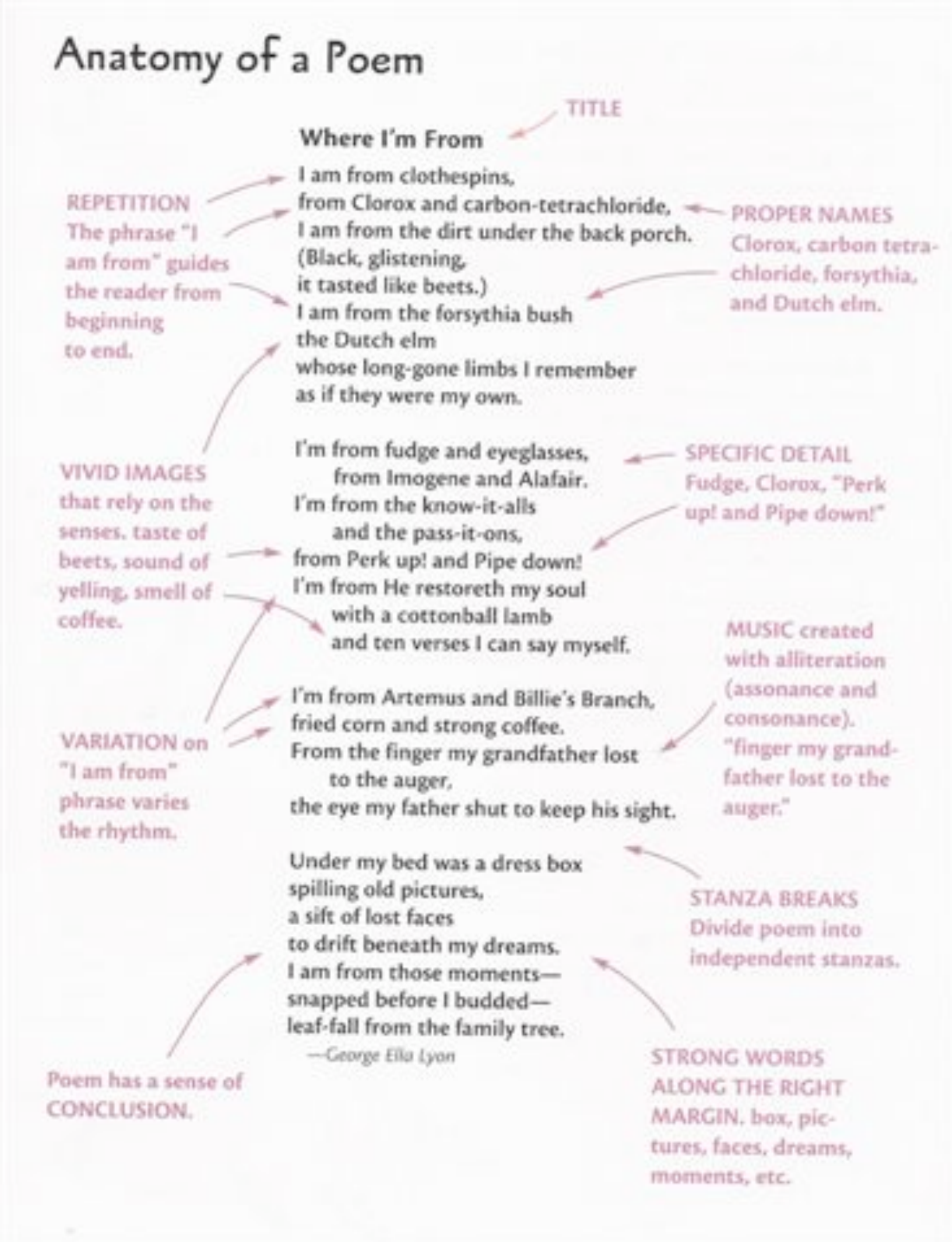
Read Lyon's original poem once more. If possible, share a student example or two from another class. Explain to your students that we are each "from" more than just a place. We are from all those memories and details that have shaped us into what we have become. The "where" of George Ella Lyon's poem is much more than a city or town.

**Step Six:**

Instruct your young writers to create their own poems or rich narratives using Lyon's poem as a model. By using Lyon's poem as a model, young writers will be practicing many effective poetic devices that will shape their memories into poetry. You'll be amazed with the strong imagistic language that results and the interest shown during sharing as students discover new details about one another's histories.

SHARING IDEA:

If you don't have time to share every poem, you can have each student read his or her favorite detail aloud. The effect is a montage of memories and sensory images that simultaneously celebrate each student's uniqueness and the whole group's diversity.


Anatomy of a Poem
TITLE
Where I'm From
I am from clothespins,
from Clorox and carbon-tetrachloride,
I am from the dirt under the back porch.
(Black, glistening,
it tasted like beets.)
I am from the forsythia bush
the Dutch elm
whose long-gone limbs I remember
as if they were my own.
I'm from fudge and eyeglasses,
from Imogene and Alafair.
I'm from the know-it-alls
and the pass-it-ons,
from Perk up! and Pipe down!
I'm from He restoreth my soul
with a cottonball lamb
and ten verses I can say myself.
I'm from Artemus and Billie's Branch,
fried corn and strong coffee.
From the finger my grandfather lost
to the auger,
the eye my father shut to keep his sight.
Under my bed was a dress box
spilling old pictures,
a sift of lost faces
to drift beneath my dreams.
I am from those moments—
snapped before I budded—
leaf-fall from the family tree.
—George Ella Lyon
REPETITION
The phrase "I am from" guides the reader from beginning to end.
PROPER NAMES
Clorox, carbon tetrachloride, forsythia, and Dutch elm.
VIVID IMAGES
that rely on the senses. taste of beets, sound of yelling, smell of coffee.
SPECIFIC DETAIL
Fudge, Clorox, "Perk up! and Pipe down!"
MUSIC created with alliteration (assonance and consonance). "finger my grandfather lost to the auger."
VARIATION on "I am from" phrase varies the rhythm.
STANZA BREAKS
Divide poem into independent stanzas.
Poem has a sense of CONCLUSION.
STRONG WORDS ALONG THE RIGHT MARGIN. box, pictures, faces, dreams, moments, etc.

# A CLOSER LOOK AT LINE BREAKS

## END-STOPPED AND RUN-ON LINES

***from* Swans**

With wings held close and slim neck bent,
Along dark water scarcely stirred,
Floats, glimmering and indolent,
the alabaster bird;

Floats near its mate—the lovely one!
They lie like snow, cool flake on flake,
Mild breast on breast of dimmer swan
Dim-mirrored in the lake.

***Leonora Speyer***

Since end-stopped lines break where a reader would naturally pause for breath, the reader feels very little "pull" from one line to the next. An end-stopped line provides a sense of closure. (See *Swans* by Leonora Spyer)

Because run-on lines do not break where the reader might naturally pause, the pull is greater from line to line. A run-on line provides a sense of anticipation and movement. (See *Po's Garden* by Ree Young)

In *Tree Farm*, poet Kristine O'Connell George combines end-stopped and run-on lines to good effect. The run-on lines of the first stanza give the reader the sensation of walking along the rows of potted trees. The three end-stopped lines of the second stanza change the pace of the poem as if the speaker has stopped walking to address the tree.

**PO'S GARDEN**

In Grandmother's
larkspur garden, a cat
sleeps, his one blue eye
hidden by a yellow-furred
lid. His dark nose
twitches, flares, scans
the air for a scent
familiar and friendly.
He knows me, this cat
with glossy gold coat,
waits for me, stretching
like a breeze blown
down the hillside, slow
and long. We lounge
all day in the garden's
shade and count
butterflies.

***Ree Young***

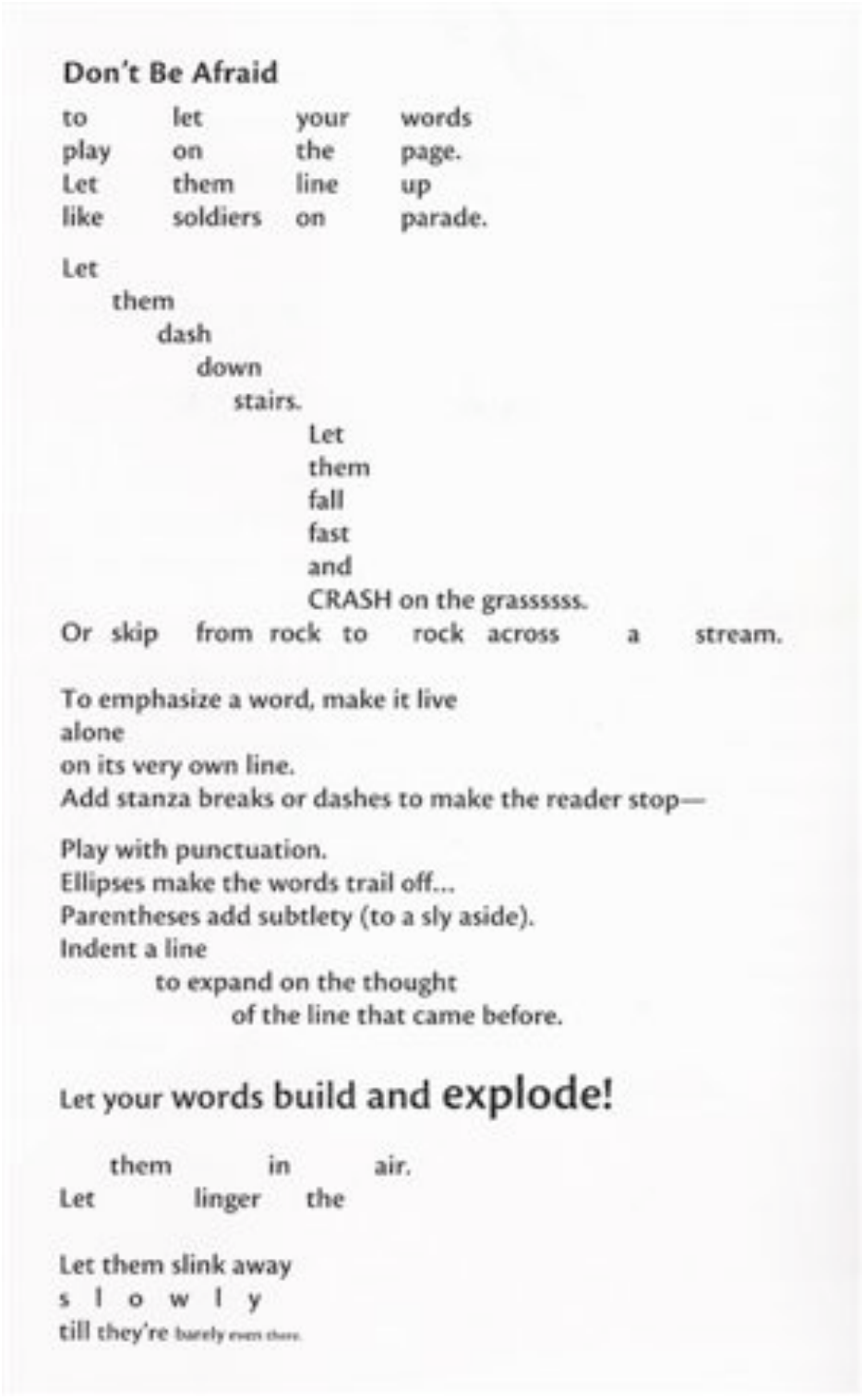
**TREE FARM**

We walk the long rows
of trees growing
in black plastic pots
and wooden boxes
until I spot
the perfect tree
different from the rest—
the one where a bird
has built her nest.

Come home, tree.
Come home, bird.
Come home with me.

***Kristine O'Connell George***

A Poet's Job is to Notice!
Do you notice the subtle, barely there,
rhymes within *Po's Garden* and *Tree Farm*?



## Don't Be Afraid

to let your words
play on the page.
Let them line up
like soldiers on parade.

Let
them
dash
down
stairs.
Let
them
fall
fast
and
CRASH on the grasssssss.
Or skip from rock to rock across a stream.

To emphasize a word, make it live
alone
on its very own line.
Add stanza breaks or dashes to make the reader stop—

Play with punctuation.
Ellipses make the words trail off...
Parentheses add subtlety (to a sly aside).
Indent a line
to expand on the thought
of the line that came before.

Let your words build and explode!

them in air.
Let linger the

Let them slink away
s l o w l y
till they're barely even there.

# MORE REVISION

Compare the original poem on the left to its revised version on the right (see below). The revision cuts out unnecessary words and introduces a few new words. The lines are more rhythmically even and the title is more evocative. I also removed nearly all capital letters and punctuation to give the poem a more fluid look.

BEFORE

**Bed**

The covers are blue and
the white of the sheets are like
white-capped waves that
drag me under. Hold me in.
Won't let me go and
drown me in sweet sleep.
To walk ashore would be
to go to school and
face another day.
Instead I'll dive beneath
the waves and sleep.

AFTER

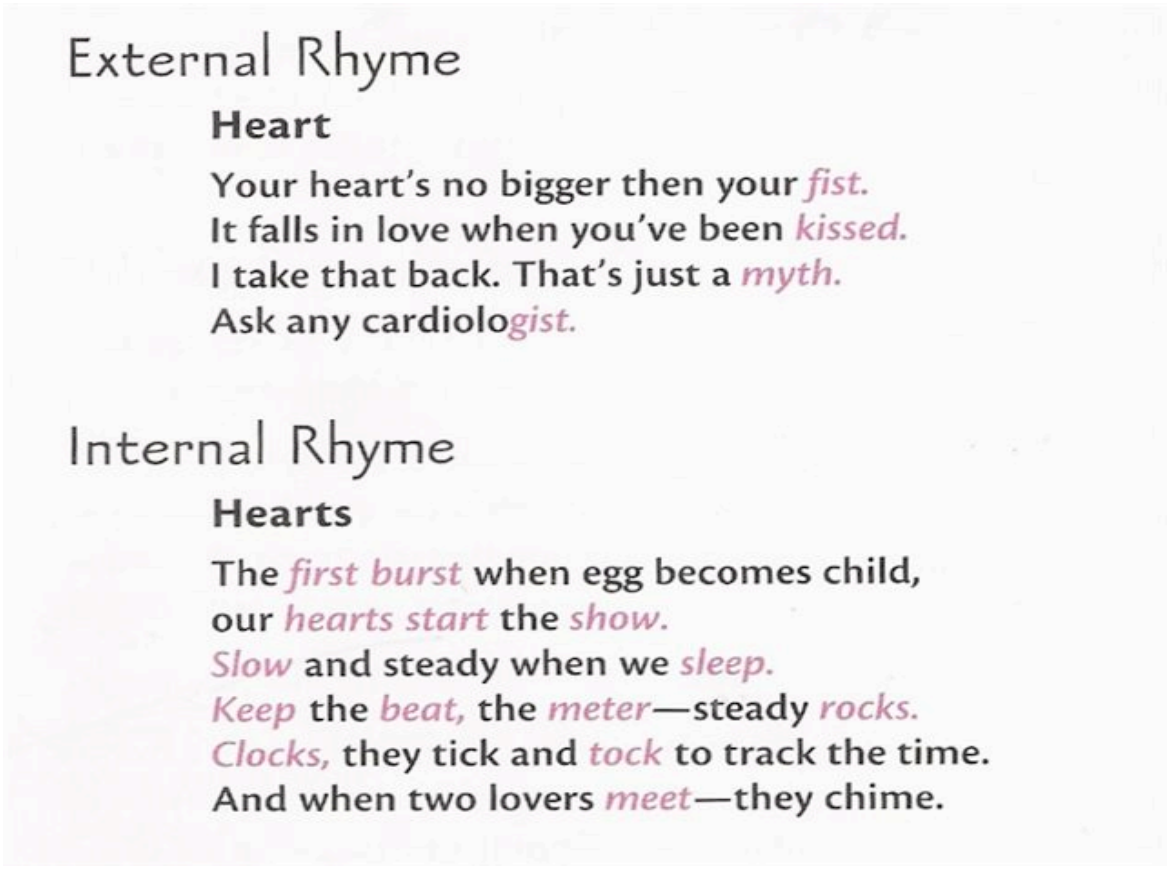
**Poseidon**

the covers
blue and white-capped waves
drag me under  hold me fast
drown me in sweet sleep
to go ashore would be to face

another land-locked Monday.

## DON'T FORGET THE POEM'S RIGHT MARGIN!

The words that fall at the end of each line can offer the reader a whole visual experience in themselves. Notice the end words of the poem's original version are weak: *and, like, that, in, be*. The revised poem features more interesting and emotive words along the right margin: *covers, waves, fast, sleep, face*.



External Rhyme

**Heart**

Your heart's no bigger then your *fist.*
It falls in love when you've been *kissed.*
I take that back. That's just a *myth.*
Ask any cardiolo*gist.*

Internal Rhyme

**Hearts**

The *first burst* when egg becomes child,
our *hearts start* the *show.*
*Slow* and steady when we *sleep.*
*Keep* the *beat,* the *meter*—steady *rocks.*
*Clocks,* they tick and *tock* to track the time.
And when two lovers *meet*—they chime.

# BIO-POEM & I AM EXAMPLES

## SEVENTH GRADE STUDENT

**Molly**
Who is energetic, creative, athletic and short.
Daughter of Sandra and John.
Lover of fun, marine life, and John.
Who feels pessimistic, left out, and sometimes happy.
Who needs love, time, and hugs.
Who fears sharks, death, and homework.
Who gives friendship, advice, and love.
Who would like to see a cure for cancer, Alaska, and my parents back together.
Resident of Mount Air.
**McDonald**

## CHARACTER FROM LITERATURE

**Queeny**
Angry, defiant, bright, frightened
Daughter of a prison inmate
Cares deeply about her mom and dad
Who feels alone
Who needs someone to see through her defenses
Who gives friendship to those who believe in her
Who fears going to jail
Who would like to see her father
Resident of Cotton Junction, Georgia
**Peavy**

## HISTORICAL FIGURE

**Abe**
Strong, brooding, witty, compassionate
Husband of Mary Todd Lincoln
Cares deeply about saving the Union
Who feels committed to ending slavery
Who needs the nation's understanding
Who gives freely of himself
Who fears war
Who would like to see North and South as one again
Resident of the ages
**Lincoln**

## PRE-PERFORMANCE CHARACTER STUDY: BIOPOEM

## Sammy of *Sammy* by Elizabeth Ripley

**Sammy**
Naughty, happy, hungry, and sly
Son of Mommy
Lover of fun, jam, and mom
Who feels motivated, happy, and guilt-free
Who needs jam, bread, and a chair to stand on
Who gives headaches, grief, and hugs
Who would like to see his mommy happy
and a swimming pool filled with jam.
Resident of The Kitchen
**Jaminsky**

## PRE-PERFORMANCE CHARACTER STUDY: I AM POEM

**Mommy of *Sammy* by Elizabeth Ripley**

I am a harried mom in a heckuva hurry.
I wonder why my son can't stay out of trouble.
I hear huge lips smacking in the kitchen.
I see mounds of jam everywhere.
I want a vacation!
I am a harried mom in a heckuva hurry.

I pretend not to find my child annoying.
I touch my child's sticky sweet face.
I worry that he will wipe his face on my new curtains.
I cry to think he won't be a child forever.
I am a harried mom in a heckuva hurry.

I understand that children *will* make messes.
I say, Sammy! Don't make yourself jammy.
(I say, I'm thankful that we've food to eat at all.)
I dream of the day that Sammy becomes self-cleaning.
I try to remember that this is just a phase.
I hope when I am old, my *son* will clean up after *me*.
I am a harried mom in a heckuva hurry.

# *Take the daily writing pledge*

I want you to now take the following pledge and write it at the front of your journal.

My name is _____. My secret name is _____. I hereby pledge to write at least two lines in this journal everyday until its pages are filled or it is lost in a fire or earthquake. I may write MORE than two lines if I choose, but I cannot write fewer than two.

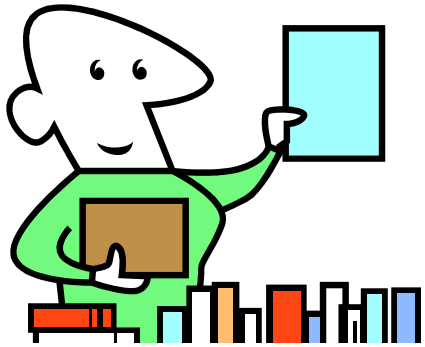
I give myself permission to write absolutely anything. It doesn't have to be intelligent. It doesn't have to be nice. It doesn't have to funny. Of course if it happens to be all of these things that's just fine. But the absolute only thing that my daily entries must be is two or more lines long (not counting the date).

Given by my hand on this ____ day of _____ in the year _____.

Signature

# TEACHING POETRY

## INTRODUCTION: WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO TEACH POETRY?



Let me start by listing what it does NOT take. You do NOT have to be an expert. You do NOT have to be published. You do NOT have to be a genius. You do NOT have to know all the answers. You do NOT have to be famous. And you do NOT have to know the difference between assonance, consonance, and sibilance.

Now, let's look at what it does take. It takes a teacher who will write along side the students, showing young poets that writing is a life-long pursuit. It takes a teacher willing to read poetry aloud to the students, everyday, whether it fits into the curriculum or not. It takes a classroom that is a safe haven for learning and exploration. It takes a group of students who are a community of learners, writers, and readers. It takes a teacher willing to explore and take chances. It takes a teacher with enthusiasm and hope (because 10 years from now, that may be the only thing your students remember you for).

And it takes a teacher who "believes." Every classroom planning session should begin with this question: What do I believe? Only after you've answered this first question honestly and thoroughly should you move on the second question: What will I do? If you honestly don't believe your students can be taught, or if you honestly don't believe you are capable of teaching them, then there is no way to correctly determine what "to do."

Poetry, like most language and communication experiences, cannot happen in a vacuum. Most people who claim they "don't like poetry" say so because they don't see how poetry is relevant to their own lives. The number one, blue-ribbon, very best practice in the teaching of poetry is to never separate the experience of poetry from the experience of life.

## INTRODUCING WRITING ACTIVITIES (THE BASICS)

- INTRODUCE THE WRITING ACTIVITY, technique, topic, or theme. A verbal introduction can involve group brainstorming or some other prewriting activity.
- PRESENT EXAMPLE POEMS BY ESTABLISHED ADULT WRITERS. This could be in the form of a reading, recitation, or performance. Example poems should illustrate the technique, topic, or theme. Remember to think "multi-modal" (see Share Example Poems in a Multi-Modal Way).
- MODEL WRITING on an overhead, blackboard, or chart paper. Write a group example poem. Allow students to suggest opening lines. Suggest a structure if students get stuck. Keep it flowing. You can create a complete poem or just the beginning of one.
- PRESENT EXAMPLE POEMS BY STUDENT WRITERS who have participated in the activity in the past. This is a great time to share a poem that you have written yourself.
- ALLOW STUDENTS TO WRITE ON THEIR OWN. As much as possible, the teacher should write along with the students. This further establishes your class as a "community of writers" and lets your students see that writing is a lifetime pursuit. I like to alternate between "writing and roaming."
- ALLOW STUDENTS TO SHARE. Share as a large group (always in a circle) or in small teams. "Pair share" if sharing time is very limited.

## SHARE EXAMPLE POEMS IN A MULTI-MODAL WAY

Be sure to present examples in a "multi-modal" way, appealing to a variety of the senses. For example, you might allow students to *see* the poem on an overhead screen, blackboard, or chart paper. Allow students to *hear* poems by asking them to close their eyes as you recite or read. Students can even *touch* the poem if it is written on some appropriate object (a poem about a pumpkin might be written on a pumpkin). Poems about food can be accompanied by an appropriate snack to appeal to the sense of *taste*. Strike a match to call upon the sense of *smell* as you read a poem about fire.

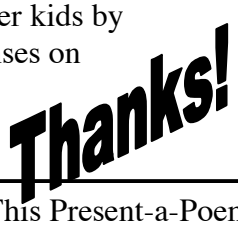
Students like to listen to poems read aloud, but they also like to *do* poetry as active participants. You might invite students to join you at the front of the class to help act out a poem as you recite it. Encourage students to repeat certain lines or sound out a call-and-response of some sort. If you are illustrating a certain poetic device, you might ask your students to clap when they hear an example as you read aloud. Use your imagination and watch your students begin to use theirs.

# A GREAT WAY TO KICK OFF YOUR POETRY ADVENTURE!

## PRESENT-A-POEM

Preparation: Place four poems of various types on a single sheet of paper. Variety is important here. A serious poem. A silly poem. A rhymed poem. A non-rhymed poem. Free verse. Closed form. Multiple speakers. A single speaker. A child poet. An established poet. Straight narrative. Imagistic. Clear meaning. Complex meaning. Use the sample on the next page if you like. Make enough copies for each student to have his or her own.

1. Have students do a "focus write" on the question, *What do you think of poetry?* and/or *What do you know about poetry?* Adapt for younger kids by doing this focus together as a class while you write responses on chart paper or the chalkboard.
2. Hand out the piece of paper containing the four poems of various types. Have students read the poems silently and choose the two they like the best, ranking them #1 and #2. They should mark their choices in pencil BEFORE they know which ones their friends chose.
3. Have the class form teams according to the poems students selected as their favorites. Second choices can be used to balance group size. (Note: I've experimented by forming a group to present a "least favorite" poem. It doesn't work as well.)
4. Allow groups to spend 15 minutes or so planning a presentation/performance of their chosen poem for the class. Memorization is NOT required. Props ARE allowed. Students may present in any way they wish including repeating or reversing lines, using mime, role-playing, or choral reading.
5. Student teams present. Require two things only: a) that each team begin its presentation by announcing the poem's title and author; and b) that each team conclude its presentation with a group bow.
6. Following the presentations have students write observations in their learning logs. Suggested questions to answer: a) What did you observe about these specific poems?; b) What did you observe about poetry in general?; c) What did you observe about group work? d) How did you feel?




This Present-a-Poem lesson model is my own adaptation of an original activity by Cheryl Bromley Jones, master teacher and Lucretia Crocker Fellow, 1989-1990.

# PRESENT-A-POEM

Read each poem silently to yourself. Then choose your favorite two poems, designating them by writing "1st" or "2nd" next to the title.

## The Street Cleaner's Lament

dirt and
clean them clean them clean them
dirt and
leave them let them rot
dirt and stench and
clean them clean them
bending at the waist and stabbing—
papers papers blowing sticking
never leave them
clean them clean them
people put them
now remove them
clean streets sidewalks
quick
remove them
dirt and dirt and dirt forever

by Patricia Hubbell

## The Washing Machine

It goes twunkety,
then shlunkety,
as the washing goes around.

The water splunchesses
and it shluncheses,
as the washing goes around.

As you pick it out it splocheses,
then it flocheses,
as the washing goes around.

But at the end it schlopperies,
and then flopperies,
and the washing stops going round.

by Jeffrey Davies

## Blue Alert

Quick

Empty the offices
rush all the lecture halls
abandon the copy machines
burst out

EMERGEN—

see the sky
unboxed
lid off
shaking loose

What number do we call to
bring it down
box it
back in?

Eve Merriam

## The White Dove

one day the
snow fell and it
looked like
stars falling

a white dove flew across
our field

my father killed it
and it looked
like snow
falling

the snow always reminded
me of that dove

I have that dove in my bedroom

and every night
I think of the dove

by Dusty H.

# FOSTER STUDENT-CENTERED ASSESSMENT SKILLS

Students compare texts to evaluate proficiency. Give students sample texts along a four point performance continuum and have them rank order them from most to least effective. Working in groups have them develop their own descriptions of each of the four score points and relate these descriptions to proficiency levels designated as *Advanced, Proficient, Needs Improvement*, and *Failing*.

Rank the following versions of the same poem from 1 to 4 with 1 being the least effective and 4 being the most effective. Explain your answers as best you can.

**The Boy**

The boy put his best toy over his head and
threw it down on the floor
and broke it.
That made him sad so
he started crying.

**Mad**

He lifts the toy
his favorite one
above his head
He throws it—mad—
He kicks it—mad—
He stomps it—mad—
in to pie ces

His eyes grow wide
He cries
and cries

**The Mad Boy**

He lifts the toy
his best one
he holds it over his head
and
throws it
kicks it
stomps it
His eyes get wide
and he cries.

**The Boy**

The boy
broke his toy.

# FROM POEM TO ESSAY

## *Sammy* by Elizabeth Ripley

Unanswerable question: If Sammy is such a trouble-maker, why is he so likeable?
Notes: Word choice and dialogue: hopeful, loved, I am.

## Down Draft

~~Kids are forever getting~~ ~~Kids~~ ~~Messes~~
Kids and messes go hand in hand. ~~Because~~ ~~Most young people~~ ~~It's~~ ~~That's~~ It's part of their ~~A child's innocence is part of his charm~~. charm~~. At first glance~~ ~~t~~The jam-loving little boy in ~~Elizabeth R~~ Sammy by Elzabeth Ripley ~~is a trouble-maker, but the auathor~~ may be a trouble-maker; but ~~we cannot help but like him.~~ at the same time ~~Sammy is~~ ~~Sammy is very~~ the reader can't help but like him. ~~By examing~~ ~~Ripley chooses her words~~ In this short funny poem, Ripley has chose~~s~~n her words ~~care~~ ~~with care extreme care~~ ~~to make~~ and dialogue with extreme care to ~~emphasize~~ make Sammy irresistable to ~~even the most~~ everyone, including his exasperated mother.

## Updraft

Kids and messes go hand in hand. It's part of their charm. The jam-loving little boy in ~~Sammy~~ "Sammy" by Elizabeth Ripley may be a trouble-maker, ~~but at the same time~~, but even so, the reader cannot help but like him. In this short, funny poem, Ripley ~~has chosen her~~ uses ~~words~~ description and dialogue ~~with extreme care~~ to make Sammy irresistable to everyone, including his exasperated mother.

## Final (Dental) Draft

Kids and messes go hand in hand. It's part of their charm. The jam-loving little boy in "Sammy" by Elizabeth Ripley may be a trouble-maker, but at the same time, the reader cannot help but like him. In this short, funny poem, Ripley uses description and dialogue that make Sammy irresistible to everyone, including his exasperated mother.

### MoBaTh Blue

| | |
|---|---|
| Motivator | Kids and messes go hand in hand. It's part of their charm. |
| Background | The jam-loving little boy in "Sammy" by Elizabeth Ripley may be a trouble-maker, but at the same time, readers cannot help but like him. |
| Thesis/Blue Print | In this short, funny poem, Ripley uses description and dialogue that make Sammy irresistible to everyone, including his exasperated mother. |

# CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT!

## NAME TENTS

**Thanks!**

Many of my classroom management ideas are adapted (or stolen whole-cloth) from Cheryl Bromley Jones of Teachers 21 in Massachusetts.

Preparation: A) You'll need enough 5x7 unlined index cards (the big ones) for each student to have one. Have extra on hand for the inevitable "goof up." B) Gather assorted markers, pens, pencils, and crayons. C) You'll want a dictionary on hand just in case. D) Make or borrow a sample Name Tent to use as a model.

1. Fold index card into a tent ("hamburger fold" works better than "hotdog fold.")
2. Think of an adjective (or word) that starts with the same letter as your first initial and reflects how you feel about being here. (Of course you can break the rules and use our last name or a letter that sounds like your initial.)
3. Write the adjective and your name on the outside front of the name tent, and write the phrase "is ready" below your name.
4. On the inside of your name tent, explain (in writing) why you chose the adjective you did.
5. Also on the inside of the Name Tent, write at least one goal you have for the class.
6. Draw a large question mark on the outside back of your name tent.
7. You may decorate your card if you wish, but don't let the rest of us see what your "adjective" is yet.

Share as follows: Announce your name. Then, taking care not to say what your adjective is, read the explanation you wrote in step number four above as the rest of the class attempts to guess. Next read your goal(s) for the class.

Note: There are many uses for Name Tents. They can help you determine who has and has not shared. They allow individual students to ask for clarification on a writing prompt without disrupting classmates. They help kids articulate goals and objectives. They help your students to build community. They can help you keep track of attendance. They make a great ice-breaker.

## TEACHER/STUDENT WANT ADS

Rather than writing their goals inside their tent cards, have students create Want Ads! They can write a want ad for English Class for example. Or a want ad for a teacher. Encourage them to include their goals within the text of the ad. The teacher can write his or her own Want Ad. (For example: Wanted: One Poetry Writing Class. Must be willing to take risks. Participate in lively discussions. Arrive to class on time. Respect each other's opinions. Etc.)

## SHARING AND DISCUSSION SEGUES

The word segue (SEH gway) means to make a smooth transition from one thing to another. Have your students use segues to facilitate student centered sharing of their poetry and other writing. As one student shares her writing, the others are listening for a connection to what they've written themselves. After Melissa is done reading, Ted would say, "I can segue from your piece because I also wrote about a time I spent with my grandparents." Students can even "anti-segue" as follows: "I can follow your piece, Ted, because while you were really close to your grandparents, my experience is just the opposite."

By using segues to share writing, students are constantly listening to each other for connections and contradictions. This makes for some very engaged sharing circles. All comments should be directed from one student to another, not just from one student to the teacher. The teacher will have to keep reminding students of this at first.

## SHARING AND DISCUSSION CIRCLES

When it is possible, arrange students in a circle to share and discuss poetry. It is nearly impossible to create student-centered discussion when the students can only see the backs of each other's heads.

## GETTA LOADA THIS & TA DAH

Before sharing what they've written, students will sometimes try to explain too much or come up with some needless disclaimer. Encourage students to simply say, "Getta loada this . . ." Likewise, to diffuse any awkwardness after a reading is over, your young poets can simply say, "Ta Dah." I try to discourage people from clapping after every poem is read unless the applause is truly authentic and not simply the polite variety. Simple "Quaker silence" is usually more helpful. Encourage students to keep all comments and compliments tied to specifics.

## THUMBS OF UNDERSTANDING

Here's a quick and easy way to assess student comprehension. After you've described a writing assignment, to be sure all students truly understand what is expected of them, tell them "Let me see those thumbs." Students who understand clearly are to reply with a thumbs-up. Those who don't understand can indicate so with a thumbs-down or a sideways thumb. If many thumbs are down, you didn't explain yourself too well. Give your instructions again. If only one thumb is down, ask a student with a thumb up to explain the instructions. And even if all thumbs are up, call on a student to articulate in his or her own words what your expectations are.

## THE HAND OF SILENCE

In order to bring your class to attention simply raise your hand and wait. As students see your hand up they are to finish their sentences. Only then, should they raise their own hands. When their hands are up, their mouths are shut. This gives everyone an opportunity to finish what they are saying. I do this for all ages.

# FREEZE FRAMES

Here's a fun collaborative way to assess student reading comprehension and foster student-guided analytical discussion.

Preparation: Choose a poem all students are familiar with. Poems with a narrative line work best for this activity, but just about any poem will work. Divide students up into groups of four or five. Have each group follow the steps below.

1. As a group, come to consensus as to which are the poem's THREE most important lines (or phrases or narrative moments). Which lines are most important to the chronology of the poem? Which ones best promote understanding and best represent the poem's main theme?

2. Next, decide how you will create a tableau to represent each of these three lines. How will you freeze the scene so that the viewers will understand what you are portraying?

3. Practice each of the frames.

4. Each group will be called to present. Viewers will place their heads on the desks or close their eyes until the presenters announce, "Okay, you may look."

5. Viewers write down the line they think the presenters are attempting to represent.

6. After a short time, presenters announce, "Heads down" or "Eyes closed." Viewers close their eyes or look away as the presenters set up the next tableau.

7. At the end of the third tableau, presenters should remain at the front of the room while viewers attempt to guess what line each freeze frame represented.

After all groups have presented, discuss observations as a class. Students should write down what they've learned from the activity.

VARIATION:

This activity is also a great way to assess your students' understanding of longer works of fiction. Instead of giving a written quiz on a reading assignment, have your students create four freeze frames to represent the four most important moments from what they read. A pop quiz could never foster so much critical thinking, authentic discussion, peer review, collaboration, and community building.

**Thanks!**

This is yet another great classroom activity I've adapted from my collaboration with Cheryl Bromley Jones of Teachers 21 in Massachusetts.

Wordstorming to Anticipate Content
A-B
C-D
E-F
G-H
I-J
K-L
M-N
O-P
Q-R
S-T
U-V
WXYZ
Content Prediction:
Questions Article Should Answer:
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# We learn.....

| | |
|---|---|
| 10% | of what we read |
| 20% | of what we hear |
| 30% | of what we see |
| 50% | of what we both see and hear |
| 70% | of what is discussed with others |
| 80% | of what we experience personally |
| 95% | of what we TEACH to someone else |

*from William Glaser*

THE LEARNING PYRAMID
LECTURE
READING
AUDIO-VISUAL
DEMONSTRATION
DISCUSSION GROUP
PRACTICE BY DOING
TEACH OTHERS IMMEDIATE USE OF LEARNING
5%
10%
20 %
30%
50%
75%
90%
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