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ABSTRACT

The teaching activities presented in the four journal columns extracted here focus on understanding and writing poetry. The first column (by Carol Case) presents an introduction to poetry unit containing five preliminary steps designed to help students develop an understanding of poetry. The second column (by Carol Anderson) describes a week of poetry writing and revision, which includes writing a "beautiful words" poem, a "group" poem, a "first line" poem, and a "creature" poem. The third column (by Sandra Fisher) presents three poetry writing assignments: (1) writing a rhymed acrostic poem in which the first letter of each line, reading vertically downward, spells the student's name; (2) writing a couplet advertising a favorite food, place, or product; and (3) writing "paper bag" poetry (a game using a random collection of words). The fourth column (by Collette Luscombe) presents two poetry writing formulas that any students, regardless of grade level, can use. (EL)

[POETRY INSTRUCTION]

Motivator of the Month

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National Council of Teachers of English

Motivator of the Month

On the Teaching of Poetry

No matter how often you observe a game, unless you understand what is taking place on the playing field the game will not hold your interest nor will you want to participate. The same is true of poetry. It must be understood to be appreciated. To help students develop this understanding, I suggest five preliminary steps.

Step one. Read the poem aloud, but remember that all poems are not meant to be spoken in the same tone of voice. Some are to be shouted in anger or in frustration, others are to be read by a voice laced with laughter or with tears. Some are to be spoken thoughtfully, almost as though the speaker were thinking out loud.

Step two. Look at the poem on the page. Are the lines of about equal length? Are thoughts expressed in complete sentences? What kind of punctuation is used? Question marks may suggest a frame of mind. Is there dialogue? If so, is it equally divided among the participants? Consider, for example, a poem with fragmented sentences and lines of uneven length. Is the speaker confused, frustrated, upset? In order for students to understand the poem, they must share that emotional state, at least to some degree.

Step three. Decide how many voices are within the poem. Often there is more than one, and each speaker has a different voice. Ask student volunteers to read these parts. Determine who will speak what lines and what tone of voice is appropriate to each part. Are the voices within the poem speaking to the reader, or is the reader being invited as observer, much as one would attend a play? Perhaps the reader in the role of observer is being asked to make a judgment about the values at risk in the poem.

Step four. Group the words in the poem into clusters. In one cluster, list repetitions of the same word. In another, put all the words for inanimate (animate) objects. Group together words that describe emotions. Place color words in a class. Group the verbs, then study them. Are they strong transitive verbs that carry action?

Now look at each cluster. Are there clues among the words in a cluster that further indicate the speaker's mood, purpose, or attitude? Remember that poets set themselves an almost impossible task. They explore emotions and experiences that leave the rest of us at a loss for words. The very things that strike us mute with grief, silent in joy, are the very things they seek to describe.

Step five Be understanding of students who complain that they cannot understand poetry. They are telling the truth! No one denies that poetry is difficult; yet, a poet cannot translate complex human responses with superficial language. The poet would not be honest, nor would readers be satisfied.

Try the following analogy. Ask a student if he or she can ride a bicycle. Assuming the answer is "yes," ask if the student can ride a bike down hill. After a second affirmative answer, go on increasing the difficulty of the task. Can the student ride while eating a sandwich, with a glass of water in each hand? Increase the complexities until the student rejects the possibility of performing the task, suggesting the improbability of anyone doing so. Then draw a parallel between cyclist and poet, for poets in their own way attempt improbable feats. It is what they set out to do, especially when they decide to work in a particular verse form or deal with experiences to which most people respond emotionally but cannot express in words.

I have found the poem "We Must Try Words" useful in helping students understand the poet's dilemma—an intense desire to create coupled with a sense of inadequacy. The poem also serves nicely as a means of introducing poetry in general.

We Must Try Words

We went to see a field of ripening wheat.
I brought my clearest words,
my friend his camera,
to catch each beard, waving
toward the sun.
But words fell short,
and pictures, too,
and missed the essence of the wheat
so far, I said: "Why bother?
A wheat field is a wheat field
and that's that."
"Oh, we must try again,"
my friend replied.
"You must try words, more words,
even if they're out of focus
like my pictures.
For you, uneasy with pictures,
and I, ill at ease with words,
are, both of us,
too much in love with wheat
not to share our love, in words, on film.
Not any word or any angle of vision
but the sharpest we can find."

Elmer Suderman

(Reprinted with permission of Ball State University *Forum*, Summer 1974, p. 55.)

I begin by listing on the chalkboard the five points discussed earlier, acknowledging that not all points necessarily apply to a given poem.

1. Not all poems can be read in the same tone of voice.
2. How a poem looks on the page is a clue to understanding what is going on in the poem.
3. A poem may have more than one speaker.
4. Words within a poem can be grouped. These clusters indicate mood, purpose, attitude.
5. Understanding poetry can be difficult.

I distribute copies of the poem, asking students to read the poem silently and thoughtfully and to jot down observations on voice, line length and punctuation, number of speakers, evidence of word clusters, and level of difficulty. Later, in discussing their findings, we establish the following.

There are two speakers. The lines are divided almost equally between them. Their dialogue has balance, which suggests an absence of serious strife. First one speaks, then a companion responds. The first five lines are a statement of fact that do not suggest frustration within the speaker. In line six, the tone changes, for the same speaker tells us that what he and his companion intended to do "fell short." The disappointment in lines six through eight rapidly turns to a sense of futility. "Why bother?" the first speaker asks, concluding with a note of finality, "That's that." The second voice responds with feeling to the first speaker's question, "Why bother?"

I now ask for students in groups of two to volunteer to read and dramatize the poem for the class. I give them overnight to study their parts; depending upon the class, you may want to allow more time.

After the volunteers have given their readings comes the time for a discussion of the poem's content. At the onset, I suggest that "We Must Try Words" is a "then" poem, for the action is in the past and complete. It is a narrative poem, and such poems usually describe past action. Other poems are "now" poems, for the action is taking place as the poem is read. We then focus on lines twelve through twenty-three. Here the second speaker expresses commitment: "Oh, we must try again." He is speaking to each of us who has ever attempted

anything difficult and is on the verge of giving up. Commitment demands our best effort. "Not any word or any angle of vision but the sharpest we can find." These lines sum up the second speaker's enthusiasm and his belief that what he attempts is after all possible.

At this point I ask students to prepare to share an experience in which they attempted to do something difficult and failed or almost failed or one in which they succeeded because they kept trying. I write the two frames of mind on the board as a reminder to students. 1) "Why bother?" and 2) "We must try again." Students organize the experiences they choose in outline form. When the outlines are sufficiently developed, students are ready to make a short oral presentation to the class. Each student hands me the outline prior to speaking. I check it and give two grades: one for the outline and one for the manner in which the experience was presented.

All in all, I have found that this introduction makes the teaching of poetry easier and the students' response to poetry more positive. The teaching of poetry, after all, requires our best selling techniques.

Carol Case, Lamar High School, Houston, Texas

January 1984

The Poetry Package: A Week of Poetry Writing

Here are a few of the activities I use during a poetry unit with juniors and seniors. I have also used the activities with freshmen and sophomores, and I'm sure they would work well with somewhat younger students.

Monday: "Beautiful Words" Poem

After a discussion of how sound can be used to enhance the meaning of a poem (I take examples from Edna St. Vincent Millay's "Spring"), I ask students to jot down a half-dozen words they like the sound of, not necessarily the meaning of. We discuss alliteration and assonance and the effects they create, as well as onomatopoeia and other words that "sound the way they should" (I've always thought *bubble* sounded just right). Students then arrange their words, along with others as needed, into a poem. This poem does not have to make sense; instead, students should concentrate on the sound of the words. To get the class going, I present a sample poem I have written as a model. Although some of the students' poems contain little meaning, many convey interesting images, contain effective lines, and express strong emotion. This is always a very successful exercise.

Tuesday: "Group" Poem

I ask each student to bring to class an original line of poetry that could become the first line of a poem. When class begins, students form small groups. Each student writes his or her line at the top of a sheet of paper and then passes the paper to the person to the right, who adds a second line. This process continues until each poem is considered complete. Groups then select their best poems to read to the class. Finally, each poem is returned to the author of its first line for revision.

Wednesday: "First Line" Poem

I distribute a handout that lists first lines from various published poems. Each student selects an intriguing line and writes a poem using that line as the first line. This assignment usually takes more than one class period, but since I am introducing one new idea each day, I allow time the following week for further revision. Naturally, these poems generate interest in the published poems, and so we eventually turn to the original versions. Sometimes we decide we like a student version better than the original!

Thursday: "Creature" Poem

I jot down natural phenomena (fog, snow, hail, rain) on slips of paper. The luck of the draw will determine each student's topic. First, we read and discuss poems that compare events of nature to living things. (Two poems I have used are "Fog" by Carl Sandburg and "The Sand and the Foam" by Dan Fogelberg.) I explain that students are to compare the topics they drew to a living creature. If they choose, they may begin by developing this comparison in a paragraph or by making a list of the qualities that will be compared. Then, they use the images they have developed to create a short poem. This is a challenging exercise, but the results are gratifying. I have seen autumn become a gardener, snow a white leopard, winter a spinster, and smog a snake coiled around the city.

Friday: Revision

On the final day, no new activity is planned. Instead, students polish their poems and select for grading the one they consider their best. All poems are turned in, and I read them all, but only the preferred one is graded; the others are credited as work completed.

Carol S. Anderson Gibson, Shadow Mountain High School, Phoenix, Arizona

Omnipresent Poetry

Poetry is everywhere—and to prove it, here are three ways to convince students to get those ubiquitous verses down on paper. Remind students that poetry is the most diverse and flexible of all literary genres. Long or short, rhymed or unrhymed, narrative, dramatic, whimsical, or lyrical—poetry gives students the freedom to write what is important to them.

Name Game

What's in a name? Have students explain what's in theirs. Each student writes a rhymed acrostic poem in which the first letter of each line, reading vertically downward, spells his or her name (first, last, or nickname) and the verse tells something about the student's likes, dislikes, or personality. Like this:

Mad about football
And baseball and track,
Try to play soccer
Though I don't have the knack.

Mad Ads

Rival the ad experts! Instruct students to write a couplet (two rhyming lines) advertising their favorite food, place, or product. The couplet may be humorous or serious. For example:

Eat Dom's pizza, you'll know why.
There's no finer frozen pie.

Paper Bag Poetry

Give each student a paper bag and as many small slips of paper as there are students in the class. Assign each student a category or word (such as noun, verb, adjective, pronoun). Then instruct students to jot down a different word in their category on each slip of paper and to put these words in their paper bags. In an orderly fashion, students pass the bags around the room, removing one slip of paper from each bag. Students should take time to look over their collection and to let their minds play freely with these miscellaneous words. Then they try to arrange their words in a pattern. They may omit some words, but they cannot add more than one additional word. Once they think they have found a meaningful pattern for their word collection, they copy that arrangement as a poem on a piece of paper.

Sandra Fisher, Belmont Career Center, St. Clairsville, Ohio

November 1984

Motivators of the Month

Poetry-writing formulas give reluctant writers confidence and often inspire more creative students to experiment with half a dozen poems in the same form. Here are two such formulas that any students, regardless of grade level, can use

The "I" Poem

Because it asks for self-analysis, this assignment appeals to adolescents. The formula provides an opening and a closing, but in between it affords the writer choices and produces poems that are widely varied in content. The directions I give are outlined below.

Directions to students: Follow this pattern and you will discover that you have written an interesting poem about yourself. A sample of the kind of poem you will create is shown.

Line 1: Begin with the words *I am.*

Line 2: Write three nouns about which you have strong feelings. Begin each with a capital letter.

Line 3: Write a complete sentence about two things that you like.

Line 4: Begin with three nouns that describe qualities you like to see in other people; end the sentence with the words *are important to me.* Capitalize each noun.

Line 5: Write a sentence containing a positive thought or feeling. It can tell what you find acceptable within yourself.

Lines 6 and 7: Write a sentence in which you show something negative in yourself or in others; however, the sentence must finish by showing that out of something bad can come good. Use the word *but* to link the bad and good.

Lines 8, 9, and 10: Each line is a short sentence relating something about which you have strong feelings—likes or dislikes. These likes do not have to relate to each other or to the previous lines you have written.

Line 11. End your poem with the words *This is me. I am!*

And here is the kind of poem you will write. I have numbered the lines to make the pattern easier to follow, but you will not want to number the lines of your finished poem.

1 I am
2 Rain, Forests, and Sunsets.
3 I like long walks and quiet times.
4 Honesty, Humor, and Peace are important to me.
5 I find satisfaction in others' peace of mind.
6 I can be fearsome when my ideas are challenged,
7 But I thrive on intelligent conversation.
8 I love this earth and its animals.
9 I can be counted on to help.
10 I have strong feelings when life is threatened.
11 This is me. I am!

Collette Luscombe, Duffin's Bay Public School, Ajax, Ontario

September 1985